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Images for a Nation: The Role of Conservation Photography in American Environmentalism

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Images for a Nation:

The Role of Conservation Photography in

American Environmentalism

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Readers:

Dr. Richard Hazlett

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**Introduction: What is Conservation Photography?**

Humans have always sought to produce imagery of the natural world. Since the advent of cave painting of animals and hunting more than forty thousand years ago, representations of the environment and its vital importance for human life have been intrinsic in human expression. The most recent iteration of this expression is the conservation photograph, in which the artist attempts to capture an image with the purpose of suggesting a pro nature, pro *conservation* ethos. Conservation is defined here as the protection of an environment from industrialized human development, and will be used interchangeably with “environmentalism.” Photographs that seek to convey a conservation message tend to portray pristine natural landscapes, ecosystems, or wildlife, or, on the other hand, environmental degradation and its effects. The former implies the inherent value – ecological and for human wellbeing – of conserved landscapes, while the latter demonstrates the harm caused by lack of conservation, thus in turn promoting environmentalism.

American identity has long been highly informed by images. From the first photographs of the frontier in the nineteenth century, to Yosemite’s cathedral-like spires captured by Ansel Adams, to war and natural disaster imagery, to NASA photographs of the Earth, the first man on the Moon, and the famous Pale Blue Dot image, pictures have long been integral in revealing America’s values, ideals, and identity. Similarly, by studying environmental imagery, insight can be gained into America’s relationship with the natural world. An examination of key figures and their conservation photography work explores the evolution of American environmentalism, laying bare how the national conservation dialogue has often been shaped by images that, in some cases, even led to crucial acts of
conservation at the federal level. Understanding this history and how it has led to contemporary conservation photography informs us about how best to affect change in the current era of ever-increasing environmental destruction.

Indeed, imagery proves invaluable as a rhetorical tool in national environmentalist discussion, for it can make arguments that words cannot. In a society dominated by utilitarian and growth-minded discourse, photographs serve to incorporate the emotional and transcendent into environmental discussions, reminding the viewer that the landscapes and life portrayed in the photograph are a very real part of this planet, not just numbers or figures on a page. Such a reminder has a strong impact on the national dialogue, and, as we will see, even leads to federal conservation in some cases.

Photographs can also elicit the sensation of the sublime that would otherwise only accompany the physical presence of majestic landscapes. Such an experience is often a sacred underpinning of the conservation ethos, yet so tenuous to explain; while academic arguments can be made about biodiversity, bioethics, or climate change, the most instinctively compelling arguments for conservation – the arguments of naturalists and writers John Muir and Henry David Thoreau, the ones that speak for beauty, respect, and deep appreciation of nature – are the most difficult to articulate.¹ This is the unexplainable but soul-filling feeling of “What I’m looking at is important, we must protect this” that may arise when viewing the Yosemite Valley, or a gargantuan stand of sequoias, or even a sparrow preening on an autumn branch in a backyard. Such sentiments often do little in economic calculations on the floor of Congress, but Americans’ unfailing love for environmental photography betrays our true naturalist position. Photographs bring

pictorial evidence of these transcendental experiences to the public debate, bolstering the case for environmentalism far beyond what words alone could accomplish.

The present exploration is divided into two sections: a history of conservation photography in America followed by an examination of contemporary applications of the medium. The first section will highlight four main figures and their context and influence in this history: W.H. Jackson’s photographs from Hayden’s 1871 survey of Yellowstone, Carleton Watkins’ work at Yosemite and Mariposa Grove in the 1860s, and the twentieth-century Sierra Club work of Ansel Adams and Eliot Porter. The second section will illustrate the imagery and impact of contemporary photographers Mark Klett, David Maisel, and Subhankar Banerjee, each with his own distinctive focus and contribution to conservation rhetoric. Referenced throughout the text will be photographs by these artists, which can be found at the end of each section.
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SECTION I: SELECTED HISTORY OF CONSERVATION PHOTOGRAPHY IN THE U.S.

