

## Making A Case for Nature Photography

Frank Serafini

In the world of publishing, children's literature has always taken a back seat to publishing for adults. In the world of children's literature, illustration has been given short shrift to great writing. In the world of illustrating, photography is the red-headed step child of the art world. Why is this? I think its because people feel anyone can take a picture. True, anyone can go to the Grand Canyon and take a picture. And given the right conditions and an early morning wake up call, anyone might get one decent picture of the canyon, especially if the light is delicious. However, can just anyone create technically sound images of frogs, butterflies, fungi, wildflowers and algae that awaken the senses and lure people to get up off the couch and take a hike? This is the true challenge of the nature photographer who chooses a career in illustrating children's books.

With the advent of digital photography, people take pictures all the time. From clicking shots on one's cell phone, and subsequently posting them on Facebook, it seems everyone is a documentary photographer these days. How do I make the claim that my work and talent as a photographer is worth more than downloading free images from Flickr? How do I distinguish my work from the countless images available in today's market? Here are a few suggestions.

One way is to gather images that no one else has available. Unfortunately, this is more and more difficult every year. For example, most stock houses are no

longer accepting new images of certain mammals because they have every picture of lions, tigers and bears they could possibly use. Unless you have a picture of Sasquatch or the Abominable Snowman, images of most common animals are probably in a stock house somewhere.

In addition, there are few natural biomes and attractions in the United States outside of Alaska that haven't been well documented. Whenever I look through Arizona Highways, Outdoor Photographer, Outside, or Backpacker magazines, I see many of the same images I have in my stock portfolio. Sometimes the images in these magazines are a new twist on a classic location, but for the most part the National Parks and featured attractions of our country have been well documented.

So, how else does a photographer distinguish oneself? Through technical excellence? Sure, but with new cameras and high-end lenses, it is easier than ever to take a technically sound image. Once you learn about focusing, depth of field, exposure and the properties of light, creating technically sound images becomes even easier. Well, how about distinguishing oneself through learning how to use all the bells and whistles in Photoshop? By selecting various software filters we can change images into black and white, create watercolor prints and other variations of our digital images. Is this enough to separate oneself from the proverbial pack? It is important to know how to use Photoshop and other editing software, but by itself, I don't think it is enough to get you a contract.

I have come to believe the answer in becoming a published photographer lies in all the above considerations and the following:

- The ability to deliver images as needed, in appropriate formats, on a short timeline makes you an important asset to a publishing house. Editors and art directors need to know that if a particular image doesn't work out, you will be able to deliver an alternative in time for their needs.
- Flexibility and creativity are also important attributes for a nature photographer. My first proposal (an ABC book about the Earth's natural features) with Kids Can Press was rejected, but they liked my images and were willing to consider other ideas I had in mind. I suggested several ideas, including a series of picturebooks for young readers about paying attention to the world around them. After some discussions, the Looking Closely series came to be published. My images got me in the door, my flexibility and creativity got me a contract.
- Photographs are often used in non-fiction picturebooks, and these books are frequently published in series formats. So, rather than develop the idea for a single book, develop a proposal for series of books. Show your agent or publisher that you can envision more than one book. Developing a series requires you to think about certain features of the books that will remain consistent across the series. Formats, photographer's notes, image location and orientation, and amount of text needs to be considered when creating a series.

- Learn to write. It is much harder to sell images without text than with text. This is true of the magazine industry and non-fiction publishers. Being able to write well to accompany your images expands the possible markets for your work.
- Remember, no one knows your work better than you do. Review and edit your image files with the eye of a photo editor. Any images that are not technically sound, in perfect focus or composed properly should be abandoned. No one cares about the three miles of hiking through swamps you had to do to get the image when they look at the actual image. Editors just want to see great images.
- Learn to look at your images with the eye of an editor. For example, in my *Looking Closely* series, all the images needed to be in horizontal format. This required some rethinking in certain locations. I would normally use a vertical orientation in the forest because trees are taller than wider. I also needed to be able to picture where the gutter would fall in an image. I couldn't have an animal's head fall in the gutter. I also did not want important aspects of my images to lie close to the borders. These are all considerations that I wouldn't think about if I was creating images for the fine art market.

These are a few of my suggestions for fellow photographers. Before closing, I would like to leave potential photographers with a question or two to ponder. Why hasn't photography been more widely used in fictional writing? Why is it so hard to tell a story in pictures? Why has no nature photography book ever won a Caldecott medal? Why is photography not given the same artistic credit as painting and other media? If we want to expand the potential of photography as a medium in picturebooks we will need to consider how to answer these questions in the near future.

Frank Serafini is an Associate Professor of Children's Literature at Arizona State University. He has been capturing images around the world for over thirty years. Frank has a series of non-fiction nature books with Kids Can Press entitled *Looking Closely*. For more information about his work: [www.frankserafini.com](http://www.frankserafini.com), and his photography: [www.backcountryimages.com](http://www.backcountryimages.com).