

## NATURE AND THE CAMERA

Ken Olson      Lewistown, Montana      October 2022

How do we view nature? In her bestselling book, *H is for Hawk*, in which she describes her life with a raptor companion, Helen Macdonald writes, “I think of what wild animals are in our imaginations. And how they are disappearing –not just from the wild, but from people’s everyday lives, replaced by images of themselves in print and on screen. The rarer they get, the fewer meanings animals can have. Eventually rarity is all they are made of.”

Planet Earth has been radically altered by just one species, ourselves. On our heavily industrialized planet, now overpopulated by humans, the natural world is in steep decline. A conservation group in the UK that does good work has, however, a somewhat thoughtless motto, “Giving Nature a Home.” Really? Do we imagine ourselves as being in such a position, able and entitled to do that? Ironic, because it’s always the other way around: we give nature nothing; all that we have and are is gifted by Mother Earth.

The places where nature is not disturbed are indeed now few and getting fewer. In *The Necessity of Empty Places*, the southern Minnesota writer Paul Gruchow commented:

“A few years ago the biology department at the community college in my town set out to turn a vacant corner of the campus into a nature study area. The first steps: some magnificent native cottonwood trees were razed and replaced with a planting of Colorado blue spruces! I was furious, but I also found the whole project screamingly funny. I soon learned that it was a joke you couldn’t share in my town. You always had to explain the punch line. ‘Well, you see, the cottonwood is natural here, and the blue spruce isn’t, and this is a *nature* study area....’ The prairie, I discovered, is an arcane subject in my prairie town.”

Situations like that raise the crucial issue of whether we humans even *want* Nature to be natural any longer, and the question applies not only to the animated, living part of it but to the inorganic, as well.

I do mainly long-lens photography of hawks, owls, and eagles, but some years ago I took a few landscape photos of the grand Lower Falls in Yellowstone National Park, as have tens of millions of others before me. The season, late September, was not ideal for it: the low-angled sun put it partly in shadows, so I wished the results could have been “better.” But this set me thinking. The plunging falls on the Yellowstone River are simply what they are, magnificent in any season. They have been there for hundreds of thousands of years, doing what waterfalls do, without any help from us and needing neither our critique nor our affirmation. However, the “impulse to improve” by post-processing abounds in photography, so much so that one has little idea what a pictured scene would look like first-hand.

A museum project in which I was once involved required copies of paintings and photographs for display. We wanted them to have, as nearly as possible, the appearance of the originals. However, it was like pulling the proverbial teeth to get such a request fulfilled by printers. Time and again, when they came back, they were not just a little off, but saturated several times over: “popped” to almost neon-type coloration. That technique and mindset, pervasive now, seems to be that the natural world is inadequate and needs a re-do. In an online photo forum, one practitioner of extreme “Photoshopping” exclaimed, “I am an artist! The world is my canvas!” --this with no sense of the self-indulgent grandiosity or *hubris* involved in the statement.

In such things, what do we expect or desire? How is it that, today, so many see nature as being deficient? Surely, it is no accident that this coincides with the raw earth being seldom under foot, as we have become mostly asphalt animals existing in sanitized environments designed to shield us from the natural world. We are the first people in history to live with so little contact with elemental forces. Artificiality encompasses us to such an extent that it is the real world itself that no longer seems real.

Think of a parent pushing a stroller along the sidewalk. A passerby leans over and comments, “What a beautiful baby!” Says the other, “That’s nothing. --You should see the *pictures!*” (Groucho Marx –remember the old comedian/gameshow host with the bushy eyebrows and big cigar? He once entered a Groucho Marx look-alike contest ...and came in third! Perhaps the trend started about then.)

In any case, this is the age of Botox and body-enhancement surgeries by the millions, because what people *are* is not good enough. Well, I do think it benefits the appearance of (almost all) people to wear clothes. But, somewhere, there must have been a line that was crossed, so that we have lost some of our appreciation for what simply is; instead, we are now too preoccupied with the image of what *could be*, if only we might manipulate it for “better” effect. (In addition, in the social context, there are all the tangential issues having to do with the fact that photographic evidence was once the best kind; now, being too easily faked, that is no longer the case.)

In terms of appearances, things have gone to extremes in so many ways. Some celebrities have been “tweaked” so many times that they are nearly unrecognizable. Exaggeration has become the ideal, whether in the anorexic look at one fashion extreme or the “bigger must be better” syndrome at the other. Consider, too, those pictures of bodybuilders who have been busy developing their biceps, quads, and abs. However, facial muscles simply are not capable of such development; the result is that the head appears to have been pasted on, as though doesn’t belong with the rest of the body. If such a specimen were to be seen for the first time by an alien biologist, it might be classified as a different species.