“A great photograph is one that fully expresses what one feels, in the deepest sense, about what is being photographed.”
- Ansel Adams

“Thank God men cannot fly, and lay waste the sky as well as the Earth.”
- Henry David Thoreau

Photography was used as a means toward conservation long before dire messages of climate change or point-and-shoot cameras were significant cultural elements. It was even before the time of Ansel Adams that the first photographs were taken with the purpose of demonstrating the importance of natural landscapes in American identity. Perhaps the most significant starting point in this history is the work of photographer W.H. Jackson, who accompanied Ferdinand Hayden’s USGS expedition to the Yellowstone region in 1871. Hayden was granted funds by the U.S. government to explore the area, creating detailed maps, surveys, and reports with his several-dozen-man team. He called upon Jackson to supplement his work with glass-plate photographs of the expedition through the highly distinct landscapes found in the region, with an eye toward capturing evidence for the catastrophism and gradualism debate in geology at the time. Although Jackson did not consider himself a conservation photographer, rather a documentarian of the frontier and its utility for the country, it is telling that some of his most lasting work consists of images that, as will be shown, inspired conversation about the protection of the Yellowstone region. Jackson played an essential role in the dialogue about this landscape, whether or not he intended to do so from the outset.
Eager to join Hayden’s party, Jackson was soon creating some of the earliest photographs of the American West. While much of his photography focused on documenting the frontier survey party and the geology of the land, he was also tasked with capturing the utterly wild and foreign nature of the territory (Figures 1, 2, & 3). The body of work can have a documentary, almost journalistic tone at times, but the landscape and still life photographs serve to orient the set as one of great Western significance: in creating images of Yellowstone’s vast, new landscapes coupled with out-of-this-world-appearing geothermal features, Jackson revealed to America what was to become its first National Park. This hard evidence for the existence of Yellowstone was indeed essential; when early explorers of the area returned to the East with stories of fumaroles and geysers, they were often met with disbelief and scoffs, as people alleged they were describing Hades and that such a land could not possibly exist on our continent. Jackson’s photographs, then, came at an opportune time: they made this mysterious land a reality for that vast majority of people who would never see it themselves. In this way, the simple existence and distribution of Jackson’s photographs gave importance to the Yellowstone environment in the late-nineteenth-century American psyche.

Common modern interpretation of the establishment of Yellowstone National Park leads one to believe that Jackson’s photos were integral in the Congressional decision to create the park. Indeed, anything short of a detailed, scholarly investigation into the

proceedings would yield such a conclusion. Alas, Jackson’s photographs were actually of minor importance in the designation of the park. His work was not presented in the original proceedings, and played no direct role in this great triumph of American conservationism.  

What it did accomplish, however, was an auxiliary role in a greater American movement toward naturalism, transcendentalism, and romanticization of the natural and uncivilized, led in the East by writers like Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau. The establishment of our first National Park was very much a product of this American momentum toward higher valuation of all things natural, primitive, and untamed – themes that were certainly embodied by Yellowstone and Jackson’s imagery of its wildness. Jackson’s photographs may not have directly contributed to federal conservation, but they were nevertheless a factor in the larger national discussion that brought about the protection of this land.

Decidedly more directly impactful in fostering national dialogue and subsequent federal conservation was the work of Carleton Watkins, another mid-nineteenth-century photographer. Although his work slightly predates that of Jackson, his motives come out of the same American trend toward reverence of the natural world as a body to be conserved, rather than to be combatted and exploited. Watkins was first and foremost a commercial photographer, capturing images of what was most popular at the time. It is revealing, then, that his most lasting bodies of work focused on natural scenery and environmental protection, indicating the importance of these themes in the American psyche of the period.

5 Ibid.
He photographed Yosemite Valley and Mariposa Grove in the 1860s, creating breathtaking early images of the region that would later become Yosemite National Park.

