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A Visual Conservation Effort for Wilderness Park

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Abstract

Conservation photography has been practiced since the early 1800’s by photographers who had the talent for photography, and passion for protecting our planets most precious resources. The photographic works of many photographers used their images as conservation tools to protect areas of land they intrinsically valued. Like these photographers, I have found a piece of land close to home that I intrinsically value, and this piece of land is Wilderness Park. Wilderness Park is 1,472 acres of riparian woodland and is part of the Salt Creek watershed, which is a tributary of the larger Platte River Basin. However, I am not the only one who finds this piece of land worth preserving. The Friends of Wilderness Park is a non-profit Organization that is committed to preserving the long-term sustainability and ecological integrity of Wilderness Park through proactive education, preservation, and community cooperation. The purpose of my project is to create a photobook for Wilderness Park, and donate any profits made from the book to the Friends of Wilderness Park organization. By dedicating my time, talent, and effort in creating this archive of images and donating the profits to this like-minded organization, I will be combining my love for photography and passion of preserving our natural resources. This paper will explore the effectiveness of using photography as a conservation tool, the history and importance of Wilderness Park, and the design process of creating this photobook.
Introduction

My love for photography goes back to freshman year of high school when I signed up for my high school's photojournalism course. Ever since then, I have been inspired to create images that show people the world through my eyes. However, I was discouraged to pursue photography as a career because from what I understood, the only way one could make a living from doing photography is by doing portrait, wedding, or newspaper journalism and none of those seemed appealing to me. So, I kept photography on the backburner as a hobby while I sought out to pursue my other passions. I struggled throughout high school trying to discover what it really was that I wanted to do when I “grew up”. My senior year, I took an Environmental Studies course, and halfway through the course I realized that this is a subject I have always been incredibly passionate about, yet I never knew it was a subject one could actually study and make a life career out of.

Once I was accepted to the University of Nebraska – Lincoln, I immediately signed up for the Environmental Studies program. Similar to my feelings in high school, I struggled to find my niche in the vast array of focuses in the Environmental Studies program. Entering into my fourth year at UNL, I was delighted to receive an e-mail from my academic advisor, Sara Cooper, about a class that had room for more students to sign up. The class was titled, “Wildlife Digital Imagery and Storytelling”. I didn’t know much about what the class entailed beyond its title, but the inner photographer in me told Sara that I was interested and to sign me up. Beginning the class, I was pleased to be introduced to the instructors Mike Forsberg and Mike Farrell. Mike Farrell is a nationally known documentarian and film maker who is a Special Projects Producer at NET. Mike Forsberg, is a conservation photographer who focuses on photographing the Great Plains. After meeting “The Mikes”, I learned that they both had an
incredible passion for protecting the environment by using digital imagery. I had finally found my niche. I knew that this was something that I would want to spend the rest of my life doing: combining my love for photography and my natural resource background.

**History**

Photographing our planet's natural world brings life and voice to subjects that cannot speak for themselves. From the deep old growth forest in the Olympic Peninsula, to the vast landscape of the African savanna, to the tiny ladybug resting on a dandelion in a backyard; the amount of photographic subjects a nature photographer has is seemingly infinite. Nature photographers have the ability to show people the world through their eyes. “Photography is one of the most universal languages around, and you do not have to say a word.” (unknown)

However, these images have the potential to be more than just art on a wall, or a picture in a magazine. The images captured by nature photographers have the potential to implement change in the way people view a certain subject, they have the ability to change policy, and ultimately they have the ability to protect the subject they are photographing. This is where the term conservation photography comes into play. Conservation photography can be defined in many different ways.

“Conservation photography is the result of photographic talent combined with environmental understanding, a conservation commitment.” (International League of Conservation Photographers).

“I think conservation photography is creating images that will affect change and insuring that those images do affect change. The responsibility doesn’t end when you trip the shutter, it actually begins then, and you have to make sure those images get before the people that need to see them.” (Garth Lenz).
Conservation photography may be a new term, but it definitely is not a new concept. Carleton Watkins was an American photographer born in 1829. In 1861, Watkins traveled to the area known today as Yosemite, to photograph the land only seen by pioneers who visited the area themselves. His photographs of Yosemite were the first photographs of this pristine landscape to be seen in the Eastern United States. He was then hired to continue photographing Yosemite for the California State Geological Survey (DeLuca 2000). Senator John Conness got ahold of his photographs of Yosemite, and passed them around Congress. These powerful images ended up influencing Congress and President Abraham Lincoln who eventually signed a bill in 1864 which declared Yosemite as the nation’s first nature preserve (Hill 1977).

