

The Green Devolution: Confessions of an amateur photographer



COLD-BLOODED VET
BY GREG MERTZ, DVM

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I suspect that most photographers are liars. I know because I am one. I didn't start off a liar, but as my shutter skills improved my selection of subject, my use of light, and focus crept into my composition. I take the best looking picture I can. I go for truth in the sense of beauty and meaning. And therein lies the lies.

Today, in the age of digital cameras the art of photography is in the choice of which image to display. There are no click limits. Back in the day of film, our pocketbooks made us compose and shoot our photos with care. We had to pay for the image twice. Once when we bought the film and once when we developed it. It made us into exquisite liars. What does this have to do with pets and animals?

I suppose there is little fallout in the world of pets. You might have the ugliest mutt ever seen and still succeed in creating an endearing, appealing photographic lie. Feel free to take the best looking photograph of your pet as possible. Lie all you want. No one gets hurt.

In the area of wildlife there might be significance in publishing good looking photographs of nature and wild animals. It allays fears that the wild world has gone to hell. I call this the Green Devolution.

I was recently working with an author for National Geographic on a small children's book. I submitted a portfolio of 351 wildlife photographs that I had taken. They were all well-composed shots. Don't get me wrong, I

am not a National Geographic quality photographer; it took a hundred thousand clicks to get these hundred or so photos.

What I am though, is a pretty good liar with access to an endless stream of wild animals, right up close and in their face. In our veterinary hospital, we can't examine them without laying our hands on them. The older I get and the worse my eyesight gets, the closer I get. I have my camera right there at the ready during many exams. We examine thousands of patients representing hundreds of species each year. They come with all manner of traumas and imperfections.

I compose shots from the head up or the feet down, or of the eye or even just the tongue. What I don't show are the broken wings, broken legs, punctured eyes, oiled feathers, the fleas, the lice and the mites. I am telling only part of the truth.

Like the five blind men and the elephant, I choose my subject wisely to promote the point of view that I want to emphasize. I always go for the attractive; you know, the elephant's eye and trunk.

When the environment finally succumbs, there will still be green leaves on the trees. There will still be forests and woodlands, beaches, lakes, ponds and streams. There will still be animals running freely across the roadways.

Photosynthesis will run rampant just like today. The problem will not be in how much photosynthesis is going on but, in how much diversity of plants and animals there are in the woods, in the fields, in the ponds and lakes. A beautiful photograph will still make it onto the front page of the newspaper, magazine, Web site, and television.

What will change? Our habitats will meld into one

large monotone of the same set of species over and over. Wetlands will be populated with purple loosestrife. The woods will flourish with Norwegian maple, and black oak. Most plants will be covered with the mysterious and picturesque kudzu. Ponds and lakes will be filled with water milfoil and covered with water lilies. Our woods will be filled with squirrels, and half domestic turkeys and deer. Our beaches will be filled with laughing gulls, our ponds populated by mute swans. But not much else will thrive. It will still be green with little animals scurrying about. The excitement of the woodlands, estuaries, ponds and lakes will be gone.

So what's wrong with that? What's missing? Diversity and complexity. The biology of Earth will not be a mystery anymore, because it will be limited enough for all of us to understand perfectly. There won't be a food chain, there won't be predators chasing prey. And frankly what will arise is a sanitized view of the environment. Conflicts will be gone, because the plants and animals that will thrive, according to the principles of natural selection, will be those that survive well in the face of humankind's onslaught.

What will be left will not be God's Nature, but humankind's nature. I think that is a problem. We are neither as inventive nor as complicated as God and/or Nature.

So what is to be done? For one, maybe I will stop taking nice pictures from now on. I'll tell the truth through photo and word. Otherwise guard the open spaces with your pocketbook, your vote and your advocacy.



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