Watkins’ photographs were the first of the Yosemite area to be widely disseminated in the East, and had profound effects in favor of conservation (Figures 4, 5, & 6). The body of work was key in inspiring beauty and awe in the landscape from three thousand miles away, inciting public praise from across the East, including from the likes of Ralph Waldo Emerson. In fact, an 1862 show in New York of Watkins’ Mariposa Grove images was immensely popular, receiving especially rave reviews from an Atlantic Monthly article by well-known writer, physician, and professor Oliver Wendell Holmes. Not only were these images at the forefront of the national dialogue about Yosemite, they were also an important factor in federal conservation of the area: the photographs were essential in President Lincoln’s decision to grant money to California for the protection of these lands for public recreation. This designation – in large part thanks to the landscape photography of Watkins – set a tremendous precedent in American environmentalism in that it was the first major move toward setting aside large tracts of American land for non-utilitarian enjoyment.

We also see in Watkins’ work an overt relationship with the power of religion. Connecting the burgeoning American ideals of primitive individualism and glorification of the wild with their deep religiosity, Americans began to reorient their aesthetic reverence

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7 Ibid.
away from the Old World cathedral and toward the natural landscapes of the New World.\textsuperscript{11} Perfect for this focus were the stone monoliths of Yosemite. The great granite spires and unsurpassed cliff faces conjure images of lofty church towers and facades – themes that underlie much of Watkins’ photography of the valley. The granite forms weren’t only physically reminiscent of cathedrals, for they also gained spiritual significance for Americans on a deeper level. Historian Simon Schama writes, “The sequoias [in Watkins’ photographs] seemed to vindicate the American national intuition that colossal grandeur spoke to the soul.”\textsuperscript{12} The awe-inspiring nature of the scenes in Watkins’ photographs gained religious significance, profoundly injecting these divine landscapes into national discussions about environmental protection. This theme even pervades the naming of the features of the park: Cathedral Spire, to take an obvious example, is a perfect representation of this transition from Old World reverence of the cathedral to New World romanticization and religiosity for the natural and untamed lands of the West. It was undoubtedly Watkins’ apt ability to capture the spiritual nature of the valley in his photographs and present them to the masses of the East that inspired passionate conversations about the reverence of these environments and even their federal protection.

The history now turns to one of America’s most famous photographers, Ansel Adams. Without question, this man shaped conservation photography into what it is today. His work began early in his life, and by his thirties he was already producing landscape work of the Sierras that was shown at the Smithsonian.\textsuperscript{13} His photographs, the most well

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{11} Schama, \textit{Landscape and Memory}.
\textsuperscript{12} Ibid.
\end{footnotesize}
known of which focused on Yosemite and Kings Canyon, are widely cited as some of the most influential and breathtaking representations of American landscapes. They gave identity and deep meaning to these locales even for people that would never visit them, similar to that aspect of Watkins’ work decades earlier. Adams was a nature romantic, focusing on the awe-inspiring and striking qualities of great landscapes like Yosemite, and received praise from art critics, fellow photographers, and artists from all disciplines alike.14

Adams’ work was shown at numerous galleries around the country and widely published. His most famous photographs – indeed, there are many – generally depict expansive landscapes with dynamic interplay of highlights, shadows, and cloud cover, giving huge depth and drama to the scenes (Figures 7 & 8). Adams used large-format cameras coupled with very small apertures to gain his impeccably sharp, deeply detailed images in which the entire landscape was perfectly in focus. Using this technique, Adams sought to portray the full range of light captured by his own eye in these unparalleled locations.

