



River life, Vietnam

What is Human Interest?

Karen Kotner
St. Louis, MO

According to PSA Exhibition Standards, human interest is captured in “an image depicting a person or persons in an interactive, emotional or unusual situation, excluding sports action” (*Photojournalism Section 20 g*). When thinking about human interest, the following three well-known images that evoke strong emotions come to mind:

- the exhilaration of the sailor returning from World War II and kissing a nurse in Times Square on V-J Day (Alfred Eisenstaedt, 1945)
- the heart-wrenching sadness of “John John” Kennedy saluting his father’s flag draped coffin (David S. Boyer, 1963) and
- the shocking horror as Vietnamese General Loan executes a prisoner with a pistol (Eddie Adams, 1968).

The PSA Exhibition Standard for Photo Travel also implies human interest when it states “a Photo Travel image must express the feeling of a time and place, portray a land, its people, or a culture in its natural state...” (*Section 21a.*). The concept of human interest transcends both of the definitions stated in Photojournalism and Photo Travel and encompasses many categories of photography. Any image capturing the essence of a time, place, person or culture along with evoking an emotional

response (e.g. happiness, excitement, sadness, despair) could be included in the definition of human interest. These emotional moments can be found everywhere, even in simple ordinary events such as a youngster holding his new baby brother, a grandfather blowing bubbles with his grandchild, a dejected football player sitting on the sidelines after a tough loss.

Although the PSA Exhibition Standards in photojournalism state that the journalistic value of the photograph shall be considered over the pictorial quality, human-interest images share the basic elements of all good photography. The best images are those that have a strong subject as well as an engaging story. Although it is important to eliminate all distracting detail in the background, try to include enough context to provide information that contributes to the viewer’s understanding and response. The use of color or the absence of color also contributes to the emotional impact. Other techniques, such as panning, can enhance composition. Before going to Vietnam where most people travel by bicycle or motorbikes, I practiced panning automobiles and trucks near a busy local intersection so I would be prepared to capture motion when we arrived.

Like photographing active sports moments, it is



Cardinal fan, St. Louis, Missouri



Teaching reading, Peru

essential to work quickly when capturing human-interest subjects. Unlike a building or monument, which can be shot over a period of time, you may have only one chance to record an important fleeting moment. Therefore, the right equipment and a good understanding of it and the proper techniques for a given situation are critical. Local markets, for instance, often have composition and lighting challenges. Lighting challenges are also



Meditation, Laos



Mothers and children, Peru

*Funeral procession,
Cambodia*



Karen Kotner

found in South America, for example, where the people wear large brimmed hats to protect their faces from the sunlight even early in the day. In this case, fill flash is an important technique to eliminate the shadows cast on people's faces. A telephoto lens is very good for capturing candid moments of people. The image accompanying this article of a mother teaching her child to read was taken with a medium telephoto 70-300mm lens, which allowed the capture of this intimate moment in a natural way from across the street without posing the subjects. Human-interest images must be spontaneous and not posed.

*Playing with chalk,
New York, New York*



Before leaving for a trip, read ahead about the people, the culture and the lifestyle of the area to be visited. Historical or fictional novels set in that country as well as guidebooks and the Internet are a great way to gain insights into the people. When arriving at a place, speak to the local people about the area to ensure knowing, for example, the exact time of sunrise and sunset (or check ahead on the Internet <http://www.usno.navy.mil/USNO/astronomical-applications/data-services/rs-one-day-us>), as well as the best places to go to capture the best images. Inquire about small off the beaten track villages where one can capture everyday life. Visit markets, which are often an excellent microcosm of the native lifestyle.

Timing is very important. Try to find out when there are native festivals, markets and celebrations and plan to be in those places at the appropriate time. On a recent trip to Southeast Asia, a colorful and important lunar festival was missed by one day! We could have easily rearranged our itinerary to be there at that time had we done a little more research.

Photographs that capture human-interest document a particular event or time of life. But it is not only a short moment of time that is recorded. These images, beginning as current events, often become icons for an era. The haunting image by reporter Nick Ut of the nine-year-old girl fleeing her napalmed Vietnamese village remains a symbol for the horror of war 35 years later. One hundred years from now, this picture will continue to be a powerful human-interest image even for a generation that had no personal connection to



Nun praying, Vietnam

the Vietnam War. A good pictorial image or print like the Nick Ut image must capture and embrace the essence of human-interest if it is going to be a successful image, which grabs our attention and rests in our memory. ■



Woman selling fruit, Peru



Woman weaving, Peru

Any mention of products or services in this article or anywhere else in the *PSA Journal* does not constitute an endorsement or approval of those items.

Photos © Karen Kotner