After the conservation successes of Carleton Watkins, photographer William Henry Jackson’s photographs helped establish Yellowstone as the nation’s first National Park. In 1869, Jackson was appointed to photograph the scenery along various railroad routes. His work was then discovered by Ferdinand Hayden, the director of the U.S Geological Survey, and Watkins was asked to join in on his expedition to Yellowstone (Library of Congress 2010). After Hayden saw Jackson’s photographs, he took these images to Congress to lobby for the protection of more than two million acres of land. In December 1871, the Yellowstone bill was introduced to both houses in Congress. Finally, on March 1, 1872, President Ulysses Grant signed the Yellowstone Act into law, and the world’s first National Park was created (Western Trails Project).

This movement of photographing untouched natural regions in America continued throughout the 20th century. On the eastern side of the United States, George Masa, a Japanese immigrant arrived in the United States in 1901. Masa was a businessman and a professional large format photographer. He spent extended periods of time photographing the wilderness of the Smokey Mountain region. His love and tireless passion for the preservation of the area
showed in his photographic work. For many years, he worked hand in hand with author, and National Park proponent, Horace Kephart. Together, they published a large format pamphlet titled, “A National Park in the Great Smoky Mountains”. President Roosevelt was able to see the region as a national jewel, which needed to be protected. This led to the establishment of the Great Smokey Mountains National Park in 1931 (Burns 2009).

While Masa was photographing the Smokey Mountains, Ansel Adams was merely just discovering his passion for photography. Adams was an American photographer and Environmentalist born in San Francisco, California in 1902 (Werner 2009). At age 17, he joined the Sierra Club as a custodian of the Club’s LeConte Memorial Lodge. In 1927, Adams participated in the clubs annual outing, known as the High Trip, and the next year he became the Club’s official photographer. In 1934, Adams was elected as a member of the board of Directors of the Sierra Club. The Sierra Club was seeking the protection in the Kings River region in the Sierra Nevada, so Adams created a limited-edition book with striking images of Sierra Nevada region. Adams took this book and lobbied Congress which eventually led to the creation of Kings Canyon National Park in 1940 (Cahn 1981).

The work of conservation photographers does not only exist in the United States. Peter Dombrovskis was an Australian photographer born in 1945. His photographic work focused primarily on protecting the wild Tasmanian Rivers from damming projects. Even though his efforts could not stop the construction of all the dams, he was able to stop the Franklin Dam project of 1978. If this project had been passed it would have destroyed wildlife habitat, flooded valleys, and disrupted water flows. The photograph that played a major role in stopping the construction of the dam is titled Morning Mist, Rock Island Bend (Figure 1). This image was printed in the Sunday Morning Herald, and Melbourne’s The Age newspapers, accompanied with
a caption, “Could you vote for a party that would destroy this?” Ultimately his efforts were of great success and he was the first Australian inducted into the International Photography Hall of Fame and Museum (Mittermeier 2005).

Inspired by Dombrovskis work, Cristina Mittermeier created the International League of Conservation Photographers. She started her career graduating with a Marine Biology degree from the Instituto Tecnologico y de Estudios Superiores de Monterrey in Guaymas, Sonora, Mexico in 1989 (Klaus 2009). She later studied photography at the Corcoran College of Arts in Washington, D.C.. Her subject of focus was the important relationship between indigenous cultures and the surrounding biodiversity. This led her to a tribe in Central Brazil called the Kayapo. Her goal was to photograph the struggles this indigenous community goes through to protect their territory from logging or development. Her photographs are giving voice to the people who may not have the means or power to protect their culture and land (Mittermeier 2005).

Another contemporary conservation photographer is, Michael Nichols. He joined the staff of National Geographic in 1996 after studying under civil rights photographer Charles Moore. One of his projects that stands out above the others is his project titled Mega Transect which became a three part story in National Geographic (Mittermeier 2005). This project consisted of two years of trekking across the Africa continent starting in Congo and ending on the coast of Gabon. This trek took place from 1999-2001, and covered nearly two thousand
miles. The objective of the trip was to bring awareness through photography, of critical endangered species and various habitats. After the journey was over, and the images were sorted and edited, they were then presented to Gabon’s president, El Hadj Omar Bongo. The photographs were able to impact him in such a way that he decided to create a system of thirteen national parks. This has been one of the most significant conservation photography success stories in decades (Nichols 2005).

These instances of human effort, talent, and drive show that photography is an incredibly powerful tool to implement change, and ensure protection of the subject being photographed. Today there are many conservation photographers with the same passion, drive, and talent who use photography as a tool to protect the subjects of the natural world they care about. These individuals are proclaimed conservation photographers, not only because of the talent and photographical technique they have, but also because they paired that talent with an activist mindset to make sure those images got to the people who needed to see them. Ultimately, photography has protected millions of acres of wilderness which proves that it can be used as an effective conservation tool.

