

The Truth, The Whole Truth, And Nothing But The Truth; PSA Nature Definition—Image Manipulation

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The Photographic Society of America (PSA) Nature Division has long included the rule that "... any form of manipulation that alters the truth of the photographic statement" will make an image ineligible for exhibitions or competitions which are recognized by the PSA Nature Division. This rule has applied to film-based images for many years, and certainly such images could be and would be altered from time to time. Digital photography has provided many new tools, found in cameras, computers and scanners, to easily "edit" (or to use synonyms, to adjust, modify or manipulate) images. The special connection between reality and a Nature photograph needed the protection of some additional guidelines. The following was added to the Nature definition, and applies to prints, slides, and digital projection images:

"No elements may be moved, cloned, added, rearranged or combined. No manipulation or modification is permitted except resizing, cropping, selective lightening or darkening, and restoration of original color of the scene. No special effect filters can be applied. Any sharpening must appear natural."

The purpose of this article is to briefly outline for photographers new to nature photography those



Fig. 1 - The photographer had fun with this image, by adding the coyote, and did not intend it to be a Nature image. Obviously, it is just not a truthful photographic statement and would be disqualified if entered in a PSA Nature recognized exhibition or competition. © Dan Charbonnet, FPSA, Ambitious Coyote

editing techniques which are currently within the PSA Nature Division rules, and those which are not. That is not to say that there are areas where one will experience differences of opinion about these guidelines. When in doubt, consider the following questions: Is an image a truthful photographic statement? Is it the whole truth and nothing but the truth? Does the image appear natural? Note that the natural appearance rule is only found in the "sharpening" sentence, but underlies all the editing rules.

"No elements may be moved, cloned, added, rearranged or combined."

It is clear that the elements of an image must remain in the final image in the place they were captured, and cloned or new elements would not be truthful, and are not allowed. (See Figures 1 and 2)



Fig. 2 - The time to eliminate an undesirable object or element from an image is before capture, not with digital editing. Distracting elements or human elements (such as the table near the shoreline in the left margin) could be cropped out, but should not be removed with other digital tools. Careful review of the scene and composition adjustment before capture will help avoid the problem. © John M. Davis Jr, APSA, PPSA, Havasu Falls

“No manipulation or modification is permitted except...”

There are many digital tools which can be used to edit images. Drawing a line between what is not allowed, and what is allowed, is not always simple to do. The rule of no manipulation or modification does have exceptions, and demonstrations of the key rules follow.

Resizing—Resizing the entire image (changing the dimensions or resolution) is perfectly acceptable. (See Figures 3, 4 and 5)

Cropping—Cropping is allowable as a way to eliminate an undesirable image element, whether or not the crop changes the aspect ratio (such as creating a horizontal image from a vertical one). The truth of the photographic statement is intact. (See Figures 3, 4 and 5)



Fig. 3 - This scan of the original slide includes more than is desired in the final image. © John M. Davis Jr, APSA, PPSA, Antelope Textures



Fig. 4 - Cropping from the top and bottom (creating a new aspect ratio) and resizing is perfectly acceptable, and produced this result, essentially the same image with the same name, not altering the truth of the photographic statement. © John M. Davis Jr, APSA, PPSA, Antelope Textures



Fig. 5 - Only the lower right corner of Antelope Textures remained after another acceptable crop, resizing and truthful statement, but note that the image has a new name, because it is essentially a new image. © John M. Davis Jr, APSA, PPSA, Antelope Sandstone Textures

Selective Lightening or Darkening—It is acceptable to selectively lighten and/or darken image elements with the tools that may be available, such as curves, levels, dodge and burn, shadows and highlights, or equivalent digital tools, as long as the result appears natural and the image remains a truthful photographic statement. (See Figures 6, 7 and 8)



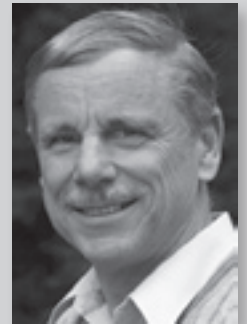
Fig. 6 - The original image has some light and dark elements that can be modified. The white in the background can be toned down, and the dark tail can be revealed. © Jack Templeton, Gyrfalcon With Meal



Fig. 7 - Cropping and resizing eliminates a bit of the white background and emphasizes the hawk and the nature story. © Jack Templeton, Gyrfalcon With Meal



Fig. 8 - The Shadow/Highlight tool in Adobe Photoshop CS3 and a bit of selective burning in the highlights reduces the brightness of the background, feathers and rock, and reveals the dark tail feathers. Removing the white background by cloning would not be acceptable. © Jack Templeton, Gyrfalcon With Meal



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Restoring Original Color

Color can be corrected to match the color of the subject when the photograph was taken. If color saturation is added, it should not be overdone. The color should appear natural and approximate the actual color saturation. Be gentle! (See Figures 9, 10, 11, 12 and 13) Also, color can be completely removed.

