

How images spark change

Some photographers give voice to the voiceless; to animals, our natural environment, and oppressed people. Images spread across cultures and continents and become visual interpreters transcending language barriers, with the power to elicit emotional responses almost instantaneously. Sophia Hawkes spoke with four pros whose work has the power to help bring about change.

Some images become a catalyst for important conversations. Others spark change. Like stars in the night sky for sailors lost at sea, images become meaningful in our interaction with them.

Eye of the beholder

In a world so saturated with images, how can photography best yield its power to help both highlight issues as well as create positive change? English photographer Nick Brandt's work focusses on the rapidly disappearing natural world. His work in Africa, which commenced in 2001, examines environmental destruction and its effect on humans and animals. With two decades worth of experience in the field, Brandt says he doesn't think there are any clear rules or formulas when it comes to producing work one hopes will bring about change. "Every situation, every urgent cause for concern, is different, and outcomes so unexpected," Brandt says. "For example, in *The Day May Break*, people and animals impacted by environmental destruction are photographed together. The people in the photos have all been badly affected by climate change and the animals are almost all long-term rescues in sanctuaries. I had a conceptual overview for the project – photographing them together in fog that symbolizes the natural world disappearing from view, but of course, each photo has a different emotional impact on every person, so I couldn't say which is the most successful."

Quantifying the impact an image will have is tricky. American photojournalist and filmmaker Amy Toensing has been shooting for over twenty years and is a regular contributor to *National Geographic* documenting people and cultures around the globe. "I think a lot of us photographers worry that our images are not doing enough, and we don't really know what impact they have," she says. "I can't predict how somebody is going to respond to an

MAIN: Alice, Stanley, and Najin, Kenya (2020), from the series, *The Day May Break*.

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image. I don't even feel like I have a lot of power in that. I feel it's just my job to research and understand the story and put myself in situations where I can have the strongest visual language for telling that story."

Brandt thinks the impact is gradual and cumulative, rather than instant. "Even though so many of us are sadly preaching to the converted – those who are already likely thinking similarly to us – the growing chorus of voices hopefully adds up to something more consequential," says Brandt.

Inspiring positive change

Emmy Award-winning cinematographer and conservation photographer, Shawn Heinrichs has seen the power that images have to drive policy and connect people to issues first hand. The NGO that he founded, Blue Sphere Foundation, joined forces with Paul Nicklen and Cristina Mittermeier's NGO, SeaLegacy – a collective of photographers, filmmakers and story tellers working on behalf of the planet's oceans. "Photography is one of the most powerful tools we have today," Heinrichs says. What then gives photography that power? According to him, a vital part of the answer is that people protect what they love. However, without adequate coverage of issues, animals and habitats needing protection may remain hidden from most and therefore not attract the required attention. Before people will take action to protect something, there has to be connection and this is where photography comes in. "There's science which is important from a logical standpoint, but that doesn't speak to your heart. You need to create a sense that you have a relationship with a species or place, and photography allows the viewer to connect, in a very specific and visceral way, to a powerful moment, animal, and place," Heinrichs says.

The power of images

For an image to be a catalyst for change, it's essential it tells a compelling story. "I would like to think that the more something impassions you, the more compelling the narrative will be," says Brandt. Toensing agrees, and says that finding the projects and stories that you're passionate about is key. "Documenting these stories and projects can be hard," she says. "You've got to have endurance to seek them out and see them through."

Heinrichs says the first step is to get clear about what you care about. "If you really want to make an impact, start with the cause and deep sense of purpose and commitment to the story, and then let your images do the work to fill in the story. Today, there's a lot of people taking pretty pictures and that's not a great strategy in this context. It starts from the heart and from a real sense of passion. It takes time and it takes an authentic approach where your camera is nothing more than a tool to translate what you feel and experience in that moment. If you don't feel it, don't expect your viewers to either," he says.

Australian conservation and wildlife photojournalist Doug Gimesy points to the importance of producing images that have an emotional and empathic impact on the viewer. "The real kicker is when images trigger emotions known as meta-emotions," Gimesy says. Meta-emotions refer to emotions and thoughts one has in relation to the emotions experienced. "A powerful image engages people emotionally and drives a behaviour," he says.

Heinrichs agrees with Gimesy. "Your job is to strike the emotion within the viewer. The subject is only one part of it. What is the orientation and expression of that subject and what is the context of that subject to its surroundings? What's happening?" Heinrichs says. "All of these aspects come into play to capture that raw emotion and transmit that to the viewer. The measure of a really successful image is when someone looks at that image and for no reason that they can describe rationally feel something deeply. Every image has a story in it if you do it right," he says.



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Heinrichs adds that because we've all experienced vulnerability in our lives, instilling a sense of vulnerability in the viewer is important. "From vulnerability you strike a chord of empathy, and then, from that centre, all survival and protective instincts come in, and you have an innate desire to use all the tools you've developed to address the situation," he says. From Heinrichs' perspective, one of the most important things a photographer can do is to bring about empathy in the viewer.

Toensing's approach is to document as accurately as possible, without being overly focussed on trying to elicit a specific reaction from the viewer. "I'm very dedicated to finding out what the story is. Then, I try to get to the images that are going to best reveal that story. I'm definitely not thinking, 'Wow, this is going to make somebody cry'. That's not what's driving me." For her, it's more a case of having, say, identified grief as part of a story how best to show that in her work.

Getting the message out

"Change is a matter of profound urgency," says Brandt. But shooting powerful images is only the first step. If images are to reach full potential as change-makers, they need a solid launch pad and you have to reach the right audience. You can focus on an audience that already cares about a particular issue. If your work is featured in any of the publications on the global stage, chances are the audience falls in this category. However, Toensing says pursuing a publication isn't a grounded approach, and that the work you're doing should be your primary objective, rather than specifically where it appears. She adds that some stories are valuable locally, others globally. "It's important to recognize where the work you're doing will best run, and where it's appropriate, and that isn't easy. It's something you cultivate and learn about over time."

