

Conservation Photography.

In this essay my aim is to study the part that photography has played in the field of Conservation and Environmentalism, to begin with I'm going to look at where this kind of photography has its roots before moving on to look at more modern forms and how their approach has altered if at all in the today's world. From this work I intend to take inspiration which will help and guide me in my future assignments on this course.

I remember as a child seeing a photo of part of a Rainforest (I think it was probably in Brazil) which had been completely cleared to make room for farmland and thinking what about all the animals that lived there, where have they gone? I might have asked my parents and I'd imagine they'd give the kind of answer which although wouldn't answer my concerns would at least give me the idea that everything would be ok. This was my first experience in the field of Conservation Photography and it left me with the feeling as I've grown older that I needed to understand and learn more about the environment around me and the wildlife that inhabits it, I wouldn't call myself an environmentalist but what I believe is that everything has a right to live on this rock we call Earth. If that means us as a highly intelligent species (in the most part) should do everything in our power to limit the damage we do while at the same time helping and protecting the world around us then surely we should. One of the first reasons I picked up a camera was to capture images of the wildlife in my garden and from there I've always taken pleasure in photographing the natural world around us, for me after a lot of thought I realised that the obvious subject to look at for this course was Conservation because I could bring together my love of photography and of the natural world and look at how photos can be used to help people understand why areas and wildlife need to be protected.

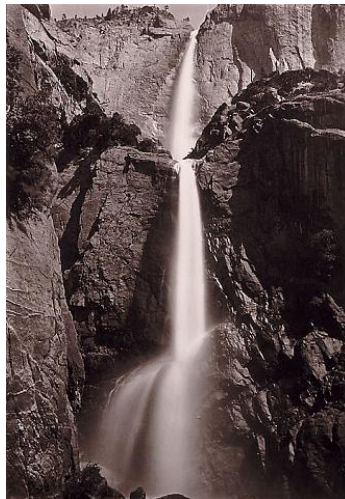
The important question to ask here is what actually is Conservation Photography, in its simplest form it can be defined as photos that empower conservation showing the issues and work being done. In essence it's more than that, in the modern world one view is that as a society we're growing more distant from nature and this kind of photography helps us to reconnect and understand how our actions have a direct effect on the environment. One of the best quotes I've seen describing what this kind of photographs can do says "If we are going to have a new connection to the environment it will happen in individuals' hearts and souls... the artist can help us fall in love with the Earth again"¹, for me this outlines perfectly what Conservation Photography is all about because it has to produce strong feeling in the viewer making them want to encourage change. It's possibly a more powerful tool today because we're more aware through the media of the environmental crises that are produced through our activities, but surprisingly the use of photography for this purpose isn't a new occurrence.

You have to go as far back as the 1860-70 to the American West to find the birthplace of what we recognize today as Conservation Photography and look at two particular men Carleton Watkins and William Henry Jackson. What they did and in turn what their work was used for was

way ahead of their time but the effects and influences still can be seen today when studying this field.

Carleton Watkins.

Carleton Watkins was born in Oneonta New York in 1829, America at this time still being pretty much the wild west must have been one hell of a place to grow up which must have affected him in some way you'd imagine but surprisingly there isn't much information to be found about his early life. The first important step he takes in the path that will eventually lead him to photography is in 1851 when he migrates along with hundreds even thousands of other people to California during the Gold Rush in the hopes of finding his fortune. This journey be it on the railroads or on horse through the west and over the Rocky Mountain surely must have opened his eyes to the beauty of the American landscape. After 3 years of hard work without finding gold he starts working as an aide in Portrait Photo studios, first with Robert Vance in Sacramento then at James Ford's Gallery in San Jose. Here he would have learned all the skills he'd need from using heavy cameras shooting on glass plates to the skillful task of processing and developing the images. It didn't take him long to discover that portrait photography wasn't for him and he began taking landscape images, to begin with he focused on the Californian mining scene but soon began taking photos of Yosemite in the Rocky Mountains which would gain him much notoriety because people had never seen images of this area before.