Fig. 9 - If a warming filter is used, or if a "cloudy" or "shady" white balance setting is used in sunshine, the result will be an unnatural warm look. © John M. Davis Jr, APSA, PPSA, Delicate Arch With Shadow



Fig. 10 - The correction of the excessive warmth will restore the natural color of the subject. This is especially important when the subject and its color are well known. © John M. Davis Jr, APSA, PPSA, Delicate Arch With Shadow



Fig. 11 - Excessive saturation of color will cause an unnatural look, as here. In an exhibition, an over-saturated image may be marked down or disqualified. © John M. Davis Jr, APSA, PPSA, Delicate Arch With Shadow



Fig. 12 - Color can be removed completely to create a B&W nature image. Reversing a slide or doing a "horizontal flip" of an image is authorized, but be careful not to reverse writing on a scientific band or the position of a well-known landmark (such as Delicate Arch), and be careful not to challenge the law of gravity with a dew-drop laden spider web drooping upward or sideways! © John M. Davis Jr, APSA, PPSA, Delicate Tones BW



Fig. 13 - Judges have to be careful, however, in being too quick to see overdone saturation. Mother nature sometimes produces intensely saturated color, such as in sunrises, sunsets, and in the rich palate of autumn colors. This image, scanned from a slide without adding any saturation, exemplifies the point. © Gerald Emmerich, FPSA, EPSA, Fall Color at the Falls

Sharpening—Moderate sharpening of digital photographs is necessary. Sharpen the whole image or selected portions of an image to achieve a natural look. Over-sharpening will weaken a nature image. (See Figures 14 and 15)

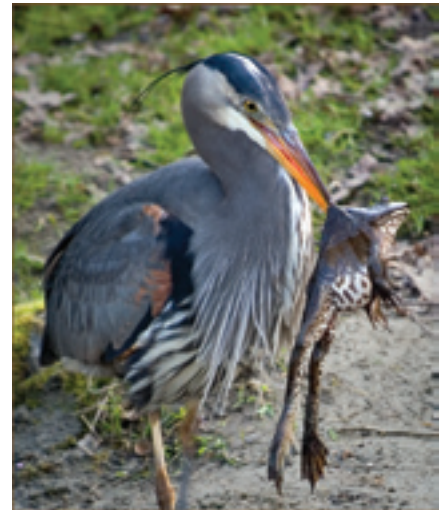


Fig. 14 - This image received moderate sharpening, slightly increasing the contrast of adjacent pixels. © John M. Davis Jr, APSA, PPSA, Heron With Prize

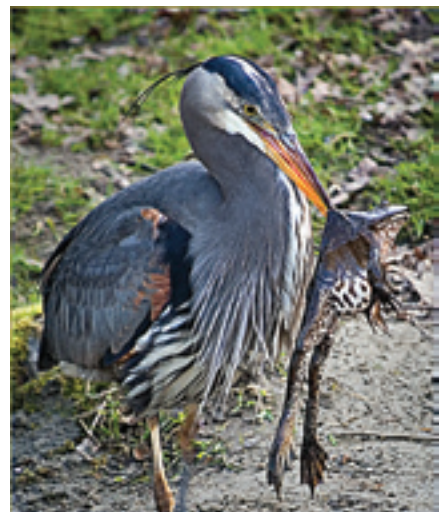


Fig. 15 - Excessive sharpening creates a harsh, unnatural look, because of heavy contrast of adjacent pixels. © John M. Davis Jr, APSA, PPSA, Heron With Prize

Focus and Blur. Controlling depth of field with the lens or aperture is acceptable, but not with digital tools. Blurring filters, even lens blur, should not be applied. (See Figures 16 and 17)



Fig. 16 – The distractions in the background could have been reduced with depth of field control with lens or aperture. © John M. Davis Jr, APSA, PPSA, Song Sparrow 2



Fig. 17 – The lens blur tool used here (or any other blurring tool) simulates depth of field control but is not an acceptable editing technique. However, reducing some of the brightness in the background is acceptable as long as the result is a natural appearance. © John M. Davis Jr, APSA, PPSA, Song Sparrow 2

Special Effects. Special effects filters (on the camera or in the computer) introduce unusual, unreal, or even distorted renderings of natural subjects which do not meet the truth and natural look tests, and one would expect them to be disqualified in a PSA-recognized exhibition or competition. Filters employed to diffract, streak, show speed, center-spot focus, change hues, and otherwise alter reality, create ineligible images. However, polarizing filters, split neutral density filters, warming or color enhancing filters, or other filters which do not change the photographic statement but modify an image to more closely represent the reality the photographer saw, are acceptable.

Combining Images. A digital process which combines images is not allowable under current

Nature rules. Digital software like Hellicon Focus and the HDR tools such as those provided by Adobe Photoshop and Photomatix combine separate images. Also, the double processing technique where an image is optimized for highlights, and then combined with the same image optimized for shadows, is not allowable because it creates and then combines two image files out of a single capture.

Image Borders. Adding a border to a projected nature image is not disallowed, but a bright border (especially with a digital projector) may distract and cause a judge to mark the image down. (See Figures 18 and 19)



Fig. 18 – A thin but not bright border that helps define light or dark edges can help set apart an image. © John M. Davis Jr, APSA, PPSA, Damselfly



Fig. 19– Brightness or color of a border can distract from the nature image when projected. © John M. Davis Jr, APSA, PPSA, Clodius Returns

Summary Observations. The digital editing and adjustments which can be done within the guidelines, to match what was seen in the viewfinder, include the following:

- You can adjust the exposure and bring out details in highlights and shadows, correct white balance, and adjust local or overall color casts;
- You can adjust contrast, color saturation, and apply sharpening, but be gentle; or you can remove all color;
- You can remove dust spots, rounded slide mount corners from scanning slides, sun flares, and noise caused by the camera or scanner;
- You can straighten (e.g. tilted horizon) and flip an image horizontally;
- You can crop and resize.

Truthfulness and natural appearance are cornerstones to editing nature images. It is important for photographers who wish to enter PSA Nature recognized exhibitions or competitions to understand the editing guidelines which are a part of the Nature Definition. It is this knowledge, and the honesty and integrity of the photographer, which will be the best guarantors of the truthful and natural connection between the nature subject and the nature image. ■