Field Guide: Capturing Compelling Photos from the Field
Center for Sustainable Development: https://training.csd-i.org/

Adding Images to your Non Profit Communications
One of the biggest challenges that I see with nonprofits is a shortage of good quality photographs. This month we will look at the complement to compelling field stories—compelling photos that capture by illustration the impact of the project.

In a companion field guide we look at the importance of using compelling field stories in reports, proposals, and newsletters. This month we will look at the complement to compelling field stories—compelling photos that capture by illustration the impact of the project. A few good quality photographs of one of your projects can make a tremendous impact on donors, and in newsletters and annual reports.

Compelling Photos: What are they?
For our communication purposes, a compelling photo paints a picture that makes the reader feel 'I was there'. What might capture a reader's imagination? Almost any photo from the field for your audience will be interesting, but children and people performing intriguing tasks or showing off something that they are proud of rank right at the top. In short, high-quality, graphic photographs of active people smiling and looking enthusiastic will resonate with your audience and help them to connect with the universal potential of mankind—and with the potential of your projects.

Collecting Photos During Site Visits
In the field, the photographer's first job will be to find the compelling story line. Once found, their second task will be to collect a color palette of locations, people, objects, colors, sights and activities with which to paint a picture that brings the story to life. These are your compelling photos.

For photography, informal site visits are better than formal ones. I've felt that when I'm taken on a planned tour, I'm led through canned presentations and staged interviews. People are stiff and interviews are cautious. Your handlers are purposefully engaging you; you don't really have the free time to think, snoop around and meet people in their natural setting.

Photography demands solo time alone with subjects—and sometimes it demands quite a bit of time. It is difficult to get really good shots if you are surrounded by friends, handlers, or a group that you may be travelling with. Your job as a nonprofit professional is the find the compelling story line, engage with your subjects, and identify the patterns from which to entice compelling photos: hard to do when you are competing for your subject's attention with other visitors, when you are being distracted by other visitors, or are being asked by your handler to move along with the rest of the group.

To avoid this, I ask if I can just tag along alone with a field staffer on a normal day of normal rounds. Staffers do incredibly interesting things with even more interesting people. Since I'm not 'working', I'm free to observe, be curious, think up questions, roam a bit, talk casually to people—and take photos.

Beneficiaries will be very curious about you if you arrive unannounced. They will have questions about you, which in turn give you permission to ask questions of them—and begin the process of engaging with them. These are real people with real lives: this is humanity. They are the wellspring of your compelling photos and they are momentarily allowing you into important spaces within their personal lives. At these moments in time I can't believe how lucky I am; it simply doesn't get any better than this. Ask if they will show you around the project. Have fun keeping everyone relaxed and carrying on conversations, but keep an eye on the Staffer in case she suddenly starts doing something incredibly photogenic!

Capturing Photographic Images
If you like taking photos, here are some fun, non technical ideas for progressing from snapshots to compelling images:
PEOPLE
- Before you go taking other people's photos, have your own photo taken, just by yourself—just standing there—to see what it feels like. Next, have it taken while you are laughing, or happy to be with friends/family—or showing off something that you are really excited about. You will probably notice a positive shift in your relative comfort level when being photographed in these two different situations. Think how someone from a project might feel in front of a camera who isn't used to cameras, none-the-less being photographed. The goal is to get them into a zone of comfort too.
- Get to know someone a bit, get them relaxed, and then ask permission to take their photo. One simple starting point is to express interest in an activity that is normal for them, and explain that you would like someone to demonstrate how it works; this focus on the activity can remove your subject's self consciousness. It's less scary for them to be photographed doing something they are accustomed to doing, than to be posing for a photo standing all by themselves.
- Once you've asked permission once, and taken the first picture, suddenly everyone else wants their picture taken too—and then the fun begins. A fun photo shoot with new friends relaxes people and leads naturally to open conversation and compelling stories.
- I cannot recommend highly enough the importance of children. Their natural curiosity, playfulness and happiness make them natural subjects. But more than that, even if they aren't your intended subjects, their natural qualities are contagious and can pull even the shiest of adults into the photo shoot.
- If you ask a person to smile, they may be self-conscious and make an unnatural smile. Instead, playfully get people to laugh; when they quit laughing they will quite naturally be smiling.
- Get people to do a task (associated with your project!). Focus your camera on them, compose your shot, and then ask them to look up from their task for a second and look at the camera. Click.

- Everyone loves to see their photo on your little camera screen just after you have taken it. This can be a great ice-breaker; someone very photogenic, who is reluctant to have their picture taken, may want to join in after seeing example shots of their friends.

COMPOSITION
- This is about people; fill the frame with your subject. A tightly cropped photo of a person's face, torso, and a detail of the activity that they are doing, with very little empty space around them, and very little distraction behind them, creates a strong graphic image that pulls busy peoples' attention into the depths of a newsletter or proposal. You need to get right up close to people with the camera to do this. Don't use your zoom: non-professional camera zooms reduce the image quality.
- Photos in newsletters tend to be quite small—so your photos need to be very simple in composition in order for your newsletter audience to be able to 'read' the information contained in this small picture.
- Take a second to study the scene and make sure that there isn't something in the composition that shouldn't be there. If there is, move it or change your angle. Other peoples' arms and legs captured next to your subjects face, or a post appearing to rise from the top of their head are very distracting.
- If the background behind the person is busy you may need to change position to get a background that is less disruptive. I have to be careful with this one too; in the context of what you are doing and where you are at that precise moment, the background might seem to fit in, but back home the shot may lose its graphic clarity because the subject is competing with a busy background.
- Look for color; look for interesting backdrops like faded blue, weathered walls.
- Ask your subjects to take off hats and sunglasses. Peoples' eyes and smiles are what make photos compelling. Hats obscure eyes with dark shadows. Normal glasses can also be a problem due to reflections; I occasionally ask people to remove theirs in order to see their eyes better.