Images taken from [Masters of Photography](#).

By 1865 he had become a recognised photographer in his own right and taken up the position of Photographer for the California State Geological Survey, but what he really became known for was when his work was used as a tool in the protection of the Yosemite Valley in 1864. Mining and Logging companies were already eying up the area ready to move in but the “Yosemite Grant” created in the American Congress effectively proclaimed the land as a national park in everything but name. In turn this started a change in the view Americans had that it was their god given right to exploit the land and resources found out west and at the same time started

the conservation movement in America. Unfortunately for Watkins this was the highpoint of his career because soon with the limited business sense he had to declare himself bankrupt which meant he lost his gallery and negatives to another photographer called Isaiah Taber who began to publish and sell his work under his own name. Watkins did begin again but he'd never reach the highs he had previously which is a shame because almost single handedly he'd brought the beauty of the American West to people attention.

A final point I'd like to make about Watkins work is his distinctive style which I think say something about his character. He liked high vantage points for his landscapes which would have meant in some cases a hellish climb with heavy equipment, from this I'd guess he was a very determined man but also he'd return to the same spots over and over during the years which has help us today track the changes in Yosemite during the period of his work. When you study his photos he liked to have a central strong focal point and then used the natural landscape (be it cliffs or trees) to frame the view drawing the viewer into the image and creating a more connected feel. Whether he started out aiming for his work to be used in the way they were I'm not sure, but what I do think he possible wanted to do was show people back east the wonders that he'd found in these new and exciting landscapes.

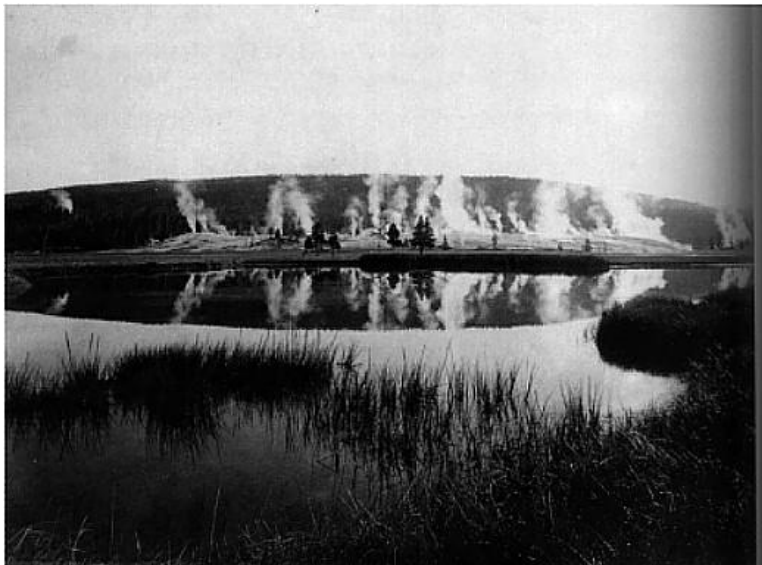
William Henry Jackson.

Born in Keeseville New York in 1843 unlike Watkins his experiences with photography began at the much younger age of 12 years old when he began working as a retoucher in a photo studio, here he refined his artistic skills with his retouching work but at the same time was also learning as much as he could about the art of photography which he would put to use in later life. In 1862 with the outbreak of the Civil War in America Jackson joined the Union Army, during his short time in the army he never saw any significant action and by 1863 he was mustered out and so returned to what he knew best by working in Vermont at Style's Photographic Gallery. During the following years like many he headed west in hope of finding his fortune and a better life and like the majority this never happened but what it did give him was the chance to do sketch landmarks and lifestyles that he came across during his travels. Eventually in 1868 Jackson settled in Omaha, Nebraska where he set up a portrait studio with his brother Edward, although this provided him a steady income he still wanted to take his photography further and at one time said himself "Portrait photography never had any charm for me, I sought my subjects from the housetops, and finally from the hilltops and about the surrounding country; the taste strengthening as my successes became greater in proportion to the failures."² With this movement in a different direction came new opportunities, when his photos of the construction of the Union Pacific railway came to the attention of Ferdinand V Hayden he was asked to join a Geologic Survey that was heading into the previously unexplored area of the Rocky Mountains called Yellowstone. His work during this period was influenced by Thomas Moran a Painter working alongside him on the survey but also by photographers such as C.R Savage and A.J Russell. Jackson became the first person to

