



Daniel Beltrá: Photography and the Environment

Robert Hirsch

The interrelationship between photography and America's natural environment can be traced back to Solomon N. Carvalho's daguerreotypes made during John C. Frémont's fifth expedition crossing the Rocky Mountains in 1853 (only one of his plates is thought to have survived). The expansionist notion of Manifest Destiny, public curiosity, and tall tales about the West stimulated demand for photographic documentation of these wonders by photographers such as Carleton E. Watkins, Timothy H. O'Sullivan, and William Henry Jackson. In Jackson's case, his large, wet-plate photographs played a role in the establishment of Yellowstone as the country's first national park by Congress in 1872.

As we become aware of the global consequences of human activities, the role of increasing responsiveness to environmental issues is carried on by groups such as the International League of Conservation Photographers (ilcp.com), whose mission is to further environmental and cultural conservation through ethical photography.

One member of this consortium is Spanish photographer Daniel Beltrá, who now lives in Seattle, Washington. Although Beltrá began making photographs as a teenager, he studied forestry and biology at university. In 1988, he photographed a Basque terrorist bombing in Madrid, which led to a job as a photographer at Spanish National Agency EFE. In 1990, he started working with the not-for-profit, non-governmental organization (NGO) Greenpeace, becoming one of their leading freelance photographers. He has since documented expeditions to the Amazon, the Arctic, the Southern Oceans, and the Patagonian Ice Fields. In 2010, he spent two months covering the 5-million-barrel oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico. Recently, I spoke to him about his experiences and the following are edited excerpts.

Robert Hirsch: How did conservation become your visual passion?

Daniel Beltrá: I contacted Greenpeace and arranged to board a ship going to the Balearic Islands. I told my EFE picture agency editor I wanted to go with Greenpeace on assignment for two weeks. The editor laughed in my face, saying, "There's no way I am going to pay you to take a two-week holiday on a boat." Jokingly I replied, "If I take vacation time and produce a good story would you distribute it?" He agreed and disseminated my resulting story.

This led to Greenpeace asking me to do more pieces, though I couldn't as an EFE staff photographer. In the early 1990s, I relocated to Paris and became correspondent for the French picture agency Gamma, allowing me to freelance with Greenpeace and photograph the subjects I deeply cared for. Conservation photography was a profession I didn't even know existed. It felt like we were inventing a new field. I moved to the States in 2002, and that's the only thing I have been doing since.

RH: How did Gulf oil spill series come about?

DB: I got a call from the Greenpeace USA photo editor. He said, "Daniel" and I replied, "Oil." I knew. They only had funds to cover four days of aerial surveys to see what was up as there was no oil near the coast. Fortunately, I ran into a lady from Alabama who was quite concerned about what was happening, saw my printed work, and funded additional flights over a two month period.

RH: What does your aerial work reveal that is not evident from eye-level?

DB: Making photographs in the air reveals a sense of scale. Also, what separates my work from many photojournalists is that my photographs turned out to be quite beautiful. This has allowed me to put work in public places, such as galleries and aquariums, where they have a longer life and larger audiences.

RH: How do you reconcile making beautiful pictures of horrible events?

DB: I can sleep relaxed at night knowing I was not trying to make beautiful photographs, rather I am following my spirit. When I see the positive reaction to the work I feel good about it as it keeps the subject and discussion out there. Because everything goes so fast, many environmental photographs with a hard-core photojournalism approach are quickly forgotten. I want to make effective photographs that have an extended life. I never intended the work to be thought of as Art, but that is how it has started to be considered.

RH: Do you think of your work as art, reportage, or post-documentary, in which a maker actively incorporates his voice?

DB: In my heart I am a photojournalist who is telling a story about a subject I am concerned about. If I manage to build a bridge between hardcore photo-

(Left) A ship cuts through a band of oil on the surface of the water. A substantial layer of oily sediment stretches for dozens of miles in all directions from the wellhead, suggesting that a large amount of oil did not evaporate or dissipate, but may have instead settled to the seafloor.





Oil released from the failed Deepwater Horizon wellhead rises up to the surface of the Gulf of Mexico amidst an offshore platform drilling a relief well.

journalism and the art world when these photos hang on a museum wall, then I am happy.

I had a fine arts show in Aspen, Colorado in which three, large, abstract pieces were in the front of the gallery and people walked in and thought it was a painting exhibition. That was not my intent, but it is a great opportunity for a completely different crowd to see my work. It resulted in an exhibition at the Seattle Aquarium. I don't think they would have done a show of hardcore photojournalism.

The exhibition opened on the first anniversary of the oil spill and ran five months during peak tourism season. Half a million people had the chance to see it, that's incredibly important for me. Now the show is going to the Long Beach California Aquarium where another half a million people can see the work. There are not many photographs of the Gulf oil spill that we still see a year later. For me the key issue is how to be initially effective when an event happens and then for the photographs to have an afterlife.

RH: What role does Photoshop play in your work?

DB: I shoot RAW files and make adjustments to the contrast and saturation, but nothing is added or subtracted from the original capture.

RH: How do you print your large images?

DB: The largest print, *The Pelicans*, is 48 x 60-inches and it is stunning. When I was in the Gulf I met the photographer Edward Burtynsky whose work explores how nature is transformed by industry. There was a little drama, as my printer couldn't make the deadline for the Seattle show. Ed stepped in and offered to make them in his Toronto studio and so I printed the images there. It was a phenomenal experience, it was like a painter getting to go to Picasso's studio.

RH: What would you suggest to someone starting a photographic project to consider?

DB: Follow your passion and act locally so you have ongoing access to your subject. Then ruthlessly edit, edit, edit.

RH: Your approach brings to mind Cornell Capa's

(Left) Volunteers of the Tri-State Bird Rescue and Research and the International Bird Rescue Research Center run a facility in Fort Jackson, Louisiana, where they clean birds covered in oil from the Deepwater Horizon wellhead. By November 2010, around 8,000 birds had been collected; 6,100 of those were dead.



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A plume of smoke rises from a burn of collected oil. A total of 411 controlled burns were used to try rid the Gulf of the most visible surface oil from the BP Deepwater Horizon wellhead.

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concept of the *Concerned Photographer* in which “The role of the photographer is to witness and to be involved with his subject.”

DB: I remain optimistic. If I were dumped in the middle of a lake, I would swim to shore the best I could. Regardless of one’s political views, we all live on this planet and share the responsibility to care for it.



Robert Hirsch is author of Exploring Color Photography: From Film to Pixels; Light and Lens: Photography in the Digital Age; Photographic Possibilities: The Expressive Use of Equipment, Ideas, Materials, and Processes; and Seizing the Light: A Social History of Photography. Hirsch has published scores of articles about visual culture and interviewed eminent photographers of our time. He has had many one-person shows and curated numerous exhibitions. The former executive

director of CEPA Gallery, he now heads Light Research. For details about his visual and written projects visit: lightresearch.net. Article ©Robert Hirsch 2012.

Resources

Websites: Daniel Beltra-danielbeltra.com; greenpeace.org/usa/en; Edward Burtynsky-edwardburtynsky.com