Although Toensing considers herself fortunate having freelanced for

**...the more something
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more compelling the
narrative will be.**

Nick Brandt

National Geographic for over twenty years, sometimes other projects leave her feeling most fulfilled. "I'm not attached to work being published in a big publication. I'm more interested in it creating local discussion so that people connect in real time. Bringing stories to the places where they're actually happening can be really powerful," she says.

For example, when Toensing was living in Portland, Oregon, she documented the experiences of refugee girls adapting to American culture. She had an exhibition of the work and hosted a panel including one of the girls she photographed so as to help stimulate community discussion. "That was so fulfilling because I felt like it was actually doing something. Sometimes when you publish to big publications, you're not really sure what the impact is," she says.

On the other hand, you can attempt to engage people who wouldn't consciously seek out the issue you're documenting, meaning you chose a different platform to help disseminate your work. While Gimesy's work appears in numerous leading publications around the world, he's found that having his work recognized in competitions is also an effective method to get it out there. For example, having work shortlisted for the National Photographic Portrait Prize and hung at the National Portrait Gallery in Canberra allows him to reach people who might not otherwise have chosen to engage with the work. This allows him to reach and inform people who haven't previously thought about an issue. Other times Gimesy shoots images with a specific audience in mind. He brought his images of bats entangled in netting used on fruit trees to the Deputy Premier of Victoria, James Merlino,

TOP LEFT: A freediver drops in and shares a profound moment with a shortfin mako shark. Auckland, New Zealand.

BOTTOM LEFT: Richard and sky, Zimbabwe (2020), from the series, *The Day May Break*.

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hoping to have the netting made illegal. Gimesy acknowledges that the images viewed by Merlino were but one of the elements that helped bring about a change in legislation outlawing the use of the nets, but they were very effective in quickly highlighting and bringing the issue to his attention.

Brandt has always funded his own work, and he's gradually moved from straightforward projects to those that are far more complex. He says that it's those early projects that have helped him successfully fund the complex projects he's worked on since 2014. "Had it not been for that, I would never have found the funding for such elaborate projects," he admits.

Time and dedication

Besides tenacity, patience is also crucial when it comes to getting a message out. Recently, Gimesy's images were published in a *National Geographic* story on the illegal wildlife trade. But because of an ongoing court case, images that he had captured of the subject (who was on trial) as well as of the raids on homes, it would be two years before they were published. In order to approach the topic, Gimesy says it was important to consider it from a multitude of angles, including moral issues and wildlife laws. "A lot of it is understanding animal welfare and examining your justification."

Heinrichs has also had to work on projects for several years before seeing results. He says that often it's a team effort that helps most effectively get a message out, and that while an image may be captured by an individual, that's only one part of a long process. Two specific success stories of his images being aided by a team effort to bring about change relate to the protection of manta rays and mako sharks. In both instances Heinrich and his team brought images and documentation before the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES). The convention is an international agreement between governments with the aim to ensure that the international trade in wildlife does not threaten wild populations of plants and animals. It also has the power to decide trade bans on specific species as a protection measure. In the case of the manta rays, it was a culmination of four years' work, and Heinrichs believes that were it not for the power of images to tell the story of the rays' beauty, vulnerability and exploitation, they would not have become protected.

Capturing images of mako sharks that showed why the animals required the same protection as manta rays was more challenging given

PREVIOUS PAGE: Simon Booth plays with his kids, Claire and Ryan, in a dried-up paddock on their farm on 7 February, 2008, in Balranald, New South Wales. Simon travelled out to his fields to see how the rainstorm the day before had affected his land. One area had received just under 2 inches – the most rain in one incident in over 10 years for his station.

ABOVE: Entangled. A grey-headed flying-fox (*Pteropus poliocephalus*) hangs entangled in urban fruit-tree netting. Prahran, Victoria. Despite being rescued, the netting had cut the circulation to its wing for too long and the bat had to be euthanised.

their reputation as formidable predators. When Heinrichs went to New Zealand to document the sharks, it was the first time he had encountered them. "Bait was put in the water and the first mako that surfaced took a bite on the platform right where I was standing. Then it started chewing on the back of the motor which was turned off. The shark was literally trying to rip the back of the boat off. So, I'm thinking, 'We want to protect that? How is that going to happen?'"

After about half an hour, Heinrichs was able to jump in the water and swim with a female mako for six hours. "By the end of it, she was allowing us to stroke her, and she would come and rub her body against us. We were able to capture these luminous images." He says the images demystified the shark from a terrifying ocean predator to a highly sentient, curious being that wasn't a monster. The images were able to show a very different picture to what the media had previously painted. Heinrichs and his team were able to blast them all over their social networks, and at the last minute were able to turn one of the voting countries in favour of protecting the sharks, securing a win for the makos. "Protecting a shark like that is difficult," Heinrichs says. "Without the imagery it would have been extremely hard to do, but we were able to shift peoples' perception with those images."

Images reach beyond the limitations of spoken or written language and can rip one's hearts open in an instant. From there, positive change can be sparked. The trajectory of an image creating positive change is often long and full of challenges. Therefore, it's important to let your passion guide your choice of subject, while spending time getting to know it and the surrounding story so you can best yield the power of photography to bring about positive change. If an image sparks conversation, shines light on an issue, or creates empathy, then it has succeeded in its role as change-maker. Images can carry meaning and information across cultures and languages to shape reality, but this isn't a static process, it's a dynamic conversation between photographer, subject and viewer. □

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