photograph Yellowstone and his photos produced such strong reactions from the public because they'd never seen or encountered a landscape quite like this it. In the end like with Watkins photos of Yosemite the American government moved to protect the area and by 1872 it became America's first national park due to impart the reaction to Jackson's photos. Below are some of the photo's used.



Taken from www.pbs.org



Taken from xroads.virginia.edu



Taken from lololikes.blogspot.co.uk

These only give the briefest glimpse into what he produced but he didn't stop there, over the rest of his career with the fame he'd gained through his Yellowstone work he continued working with other Geologic surveys in the west and southwest capturing their work and the ever differing landscapes he found himself in. Ever the adventurer in 1894 he set off on a world tour taking in Europe, Africa, India, Russia and Japan when most people would have been happily retired content with the contribution they'd made to photography he could or just wouldn't stop. By the time he died in 1942 he witnessed and captured many of the changes in the American landscape and this is another reason why he's regarded as an important part in the history of American Photography.

When you study both Watkins and Jackson's work it'd be easy to say with a modern view that really there isn't anything that special artistically about what they did. The photos themselves don't produce over strong emotions in me but that's because it's difficult to understand the kind of reaction they'd have received in the late 20th century, today we're kind of used to seeing images of these landscapes. What you need to do is put yourself in the shoes of people at that time, photography was still very much in its infancy and the only way to see these kind of landscapes was in paintings, to see them in a photo must have been a bit of a revelation. With the scenes in this form the realism produced a more emotional response meaning that the public were more open to the fact that these areas should be protected and not exploited for their natural resources as was more the norm at the time. Another point that needs to be made about their work is what it tells us about the birth of Conservation Photography, this began that it was born out of a need to explore the unknown. In Jackson's case it was a journey undertaken with a scientifically led party who were interested in the geology of the area but also the flora and fauna that they found in this environment. On the other hand Watkins was led by the need to reach and see previously inaccessible parts of the continent. When you look at the style of their work you can see how they were influenced by artists of the day copying techniques used in painting to construct a landscape, at the same time though you also see ideas relating to

Straight photography because realism is key to their work.

What I want to look at now is the modern approach to conservation photography and how it has progressed from the work of Jackson and Watkins. Over the last century with changing technology and the increase in accessibility of the medium to more people than ever before it has become one of if not the most powerful tool when fighting the cause of protecting our planet. In today's world it's difficult not to be aware of the effects that our way of life is having on the environment around us, this is in the main due to the use of photography in the media be it in papers, magazines, on tv or seen on the internet we are confronted with the consequences of our actions. For example today if some kind of man made environmental disaster occurs within hours it's possible to see the resulting damage and with good photography even world governments can be galvanised into rapid action. This is possible thanks to a dedicated bunch of photographers throughout the world who have such strong feelings about the issues that arise that at times they'll put their own lives at risk to make the public sit up and take note of what's happen, these are the kind of photographers I want to have a closer look at.

Michael 'Nick' Nichols.