Adams developed a strong conservation purpose behind his work throughout his career. Indeed, through Adams, “Inspiring awe acquired the instrumentalist function of encouraging preservation of the environment,”15 and he repeatedly sent photographs to Congress to try to sway them in this manner.16 One of his highest achievements in this regard was the use of his book Sierra Nevada: The John Muir Trail and his own testimony in the Congressional proceedings to grant National Park status to Kings Canyon and

14 Alinder, Ansel Adams: A Biography.
16 Ibid.
Sequoia. Without his fight for the protection of these lands and his moving photographs to corroborate his testimony, we likely would not have the opportunity to enjoy these public lands today. Adams’ work was not only a part of the national conversation about the value the natural West, it was so inspiring that it also led to conservation at the federal level.

Ansel Adams laid the groundwork for the explosion of conservation photography in the twentieth century. His involvement with the Sierra Club, of which he was a member from age seventeen, continued throughout his career and enabled much of his conservation-minded work to be more prominently published, publicized, and received. Without the Sierra Club, Adams’ photographs could not have become as integral in national environmentalist dialogue as they did. Executive director and board member David Brower was key in the proliferation of photography as a tool for environmentalism, for he saw its strong potential as a means to forward the conservationist goals of the Sierra Club.

With Brower spearheading the movement, the Sierra Club published a series of large-format books of photographs in the 1960s, “The most effective single device in broadcasting its name,” according to author and historian Stephen Fox. In personal correspondence with photography critic and writer Nancy Newhall, Brower revealed that he sought to promote the Sierra Club directly to the most influential echelons of American society with these books. Author and historian Finis Dunaway writes, “Targeting affluent Americans, the Sierra Club presented consumption as a form of politics: by buying the

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books, consumers could...join a movement devoted to its protection.”

Indeed, the books proved effective in fostering a national conservation ethic:

“The club’s Exhibit Format books offered an ironic variation on Muir’s old scheme of creating conservationists by depositing them in the Sierra. Instead of bringing people to the wilderness, Brower’s publishing program brought the wilderness to the people – with much the same conversion effect – through books that were hard to put down.”

So, although everyone could not visit America’s wild places and be inspired to protect them on the spot, Adams imparted this same conservation ethic through his art. It was the combination of the power of Adams’ photographs and Brower’s drive to promote the Sierra Club that made Ansel Adams such a prolific figure in national environmentalist conversation.

Adams was by no means the sole conservation photographer involved with the Sierra Club, however. Another of the most prominent figures in Brower’s fold of photographers was Eliot Porter. Porter’s focus was very different from the expansive, awe-inspiring images of Adams, and can be compared to the writing of Thoreau or Aldo Leopold if it were expressed through imagery. An intimate love for detail and the passion for the commonplace complexity of nature that Thoreau conveyed through his words is what Porter sought to make visual in his photographs. Porter had a deep love for nature and for Thoreau from his childhood, and as he began to express art through a camera he realized that his ultimate tribute to environmentalism would be to convey Thoreau via images: “I hoped to be able to complement in feeling and spirit Thoreau’s thinking one hundred years

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21 Fox, John Muir and His Legacy: The American Conservation Movement.
ago, and to show the peril we face even more today by our ever faster destruction of life not our own.”

Out of this desire came the book *In Wildness is the Preservation of the World*, in which Porter’s photographs are paired with selections of Thoreau’s writings. For anyone with even an ounce of environmental or naturalistic compassion, this is truly a moving work, and it was far and away the best-selling volume of the Sierra Club’s large-format series. Porter’s environmentalist messages are strong and clear: in the preface, he writes, “A leaven of wildness is necessary for the health of the human spirit, a truth we seem to have forgotten in our headlong rush to control all nature.” Later, he quotes Thoreau from *Walden*: “Take shelter under the cloud, while they flee to carts and sheds. Let not to get a living be thy trade, but thy sport. Enjoy the land, but own it not.” These messages, paired with the images of forest flora and streams you might visualize while poring over *Walden*, offer powerful arguments for the preservation of the natural environment (*Figures 9 & 10*).

