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*Stories and human life: When human beings recognize themselves in a story, it captures their attention and directs their thinking. Though it's rarely helpful to place people at the center of every story conservationists tell, images that convey relationship can shape a larger narrative.*



# Telling a Better Story: Making Meaning Through Conservation Photography

Story and Photos by  
Dave Huth

## Conservation is complicated

Facing the 21st century's relentless ecological crises, it's hard for many conservationists to face this scary fact: an argument from knowledge and reason alone won't save us.

Most of us presume on principle that education should change behavior, facts should inform decisions, scientific consensus should be trusted. But in the supposed "real world," things aren't quite so straightforward.

Cognitive bias. Motivated reasoning. Group identity. These forces make persuasion harder than most of us expect it to be. Each week brings new investigations into why people do (or don't do) what they do (or don't).

The complexities of how to persuade people to conserve nature are worth investigating. Collective human action is responsible for threatened biodiversity, ruined habitats, altered climate, and collapsing ecosystems. Therefore, collective human action is needed to address these problems. Conservation goals can be achieved only by persuading lots of people to change something they're doing (or not doing).

## Persuasion requires more than facts

Researchers at Yale Law School's Cultural Cognition Project investigate the confounding questions around why and how groups of people might change. The term "cultural cognition" was coined in response to their conclusions: people tend to conform their beliefs about the world to the values that define their cultural identities.

In other words, we don't change our behavior simply by learning new information. We change only after we synthesize meanings about information.

So the question of how large, pluralistic, technological societies might be induced to restrain destructive instincts becomes central to conserving the natural world. In recent years, we've assembled a more complete toolkit to address this question – and not a moment too soon!

Many conservationists now understand that nature education and communicating scientific evidence are *necessary* conservation tasks, but not *sufficient*. "Necessary but not sufficient" is a familiar condition in science, where looking under the hood often reveals unexpected complexity. What most people require to change their behavior is not data alone, but also an accompanying story that gives data meaning.

Communicating value: Each of these frogs – which share adjacent habitats near Panama’s continental divide – are tiny, easily overlooked, and unremarkable from a human-centered perspective. Though one is common and the other is critically endangered, the hard work of photographing them presumes that each is valuable, interesting, and worth thinking about.



## Making meaning isn’t easy

“Meaning” emerges from a complex slurry of values, group identities, culture, experiences, feelings, and – perhaps most importantly – *storytelling*. Human beings hold tightly to our sense of meaning. Shared meanings connect us to each other, making our social lives possible. We culturally inherit much of it in childhood, and it’s tied intimately to what we love and how we define ourselves.

Therefore, efforts to persuade people toward new values and a new story about their place in the world are going to need many people employing diverse methods. We need scientists, engineers, politicians, educators, and an army of skilled cultural communicators.

Who are the persuasive voices shaping cultural values? Anyone who can skillfully and compellingly craft a story about the value of the natural world will have a role to play. Photographers occupy a special category of importance in these efforts. Conservation photographers think they might help change the world by making certain kinds of pictures – and they’re almost certainly right.

## Photography can communicate value

Conservation photography supports the communication of necessary facts and knowledge about the natural world by presenting a context of meaning for those facts. In this way, conservation photography is a kind of values-infused storytelling about what’s important, and, perhaps more crucially, why it’s important.

If you listen carefully when conservation photographers speak about their work, you’ll hear them use the language of values and meaning. They talk about “beauty” and “harsh realities.” They reflect on their passion for their subjects, their attempts to provoke emotional connections and new perspectives. The simple fact of pointing a camera at nature already presumes the value of nature.

By engaging in the effort, expense, and careful attention necessary to capture the movement of a bird’s wing – or a foggy landscape, or the face of a cricket, or a coral polyp – a photographer is presenting a judgment about the value of that wing, landscape, face, or polyp. Nobody goes to the trouble of doing this work unless there’s something about it that is of value. And that’s just the start.

## Stories shape society

A growing body of social science highlights conservation’s need for skilled conveyors of narratives that focus facts through a lens of meaning and value. Much of the work for reversing an ecological crisis, or healing its consequences, includes refashioning the cultural meanings that made the crisis possible in the first place.

The title of economist David Korten’s book, *Change the Story, Change the Future: A Living Economy for a Living Earth*, refers to the role of cultural communicators, like photographers. He writes, “We humans live by stories. A shared story is the basis of the ability of any people to live together in organized society.” He makes an argument

for communicating values through storytelling, in order to establish ecologically sustainable social practices.

Korten also emphasizes that cultural meaning-making is crucial when economies go ecologically off the rails. For this task, photographers can help their communities envision alternatives to environmentally damaging practices. “To discredit a corrupt story... is not sufficient,” writes Korten. “It must be replaced by a more credible and compelling story.”

## Replacing harmful stories

One story presents spiders as creepy, soulless, dangerous, and out of place in human dwellings. Another story is that spiders nurture their young, rid homes of pests, and carry an eerie beauty.

One story is that an endangered bird is economically useless, obstructing progress, and irrelevant. Another story addresses its key role in ecosystem health, its impressive perseverance under harsh conditions, and its inherent value in the web of life.

One story is that coyotes are at war with humans, morally evil, dirty, and can’t experience pain. Another story is that coyotes can be beneficial, intelligent, playful, and unthreatening.

One story is that trees are inert objects, all the same, and a material resource to support human industry. Another story is that trees are mysterious, communicative, diverse, and evocative.