I've been looking for a while now for a standout photographer to begin my look at modern conservation photography and one name seems to crop up the most, Michael Nichols. Born in America in 1952 Nichols didn't begin his photographic career until he was drafted into the US Army's photographic unit in the early 70's, today he's considered one of the greats in the field often described as the Indiana Jones of Photography because of his determination to get the images often regardless of the personal risks involved, a good example of this would be his work focusing on the struggle against elephant poaching in Chad. Here the chances of being shot at and killed himself must have been incredible high because that last thing the poachers want is to be captured on film. After leaving the army he studied at the University of North Alabama where he was to meet his mentor former Life Magazine photographer Charles Moore who captured images of the civil rights movement during the 60's in America, he must have more than anyone else opened Nichols' eyes to the power of photography when used in the right ways. From this point he worked hard perfecting his approach until the major turning point in his career came in 1981 while photographing Mountain Gorillas in Rwanda. You could call it his epiphany moment because he saw that by using his camera he could help these creatures in ways similar to his mentor by giving a voice to a group that couldn't stand up for itself. Expanding on this idea his aim ever since has been to protect and preserve true wildness by creating images that show us what we could lose if we don't help our planet. To achieve this aim he's had help over the years from National Geographic where he's worked as Staff Photographer and Editor at large or by working with scientist/conservationist like Jane Goodall, J. Michael Fay, Iain Douglas-Hamilton and Craig Parker. These relationships have allowed him to create epic narratives some of which have been ground breaking as with Jane Goodall's

study of chimps which has help us to understand the issues at hand and how the situation can be improved to protect them and their natural habitat.

Today he's pushing the boundaries of what the camera can show us even further than ever before by trying to get as up close and personal as he can with some of the most endangered wildlife this planet has to offer. To do this he's using things like remote controlled micro-copters and cars fitted with cameras, infrared cameras and camera traps. The end results should be a collection of photos that give us a more indepth view of life for the creatures he studies than we've ever had before maybe give new insight into their nature and the lives they lead. In his most recent published work Redwoods. The Super Trees (Oct. National Geographic) he used ground breaking rigging techniques to create a 84 image composite of a 300 foot tree capturing the details at each level of the tree as you head up into the canopy.



Taken from [National Geographic](#).



Taken from [National Geographic](#).



Taken from [National Geographic](#).

When I look at Nichols's work there are somethings that are pretty clear, first his photos are stunningly beautiful on so many levels, from his use of colour and light to the connection you feel in his wildlife work through eye contact created with the camera. One thing that comes across most with his photography is the strength of feeling that he clearly has for each subject, in this kind of work as I've said you have to have this to really project it through your photos and onto the viewer. What I really like most about him and his work has to be his commitment, he'll go that extra mile to get the photo no matter what. I know I couldn't go to those lengths myself so this gives me even more respect for the man but more than anything its the quality of work over such an important part of our history that makes him one if not the greatest conservation photographer of his generation.

The International League of Conservation Photographers.

The best way to describe what this group stands for and does is to quote directly from their website (www.ilcp.com), here it states "As a project-driven organization, our goal is to translate conservation science into compelling visual messages targeted to specific audiences. We work with leading scientist, policy makers, government leaders and conservation groups to produce the highest-quality documentary images of both the beauty and wonder of the natural world and the challenges facing it". In today's world you have to get your message more than ever directly to the people that can make a difference, being part of a group like this can help no end because of the high profile nature they hold. Within the league there are many different

nationalities from most cultures throughout the world so you have feeling they have a pretty strong grasp on the kind of issues that we face but what I'm going to do is just focus on the members from this country as their work is most likely to have some relevance in regards to where I hope to be heading with my own, by this I mean that they've done a great deal of work focusing on British landscapes be it mainly in Scotland.

Colin Prior.