Porter’s photographs supplement Thoreau’s text without distracting from or undermining it. They serve to show the viewer that what Thoreau reveres in nature can be found everywhere, can look like a lily pad or lichen on a stone just around the corner. Porter captures Thoreau’s ultimate message that all nature is an intrinsically valuable part of us and deserves to be preserved. It is no surprise, then, that this book was one of the Sierra Club’s most relevant volumes in the national environmental dialogue and cemented Eliot Porter as one of the nation’s leading conservation photographers. His second book,
focused on Glen Canyon, was a vital part of a conservation campaign that resulted in the long-awaited passage of the Wilderness Act in 1964, which protected more than nine million acres of federal land and defined wilderness on a national level.\textsuperscript{27,28} Clearly, Porter’s photographs and the ethos conveyed through their imagery had profound effects on the popular environmentalist discourse at the time, fostering a conservationist ethic that extended even to the federal government.

Thus we see the progression of conservation photography through the mid-twentieth century. With its roots in frontier exploration and documentation, it became a powerful supplement to major conservation steps in the U.S. Generally, during this period, environmentalist imagery focused on the pristine, primitive aspects of America’s landscapes to convey their awe-inducing quality to the broader public. Watkins and Adams brought the majesty of the Yosemite Valley to the masses of the East, while Porter created detailed work largely dedicated to the naturalist, deeply appreciative philosophy of Thoreau. The next step is to consider how these trends have blossomed and transformed in the most recent generation of conservation photography.

\textsuperscript{27} Fox, \textit{John Muir and His Legacy: The American Conservation Movement}.  
Figure 1: Camp by small lake between East Fork & Yellowstone Lake | Jackson | 1871

29 All photographs cited in order at the end of the “References” section.
Figure 2: Upper Firehole, from Old Faithful crater / Jackson / Yellowstone / 1872
Figure 3: Hot springs on Gardner River / Jackson / Yellowstone / 1871
Figure 4: Cathedral Rock and spire, with lake and trees in foreground | Watkins | Yosemite | c. 1860
Figure 5: Cathedral Rock / Watkins / Yosemite / c. 1860
Figure 6: Entrance to Yosemite Valley | Watkins | c. 1860
Figure 7: The Tetons and the Snake River | Ansel Adams | 1942
Figure 8: Clearing Winter Storm | Ansel Adams | Yosemite | 1944
Figure 9: Skunk cabbage, near Peekskill, New York | Eliot Porter | 1957
Figure 10: Lichens on River Stones, Iceland | Eliot Porter | 1972
SECTION II: CONTEMPORARY APPLICATIONS OF CONSERVATION PHOTOGRAPHY

“Our vision is binocular, it is in a continuous state of flux, while the camera captures but a single isolated condition of the moment.”
-Edward Weston

“By polluting clear water with slime you will never find good drinking water.”
-Aeschylus

It has been shown that photography has a strong position in the U.S. as a rhetorical tool for environmentalism. From Watkins in the mid-nineteenth century through Porter and Brower in the twentieth century, images have been used to further national conservation dialogue, as well as to promote federally-backed conservation of some of America’s most prized landscapes. But how does this tradition express itself today? Does the purposeful art continue? We may not have a generation-defining photographer like Ansel Adams, but are there photographers following in his footsteps while pursuing new directions? As we will see, contemporary photographers produce a tremendous variety of work with forceful conservation messages in mind.

It is perhaps most fitting to start with a photographer whose work seeks to bridge contemporary photography with imagery produced in Jackson’s generation. Among an array of other work, Mark Klett embarked on re-photographic surveys in the 2000s in which he attempts to duplicate, as closely as possible, the position, angle, and lighting of early expedition photographs, like those of Jackson. Klett then presents his photographs of the scene with those taken by earlier photographers, displaying how the landscape has changed over the course of a century. He often even incorporates the older images directly
into his own, creating a patchwork image that displays a modern region with glimpses into its centuries-old past.