Patterns of behavior and social systems are informed and supported by one story or another. These stories are built by combining words and pictures in culturally meaningful ways.



Reveal nature’s stories: Move your lens to the level of your subject’s perspective. Don’t just show an animal on display for human observation. Show them moving in and out of the hidden spaces of their environments, suggesting goals and purposes that make sense in their world.

More than facts: The world can be engaged through an aesthetic perspective. Creative framing, angles, and crops can highlight the natural world’s surprising combinations of form, shape, lines, and color –as any artist might explore the formal properties of a beautiful abstract composition.

Conservation photography is one important practice for persuading and influencing how communities think through their relationships and priorities related to the natural world.

## Metaphors influence emotions

A typical conservation photograph might give an emotional impression (often explicitly named in the caption) of the “curiosity” of an exploring bear cub, the “determination” of a desert flowering plant, or the “smile” on a salamander’s face.

Science tells us that the shape of a salamander’s mouth is not a mirror of the smile on a human face. But a skilled conservation photographer is framing a salamander’s smile as a *metaphor* to draw a viewer into a new way of thinking about a salamander’s *value*. The image isn’t intended to scientifically convey a salamander’s jolly state of mind. Instead, the image serves to remind us what’s possible to feel about a salamander, thereby encouraging acceptance of a story about how we might behave toward salamanders.

Human emotional responses to visual beauty operate in similar ways. Looking beautiful is far down the list of utilitarian reasons to protect a wetland. But when people respond to a beautiful photograph of a wetland, they’re better prepared to consider the conservation science that enables a wetland’s protection.

The care with which metaphors are chosen, argues cognitive historian Jeremy Lent in his book *The Patterning Instinct*, is central to telling powerful stories. Whether a salamander actually smiles or not is a separate question from whether a picture can stand as a visual metaphor for what a smile represents to us.

“Metaphors matter,” Lent writes. “... (T)he root metaphors cultures use to make sense of the cosmos encourage patterns of thought that permeate daily life.”

This social force of metaphors is crucial to the future of life on Earth. Lent addresses this with characteristic directness: “Our metaphors of nature have never mattered more than now. The way in which our global society views the natural world frames our collective behavior toward it.”

He goes on to quote linguist George Lakoff: “Metaphor plays a very significant role in determining what is real for us ... New metaphors have the power to create a new reality.”

## Conservation photography is always a collaboration

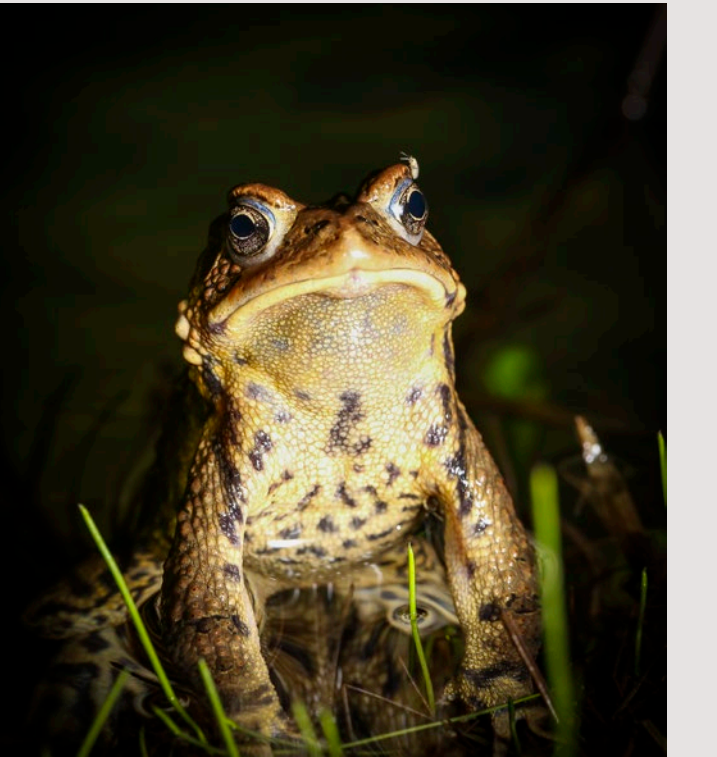
A common objection to these ideas is that reality is defined *empirically*, not “metaphorically.” But what’s being encouraged here is about human social behavior, which can’t be separated

Be creative: Use any and all skills you might have – techniques, unique presentations, explanatory designs. Think of new and unexpected ways to demonstrate relationships, variety, scale, and information.

from the goals and ingredients of conservation. Society is powerfully influenced by narrative visual expression, just as it’s influenced by precise empirical description. This truth demands cooperation between people who are trained in each.

Are animals in our environment objects to be manipulated (or eliminated) for profit as other objects are? Or are animals living beings of intrinsic value that share commonalities with our own lives? The scientific side of conservation can answer these questions only partially. Cultural storytelling carries us the rest of the way toward informed and motivated action.

Photography can be one of the most powerful ways to deliver these stories in ways that move people to change, conviction, and action. ●



Emotional metaphors: Though it’s always unethical to manipulate an animal into unnatural poses or behaviors, an astute photographer will be sensitive to ways that postures or expressions can remind viewers of their own experiences. Despite its “grimace,” this toad is probably not feeling “grumpy” or “indignant.” Yet a familiar face can be a powerful metaphor for reducing emotional distance between viewers and the natural world.