This brings me into the objective of my project which is to create a photo book for Wilderness Park. The purpose is to create an archive of images to potentially help stop any future development of the park, and to donate any profits made from the book to the Friends of Wilderness Park Organization. Cristina Mittermeier states, “It is essential to acknowledge the importance of donating images, time, and talent to small grassroots conservation organizations and other environmental causes that may lack the resources to carry out large, complex projects and for whom it is much harder to find funds to higher the services of professional photographers.” With this project, I hope that my efforts of taking photographs and creating a
photobook, will mirror the efforts of the conservation photographers, and will help keep
Wilderness Park Wild.

Wilderness Park

Wilderness Park is 1,472-acres of riparian woodland that is located in South-East
Lincoln. The park is a part of the Salt Creek watershed, which is a tributary of the larger Platte
River Basin. It consists of 20 miles of hiking, biking, and horseback riding trails braided
throughout the park. Unlike other parks in Lincoln, the park is not manicured or developed
therefore wilderness values are enhanced. A field survey done by J. Kip Hulvershorn in 1999
concludes that there is a high diversity of Flora and Fauna present within the park. There are 100
bird species, 37 potential mammal species and a confirmed total of 19 in the park. There are 26
potential amphibian and reptile species, 15 species of fish, six species of bats, and 58 species of
butterflies. The present plant community types include woodlands, grasslands, old fields and
wetlands.

In 1906, Professor E. H. Barbour saw the potential of Wilderness Park as the start of an
elaborate park system in Lincoln, NE. He argued that it would not only be a good place for
people to escape from their everyday lives and enjoy the outdoors, but this area would also
provide a good natural barrier for flood protection. Other parks in Lincoln, such as Antelope
Creek, were established early on, but the Salt Creek woodlands remained in private ownership
until the 1960’s. However, this private ownership did not stop Lincoln residence from using the
area for their recreational needs. During the 1960’s, the Corps of Engineers acknowledged that
the wooded area surrounding Salt Creek would be beneficial for preventing flooding in the
surrounding community. In 1966 a group of Lincoln residents from many professional
backgrounds made up the Wilderness Park Committee and provided guidance for the acquisition
of land. Through the Open Space Act, federal funds were made available, and private contributions were made by the Woods Foundation, the Seacrest Foundation, and the Lincoln Foundation (NEBRASKAland 1981). Alongside the Wilderness Park Committee were professors from the University of Nebraska - Lincoln who expressed their desire to use this land as an outdoor laboratory. The Epworth Area was willed to the city of Lincoln by Arnott R. Folsom with the request that it be included in Wilderness Park. From here, the Youth Conservation Corps, and the Sierra Club of Lincoln helped to make trails, bridges, and other improvements in the park. By 1972, Wilderness Park became what it is now today (Journal Star 1998).

**Environmental Importance of Wilderness Park**

Wilderness Park is considered to be a riparian woodland. A riparian area by definition is; of, relating to, or situated or dwelling on the bank of a river or other body of water. Thus a riparian woodland is an area that is situated on the banks of a body of water surrounded by woody plant communities. These important ecosystems provide for diverse communities of Flora and Fauna.

**Plant Communities**

The diverse community of plants at Wilderness Park are the main contributors to the superior soil dynamics. By having well established, and nutrient rich soils, it is possible for a wide variety of plant species to grow. The buffer of the woodland area surrounding Salt Creek, prevents erosion and sediment runoff, which helps increase the quality of the water. Densely clustered and deep rooted plants also act as natural flood prevention (Kiapproth 2014).

**Animal Communities**
The Salt Creek meanders through the park and provides habitat for a diversity of animal species. The close proximity gives animals the access to drink, swim, feed, and reproduce. The creek is beneficial for the habitats of amphibians, fish, and macroinvertebrates. With water availability so present, a variety of trees, shrubs, and grasses have the ability to grow and survive. This diverse community of plants provides fruits, seeds, buds, insects, and foliage as food sources for a large diversity of animal species. Wilderness Park contains several prairies that provide forage and seeds both within the park and along the border. Not only does this diverse plant community provide food, but it also provides shelter for many species of animals. Fallen branches in the woodland give home to many small animals, and insects. The tops of the trees can provide as a stopover habitat for migrating birds, and give bats suitable roosting grounds. Since Wilderness Park is surrounded by urban and agricultural land, it is also a critical corridor for many species to travel through (Kiapproth 2014).