One of the most dramatic of these juxtapositions is his pairing of Adams’ *Clearing Winter Storm* (*Figure 8*) with Klett’s (in collaboration with photographer Byron Wolfe) *Clearing autumn smoke, controlled burn* (*Figure 11*). Klett’s work in *Yosemite in Time* seeks to portray how the region has changed over the past century as it has been developed into an accessible, built tourist destination very much influenced by human control. This juxtaposition illustrates that conflict beautifully: Adams captured the pristine, almost surreal nature of the valley as it was dusted with snow, and Klett shows the valley enveloped in a smoky haze, reflecting its poor health. He includes “controlled burn” in the title to emphasize that this was no wildfire, rather a result of people deciding what was best for the natural landscape. The ensuing scene has a fraction of the beauty and awe-inspiring quality that the valley normally incites; visibility is minimal and the striking contrast that defines the landscape in Adams’ work is utterly lost in smoke in Klett’s image. Klett asks what human intervention has done for the park, and guides our answer by showing an example of human control diminishing its natural beauty. To be sure, controlled burns are often employed to protect the park from future calamity, and perhaps Klett seeks to encapsulate this conservationist dilemma in his re-photograph.

Nevertheless, the artist maintains a Muir-like stance in natural, primitive appreciation of the park, a belief backed by environmental, political, and art writer Rebecca Solnit’s text in the book:

> As the world comes to resemble a factory more and more, every act of lingering, of deep engagement, of doing nothing, of neither producing nor consuming according to any marketable rate, is a metaphysical work strike
for higher pay from the surrounding world... A good consumer has a short attention span, forever requiring the next thing, and touristic Yosemite often seems to encourage this hecticness, with the marked vista points easily accessible, easily photographed, easily left for the next experience.30

Klett and Wolfe’s *Eight minutes at Glacier Point* illustrates this perhaps unappreciative rush of tourists in a long exposure of a popular viewpoint of Half Dome in Yosemite (*Figure 12*). The photograph emphasizes the transient and fleeting visit of the contemporary park-goer, with only one or two visitors remaining long enough to appear clearly in the lengthy exposure. Yet, beyond the constructed lookout, we see the valley crisp and clear, a bastion of permanent beauty. Again, Klett’s work challenges the viewer to appreciate the landscape of Yosemite for its primitive, natural beauty as Muir and Adams might, and to question how development – in contrast with conservation – may inhibit our ability to revere the natural environment.

While Klett illustrates the landscapes at stake in conservation debates, David Maisel works to demonstrate the alarming results of environmental degradation. Largely through aerial photography of sites ranging from open pit mines, to military installations, to water reclamation projects, Maisel captures the ways in which humans have drastically altered landscapes. Hills become giant, mathematically designed extraction pits, deserts are crisscrossed with roads and ammunitions bunkers in geometric layouts, and lakes are reduced to stagnant, polluted cesspools of wildly colored chemicals (*Figures 13, 14, & 15*). The imagery is simultaneously dramatic, vibrant, eerie, and grotesque; the landscapes humans have designed here – often as byproducts, as waste sites for industry – may appear stunning and impressive, but are in fact soaked in toxins and have devastated the natural

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ecology of the regions.\textsuperscript{31,32} Shrewdly, Maisel realized that images that revolted the viewer – even if accurate – would do little to popularize conservation messages, so he transformed these disturbing scenes into visually remarkable photographs. Yet, despite their attractive veneer, his message is clear: humans have profoundly altered their environment, often toward exploitation, toxicity, and destruction.