He is one of Britain's most respected photographers known for his skill in using natural light to capture both landscapes and still lifes. Born in Glasgow, his proximity to some of the best natural wilderness area in the country help shape his love for the great outdoors and at the same time inspire an interest in photography that would lead him into the world of conservation. To me I wonder whether he takes inspiration for his approach to photography from the likes of Jackson and Watkins, he's more than willing to get up before dawn to climb a mountain and then stay on top until dusk to make use of the light creating epic landscapes in the process. As I've said with other photographers this shows dedication to his work but with good reasons. He see's amateur photography has reached such a high standard that a professional has to push themselves that little bit further to make their work unique. If you have a look on his website www.colinprior.co.uk you can see the results of this effort, he describes his work as "Sublime moments of light and land" this accurately describes his way of capturing the Scottish Highlands in particular where he seems to go in search of the perfect combination of light (clearly at dawn or dusk) and the rugged mountainous landscapes found in this part of the world. The trick that he's mastered though is in combining the two so that at times his work is almost dream like and verging on the realms of being unrealistic because of the strength of colour and texture that you find in these scenes. From a conservation point of view he's traveled to some of the greatest wilderness areas the world has to offer photographing such beautiful scenes that it's impossible not to feel something towards these areas. One thing that does come across in his work be it in his landscapes or still life is how patterns play a major part in forming the image giving them a very strong balance/rhythm. This is an idea that I've considered when planning my own work but at this point I'm not so sure that my subject matter really offers itself to this way of shaping a photo.



Taken from thinkcamera.com



Photos taken from bronwynvowles.wordpress.com

Robin Moore.

Moore's route into photography has taken a slightly different course than most of his contemporaries in that he studied at university to gain a PhD in Biodiversity Conservation which has then led him over the last decade to work to conserve what he see as our fragile ecosystem. To do this he discovered that photography has the potential be the most powerful tool in influencing people's attitudes and behavior towards our environment, he tends to aim a lot of his work at government for the simple fact that they can make the required changes to policy that can get the greatest results in the shortest time. For example recently he met with local government in Sulawesi to talk about the creation of a new area of protection in the country, the highest local official or 'Bupati' asked if he could have a copy of one of Moore's photos of a Toad native to the area to decorate his offices. The result of this small act was that the plan was later approved but at 10x the size originally proposed, if this isn't evidence of how photography can affect opinion I don't know what is. Like it seems most great conservation

photographers he's travelled throughout the world but my favorite collection has to be from Africa entitled [Kenya: Wildlife and Landscape](#) where he's captured the beauty of the landscape and the amount of life that fills it. Some of his best work I feel is when he's used longer exposures to capture the animal life in full flight, this to me makes the scenes seem far more alive but you have to appreciate the amount of skill and planning needed for him to get in a position to get these kind of shots. I can't say I'd be jumping at the chance of trying to photograph a charging Rhino but for him the risk are outweighed by the potential gains. On the other hand there's a less serious side to some of his work in this collection with the Giraffe at the front door and then feeding through the window, this I suppose says something about human interaction with wildlife in the area and that we can coexist but it also creates a nice balance between the serious message found in his work.



Photo taken from [500px.com](#)



Taken from [oneeyeland.com](#)



Photo taken from www.flyladylori.com

Niall Benvie.

Again born in Scotland he holds a degree in Geography but his passion in life for the outdoors was shaped at an early age by his Father, to begin with photography for him was a way of making money through stock work but slowly over time his focus shifted to more photographic stories depicting the relationship between man and the land. In an interview published in RotoVision in 2003 he talks about his work and his feelings towards other in the same field "In light of the unfolding environmental catastrophe of the 21st century, I feel it's a bit frivolous- not to say misleading- to continue to focus only on pristine environments and charismatic fauna without taking into account the state of the wider environment and peoples relationship with it. So long as landscape and wildlife photographers continue to do this, we can't expect to be taken seriously as contributors to the debate on how we should balance the needs of nature and culture"³. To me this says that he strongly believes that we as photographers are taking slightly the wrong approach to conservation, if this is true why has there been so many success story thanks to photographers and their will to stand up for those place and wildlife that can't do this themselves? I do like the idea that we shouldn't just capture the beauty thats out there but to go deeper and show the more ugly side of life, surely this gives a truer reflection of what happening around us because to understand a problem you have to see all sides of the issue.