Aquatic Communities

Riparian woodlands are essential for providing food for aquatic organisms. When leaves, twigs, insects, and branches fall into the stream the organic matter supplies food for stream invertebrates. These invertebrates then provide food for various fish and mammal species. These terrestrial inputs are critical for the survival of aquatic species. Wilderness Park has a closed canopy that gives shade to the creek providing optimal conditions for the growth of green algae and rooted aquatic plants. The fallen branches from the canopy above provide a unique dynamic of habitats within the creek. When the branches fall into the creek they alter the flows of the creek creating a web of shallow, deep, small, and large pools of water. These branches also interrupt flood waters, trap essential food items, and provide shelter and cover (Kiapproth 2014).
**Friends of Wilderness Park**

The Friends of Wilderness Park is a non-profit organization that was started in 1998 by Melva Plouzek and Patricia Rand, and a group of Lincoln residents who felt that Wilderness Park was becoming increasingly threatened of development due to the rising population of Lincoln (Journal Star 1981). Their mission statement is, “Friends of Wilderness Park are residents of Lincoln and surrounding areas who are concerned with the encroachment of development upon Wilderness Park. Our mission is to promote the creation of statutes, rules and regulations that will allow the long term sustainability of Wilderness Park and the other natural areas within the Lincoln area. Encourage and conduct biological surveys within Wilderness Park to keep the public informed of the status of its plants, resident and migratory animals, and to identify rare, endangered or threatened species. Monitor governmental entities and their policies as they affect Wilderness Park and other natural areas within the Lincoln area, with the objective of preserving ecological values at all times. Defend Wilderness Park and surrounding area from public policies that will dilute its values. Educate developers to use ecologically sound and economically feasible ways to maintain and preserve natural conditions of development sites rather than destroying and subsequently attempting to recreate “natural” conditions. Work with governmental agencies and property owners adjacent to Wilderness Park to maintain buffer zones around Wilderness Park and increase the size of Wilderness Park, either through private trust or through public purchase of additional park land. Study other sites within the Lincoln area for potential natural area preservation and inclusion within the total park holdings of Lancaster County.” (Friends of Wilderness Park).
Design Process

When enduring in a creative project, it is hard to describe the process of design as something linear. Because there were many vectors to this process, I decided that creating a flow chart of my process would be more applicable in explaining my design process. This flowchart represents the entire process I went through in creating my final thesis project (Figure 2).

Materials

The materials that I am using to create my photobook include, Moultrie Game Camera, GoPro Hero 2, Canon DSLR Rebel XTi, and Canon G12. The Moultrie Game Camera is a camera with an infrared sensor that is triggered by any movement it detects. This gives me the ability to photograph various wildlife without being present. The Canon G12 is a small digital point and shoot camera with the ability to capture video, along with still imagery. The GoPro Hero 2 is a very small camera that shoots video, still imagery, and time-lapse footage. It is equipped with a waterproof casing that allows to capture images underwater. The Canon DSLR Rebel XTi, is the camera that I use to collect the majority of my photographs. With its wide range of manual settings, it provides the most high resolution images which are essential for good quality photography. The image editing programs that I am using are Adobe InDesign, Adobe Bridge, and Adobe Photoshop. Adobe InDesign is used to layout and design the photobook, Adobe Bridge is used to sort and edit through my images, and Adobe Photoshop is used to make edits and resize my photographs.
Summary and Conclusion

Being able to combine both my passion for photography and protecting the environment are the main drivers behind why I chose this creative path for my thesis project. The purpose of the project is to create a photobook for Wilderness Park, and donate any profits made from the book to the Friends of Wilderness Organization. Friends of Wilderness is a small non-profit organization that has a team of members who are dedicated to preserve, maintain, and protect Wilderness Park from any future developments. By donating my time, talent, and images to this organization I hope to create revenue so they can continue to protect the park.

Despite the outdoor recreational opportunities and the inherent intrinsic beauty this park beholds, it is also an area that provides a large number of ecosystem services. I hope this photobook will not only raise money for Friends of Wilderness, but also serve as an archive of images to protect the park from any future development plans. The photographic works and the tangible efforts of Ansel Adams, Peter Dombrovskis, William Henry Jackson, George Masa, Cristina Mittermeier, Michael Nichols, and Carlton Watkins have proven to be effective in preserving our world’s most treasurable natural resources. These conservation photographers have demonstrated the powerful effects photography can have as a conservation tool. I want this book to serve as a conservation tool that can be used if Wilderness Park ever comes under serious threat of urban development.

This paper was dedicated to the discussion of the importance of creating a photobook for Wilderness Park, and the efforts it takes to create such a photobook. Due to the limited time frame I had, and the amount of effort and time it takes to create and edit powerful images, this book is scheduled to be complete by June 2015. Also, if I had more time I would have liked to conduct a study or survey which would determine what types of images impact certain groups of
people and why. That kind of study could be beneficial to conservation photographers by providing them with an outline of what images work, why they work, and how they can construct images similar to benefit their conservation efforts.
References

Burns, Ken. 2009. PBS, "The National Parks,"– People Behind the National Parks, George Masa


Lenz found: “I think conservation photography is creating images that will affect change and insuring that those images do affect change. The responsibility doesn’t end when you trip the shutter, it actually begins then, you have to make sure those images get before the people that need to see them. (Witness: Defining Conservation Photography Feature)