In \textit{Oblivion}, Maisel portrays the dramatic visual nature of urban landscape transformation through aerial photography of Los Angeles. Massive sprawl grids, scarring highways, and intensely patterned tracts of housing are strikingly framed such that viewers become overwhelmed, even – oddly – claustrophobic (\textit{Figures 16, 17, \& 18}). His work offers a wide-angle perspective on how we live, on how our urban habitat has a very sterile, repeating, robotic nature when viewed from above, and asks us to consider that perhaps “development” isn’t the most enlightened way to deal with the environment. Indeed, Maisel holds that “these images imply an incessant search for sanctuary that never ends,” claiming that the way we have built up urban spaces can leave inhabitants with the underlying feelings found in the photographs: dread, disconnect, anxiety.\textsuperscript{33} In criticizing the urban and the sterile, Maisel promotes environmentalist, back-to-nature values reminiscent of Thoreau’s and Brower’s philosophies decades earlier.

The story of Subhankar Banerjee, another contemporary environmentalist photographer, is perhaps the Pièce de résistance of contemporary conservation photography. His work is essential in understanding the power of images in national

environmentalist and conservation rhetoric. Banerjee spent two years in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge (ANWR), photographing its landscapes and fauna through all seasons (Figures 19 & 20). He aimed to display the beauty and expansiveness of the region while paying respect to the indigenous populations that live there – some of the very few with their original land not appropriated and altered by the U.S. government. He also sought to show that these landscapes are not the dead wastelands that proponents of ANWR drilling claim they are, but rather vibrant biomes teeming with life – for a striking example, Figure 20 is within the proposed drilling area.

Banerjee returned to the continental U.S. and published his stellar collection of images in his work *Arctic National Wildlife Refuge: Seasons of Life and Land*, which also included essays on nature and conservation by a number of authors, among them former president Jimmy Carter. The work’s environmentalist message is strong from the start: “The refuge is an abundant and critical habitat that would be irreversibly destroyed if exploited for oil.” Banerjee continues the theme in the introduction: “The proponents of oil drilling have said that the coastal plain of the refuge is ‘white and barren; void of any life’... [But] during the harsh winter months...not only does life thrive there, but new life is born. Some of my most powerful photographs were taken during the winter months in the refuge.” After producing this volume, Banerjee was on the docket at the Smithsonian Institution’s National Museum of Natural History to show his ANWR work in 2003.

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37 Ibid.
What happened next betrays the true power of conservation photography. He was entirely set up with the Smithsonian: they had communicated extensively about the images, shared interviews to post quotations and text with the photographs, and laid out the exhibit in a prime location next to the rotunda on the main floor. Down the street, Senator Boxer presented to Congress one of Banerjee’s photos in her case against the Bush Administration’s plan for ANWR gas and oil drilling, inciting mass anger among the pro-drilling fold. The senator’s use of Banerjee’s photography helped to pass her amendment to forestall drilling, but days later, Banerjee’s exhibit was moved to a corner in the Smithsonian’s basement against his will. The quotes and texts were removed, with the museum offering varying dubious explanations as to their motives. It was widely speculated that political coercion from the Capitol pressured the Smithsonian to cancel or at least impede the potentially activist, political exhibition.

The initial impact of the photographs in Washington was likely diminished by these political pressures: Finis Dunaway notes that Banerjee’s attempt to place ANWR in the context of global ecology, rather than as a land removed from modernity, may have been lost for viewers when his captions and texts were removed by the museum. But, of course, such drama surrounding the work only caused it to explode in popularity in the rest of the country, and Banerjee’s photographs became some of the most influential and iconic imagery of ANWR seen throughout the U.S. More significantly, the Smithsonian debacle reveals the magnitude of the impact photography can have in an environmental debate.

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40 Hacket, “Seattleite Subhankar Banerjee’s Photos of Arctic ‘Life and Land’ Are Winning Hearts.”
41 Shogren, “Heat Turned Up on Arctic Exhibit?”
42 Dunaway, “Reframing the Last Frontier”.
Clearly, those in Washington advocating for drilling in ANWR were so frightened by the potential power of these images to influence popular and Congressional opinions that they imposed their will on the Smithsonian. Evidently, Banerjee had captured exactly what he hoped to – that ANWR is indeed a *wildlife refuge*, a place alive with animals, energy, and stunning landscapes, and that it needs to remain that way. His photography was undeniably a prominent, influential voice in the national discussion on conservation, so let us hope that his future work continues to send powerful environmental messages.