At the minute he has a very unique way of photographing a landscape which he feels gives a true reflection of how we see an area as we walk through it, he calls this Landscape Deconstructions. What he's doing is photographic individual elements of a landscape and then combining them in a kind of collage format, here you can see an example portraying the [Gannochy Gorge](#) where he begins with the sky at the top and then works his way down to the ground below your feet. I like it because it's a very novel way of getting a message across about the amount of life that can be found within a landscape, you can wander through say a wood and not notice all the elements around you that make up the area but with this way of photographing it's all there before you in a single format that you can take in.



Taken from [discoverwildlife.com](https://www.discoverwildlife.com)



Taken from [phototechnique.com](https://www.phototechnique.com)



Taken from guardian.co.uk

Peter Cairns.

In his career so far he has managed to photograph most of Europe's most high profile wildlife species, in itself this would be enough to keep anyone busy for a whole lifetime but on top of that he is also the co founder of the highly acclaimed Tooth and Claw predator project as well as founder director of both the Wild Wonders of Europe and the Wild Media Foundation. What his photographic work tends to focus on is a very wide range of subjects from wildlife management, ecological restoration, eco tourism and evolving land use regimes but what all these have in common is the need to educate the public as much as possible on these subjects. Unlike the other photographers I've already look at a large amount of Cairns work focuses on Scotland where he is based and the wildlife of the Highlands. A look at his website www.northshots.com and you can see the kind of work he's produced capturing shots of difficult to find wild animals like the Scottish Wildcat which is in heavy decline mainly due to breeding with domestic cats, then there's the Pine Marten which can be extremely elusive mainly due to the fact that it's most active during the hours of darkness. Of all the photographers I've looked at I find it easiest to relate to his work because I already have a basic understanding of the majority of issues he's covering, many of these are occurring throughout the country like habitat loss and land mismanagement. The strong points of his work are the use of strong colours and lighting as it seems with most good landscape photographer but he also has a knack of knowing how to use the empty space within the frame so that it doesn't feel unbalanced, for example take this image of a [Slavonian Grebe](#) its only very small in the photo but it doesn't feel over whelmed by the empty space that surrounds it.



Taken from [discoverwildlife.com](https://www.discoverwildlife.com)



Taken from [treehugger.com](https://www.treehugger.com)



Taken from [northshots.com](https://www.northshots.com)

After studying all these photographers past and present what conclusions can I draw about Conservation Photography, to begin with its roots can be traced back to early exploration in which it started life as a tool to show the public the wild spaces that existed in the world beyond their horizons. Of course the downside to this was that industrious groups first thoughts were how they could take advantage of the new opportunities they saw in these areas. This in turn gave new meaning to the photography in that it could be used as a tool to encourage protection rather than exploitation. As we've moved into the 21st century this kind of work has grown in prominence because as the population of the planet has grown to the 10 billion mark we are putting more and more pressure on our environment and the damage we are causing is becoming more and more obvious to all. I find it interesting that today's photographers in this field tend to come from a scientific background more than the field of exploration which it was built on, do I take from this that there's less need for exploration because in this age the world feels somehow much smaller or is it just the simple fact that science gives people more of an insight into the issues in the world right now. Today conservation work isn't just focus on the wild place that we have left its branched out and education seems to have become a key word. With the internet and mass media markets today its so much easier to get your message across and to a much wider audience than ever before, I think today we're in a position where our eyes have been fully opened to the problems our planet faces but that doesn't mean that it's an end to Conservation Photography, there'll always be a new issue and this'll keep this kind of work relevant for a lot longer to come yet.

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Quotes.

- 1- Taken from www.conservationphotography.info by Berensohn 2007 quote taken from page 10 on 14th July 2012
- 2- Taken from <http://www.getty.edu/art/gettyguide/artMakerDetails?maker=1889> on the 17th July 2012
- 3- Taken from http://imagesfromtheedge.com/blog/?page_id=2 on the 1st August 2012