Again, it may be that all of this has had something to do, not only with how we photograph people and landscapes, but also with how we fundamentally *regard* the

natural world. Thus, to say that something was “natural” used to mean that it was unaltered, authentic, genuine, the Real Thing. Now, it can describe an appearance that is insufficiently hyped. Unanswered is the question of what actually exists. F. Scott Fitzgerald’s character in *The Great Gatsby* had reveries which “...were a satisfactory hint of the unreality of reality, a promise that the rock of the world was founded securely on a fairy’s wing.”

Consider what happens to the millions who are affluent enough to briefly abandon the cities and take to the road to “experience nature.” They drive or fly from a city with numerous Golden Arches to Arches National Monument or some other wonder. Often, they are led to do so by advertisements that present the land as a commodity, a package providing entertainment. Barry Lopez: “People only able to venture into the countryside on annual vacations are, increasingly, schooled in the belief that wild land will, and should, provide thrills and exceptional scenery on a timely basis. If it does not, something is wrong, either with the land itself or possibly with the company outfitting the trip.”

I’m sure it is the case that, each year, many of the now five million camera-clicking tourists who visit Yellowstone National Parking Lot do come back disillusioned. Nature itself, having been selectively visualized on high-contrast and brightly-color calendars and as seen in the background of wide-screen movies filmed in HD, simply cannot live up to expectations. Many have come to prefer the artificial to the actual, because their preconceptions have been soaked in glossy and hyper-saturated images showing “the purple mountains’ majesty” that was never, ever, *that* purple. The gems of the continent are spectacular, but not in a gaudy sense. Real Nature, the genuine article, is beautiful, but also subtle.

Thus, in a sense, nature is a mirror, in that what we see indicates much about ourselves. There is a recent book called, *Sub-par Parks: America’s National Parks and Their Least Impressed Visitors*. It nicely images and describes the attractions and then, reflecting a wildly popular Instagram account, offers a sampling of visitors’ mere *single*-star ratings. There are even numerous put-downs by underwhelmed visitors of that for which the specific Park is actually famous: Glacier Park: “Too cold.” Grand Canyon is “a very large hole.” Bryce Canyon is “too spikey,” and Arches “looks nothing like the license plate.”

In the 1950s, John Steinbeck set out with his dog in his pickup camper, driving across the nation “in search of America.” He chronicled his journey across the varied landscapes and cityscapes in his book, *Travels with Charley*. At one point, he says:

“I must confess to a certain laxness in the matter of National Parks. I haven’t visited many of them. Perhaps this is because they enclose the unique, the spectacular, the astounding—the greatest waterfall, the deepest canyon, the highest cliff, the most stupendous works of man or nature. And I would rather see a good Brady photograph than Mount Rushmore. For it is my opinion that

we celebrate the freaks of our nation and of our civilization. Yellowstone National Park is no more representative of America than is Disneyland.”

On one level, we can agree with Steinbeck: it’s easy to see that Disneyland and the like are overdone and garish, and that they will represent a transient and deservedly ephemeral phenomenon. But landscapes, immersed in geologic time, are incomparably more enduring, more fundamental to the “nature” of America. Perhaps what he is really getting at is the superficial focus on “the deepest, the highest, the most stupendous,” at the *expense* of appreciating *everything* for what it is, and there he is spot-on.

The Parks are treasures that were saved, this against long odds and in the face of powerful interests that would have exploited and destroyed them. The PBS series by Ken Burns, *The National Parks: America’s Best Idea*, is superb. And, I think, it is all the better because of the limitations inherent in the old black and white and sepia images of the time. They are of Nature’s architecture and, while no photograph is totally accurate, these, even without color, are natural in their simplicity. And tens of thousands of dollars’ worth of new computerized equipment doing the visuals may well have diminished instead of improved them. I’m guessing many readers are of the same mind.

In one sense, I can admire the work of so many photographers in online forums who do so well at post-processing. I too, want my shots to “be all they can be,” but I find myself foot-dragging in that department. Part of it may be sloth; part may be that I know too little about it and sense that I may be incompetent in the learning and doing; part of it may be that I’m already absorbed and fully using my available time in other and, to me, more interesting aspects of imaging. However, at bottom, I think, is simply the idea that Theodore Roosevelt had about The Grand Canyon and, perhaps, about all of Nature: that “the ages have been at work on it,” and so, really, how do you improve on that?

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