These three examples make clear that contemporary photography has taken up the torch of conservation and run with it. Current photographers, several of which have been highlighted here, produce powerful work with environmentalist overtones. Mark Klett, David Maisel, and Subhankar Banerjee, each in his own way, have illustrated the importance – ecologically and for the innate wellbeing of humans, as Muir and Adams claimed – of the untouched, undeveloped landscape. They have maintained conservation photography’s position as a vital rhetorical tool in the conservation ethos, and have done so in a time of startling environmental degradation. Their work is needed like never before, and let us hope that, like Banerjee’s ANWR photography, it continues to promote higher environmental consciousness.
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Figure 11: Clearing autumn smoke, controlled burn | Klett & Wolfe | Yosemite | 2002
Figure 12: Eight minutes at Glacier Point | Klett & Wolfe | Yosemite | 2002
Figure 13: American Mine (Carlin, Nevada 2) | David Maisel | 2007
Figure 14: Black Maps (Ray, AZ 1) | David Maisel | Nevada | 2005
Figure 15: The Mining Project (Inspiration, Arizona 9) | David Maisel | 1989
Figure 16: Oblivion 2n | David Maisel | Los Angeles | 2004
Figure 17: Oblivion 7n | David Maisel | Los Angeles | 2004
Figure 18: Oblivion 3n | David Maisel | Los Angeles | 2004
Figure 19: Caribou Migrating across Frozen Coleen River | Banerjee | Alaska | 2001
Figure 20: Snow Geese over the Jago River Coastal Plain | Banerjee | Alaska | 2002
CONCLUSION

From W.H. Jackson, Carleton Watkins, Ansel Adams, and Eliot Porter, to Mark Klett, David Maisel, and Subhankar Banerjee, it has been shown that photography is a vibrant and often powerful voice in America’s conservation ethos. Images of pristine wilderness, grotesque degradation, and everything in between have served to give identity and passion to American environmentalism and repeatedly inspire conservation at the federal level. Contemporary conservation photography has certainly continued to produce moving images, but has it been effective?

The present survey of historical examples of conservation photography focused on figures that had an impact on the national conservation dialogue, with this dialogue often extending to the federal level and influencing policy. The current generation of photographers has not produced such a revolutionary artist, but hopefully this statement includes a “yet.” Unfortunately, it appears that this opportunity was stolen from Banerjee when Washington shunned his Arctic National Wildlife Refuge photographs. These had the potential to put a resounding stop to drilling in the proposed site, but political pressure – censorship may even be an appropriate word – attempted to inhibit the impact of his imagery. On the other hand, Banerjee’s ANWR imagery played an important role in passing Senator Boxer’s amendment to prohibit drilling temporarily, and the political drama that surrounded the work undoubtedly brought it attention that it otherwise might not have received. His photographs certainly contributed to the national conservation dialogue, and even influenced a federal decision.

Fortunately for environmentalism and America’s wilderness, conservation photography will only become a more powerful force in the twenty-first century. As
photography proliferates further, with cell phones and ever-smaller point-and-shoot cameras, as well as the ability to share images nearly immediately via increasing Internet connectivity, images of human interactions with the environment will become more popular and widespread. As the consequences of climate change advance in urgency and our relationship with the natural world gains in relevance, people will turn to photography for documentation. Perhaps the next set of photographs to inspire federal conservation will be taken on an iPhone, or shared on Twitter. One thing is certain: as long as nature remains to be defended, so too will remain people who are ready to capture it through a lens. For, as we’ve seen, often in their hands lies our necessary reminder that the environment is not something to be exploited, but rather revered and respected.
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