TECHNIQUE
- Check you shots for sharp focus. If they are a bit blurry you either need more light, to hold your camera more steadily, or you need to get the subject to stop moving. Tripods can be non-spontaneous and cumbersome on short field excursions, but frequently there is a post to lean the camera against, or a table or a chair rail to set it on.
- Do not use your flash inside. The modern digital camera works fine inside without a flash and photos are much more natural without the flash.
- Although this may seem counter-intuitive, use your flash outside if you are in bright sunlight. The flash will fill in shadows below eyebrows and under the brims of hats and generally even out the harsh contrast found in direct sunlight.
- Try not to mix bright sun with shade in a composition. Your brain compensates for this in the field, but it doesn't read well in the final image. An example is a person standing in the shade of a tree with a bright wall behind them in full sun. This is another time when daytime use of flash can balance out the light in a shot.
- Take lots of photos. When you get back to the office you'll find that in many shots people have blinked or moved. With lots of photos to choose from there is a greater likelihood that there will be one you like.
- Keep your camera handy. My favorite non-professional travel camera is a Canon PowerShot SD or S model. Model numbers change regularly, but this line of cameras take beautiful shots, and they come with a large, 3" screen so that you can really inspect the quality of your photos as you take them. The screen is big enough that it is a joy to share pictures with your subjects—especially children. The camera is small enough that it lives unobtrusively in a small bag on my belt (people think it is a cell phone). Another wonderful feature of these cameras is a wide angle lens—an unusual feature on a non-professional camera. Often you will be photographing in tight quarters and the wide-angle lens lets you get everything in.
- Always have a spare, freshly charged battery—and an empty memory card in easy reach in your camera bag. If I'm travelling, for one-week trips, I have three batteries, a charger, and a combination of three 2GB and 4GB memory cards. Even if you don't need that much storage, the three cards allow you to put different segments of your trip on different cards—a great organizational tool. Conversely, you never know when you will be unexpectedly invited on an unplanned project activity—right at the end of your trip—and the extra battery power and memory capacity suddenly become essential. Ha!
- Don't email your photos back to the office using Picasa or through Internet photo-sharing sites. They lose quality and resolution in the process. Keep the originals on your memory card or laptop hard-drive until you get home. If your office is in a hurry for a shot, send select photos as normal attachments to an email message.
- Take the time in the evenings at the hotel (if you are travelling) to do a first-cut edit of your shots right on the camera. It only takes a few minutes, and it's fun to relive your experiences and see what you got good shots of that day. The important shots you took to support your compelling stories are all still fresh in your mind so it makes evaluating, prioritizing and cutting easier. Doing this once a day also simplifies what would be an overwhelming task once you get home to your busy life.
- During final editing, think of the ratios. You take 400 photos on a trip—but your newsletter editor or grant writer only need three shots total. They are busy and trying to meet a deadline and don't really want to weed through 400 shots of cute kids and community members. So, I'll edit my 400 down to 200 in the evenings during the trip. I edit those 200 down to 100 back at the office. Then I'll pick the best 25, copy them into a special folder onto a memory stick and give those to the report/newsletter/proposal/ editor.

This may sound harsh, but I don't offer to share my photos. It often isn't a practical reality to get printed photographs back to a remote village; even if the field staff agree to do it, it is extra work for them that really isn't part of their mission.

But the bigger problem is time. I travel frequently with groups of people for a week or ten days. Everyone sees you taking lots of photos and they ask if you will send them all a set of yours. When I get back to the office Monday morning after 10 days away, I'm bushed and have a thousand things to

do—getting a nicely packaged set of photos sent off to 15 people can take hours to accomplish. Plus, in your case, your organization may want to maintain the copyright © and right of use of the photos. So, hard as it is, I have learned that it is much easier just to learn when to say no in as nice of a way as I can.

If you're not out on your own taking photographs but find yourself in a busy workshop situation here are some pointers:
- get your volunteer helpers to take photographs of you as well.
- some close-up detailed shots of some of the participants,
- close-up detailed shots of the materials that you use
- interesting drawings that you might have done in your large sheets of paper
- take shots of the whole group
- take careful shots of the charts on the large pieces of paper that are the results of the group exercises
- photos of you in action—both in front of the group and close-ups of you with individuals

In Summary:
Get close-ups of people so that they fill the frame of the photograph. Make sure they're smiling and looking at the camera. Make sure the lighting is good and that the photograph is in focus. If you're taking photographs outside where there's lots of glare, use your flash—it will balance out the glare. If you are taking photographs indoors, turn off the flash. Modern digital cameras don't need a flash indoors and the flash creates a very harsh photograph. Try an experiment with taking a photo indoors with a flash and then without a flash. The photo without the flash will be much softer and warmer.

Look at the photograph of the woman with the green banana plant to see what I mean about the positive aspects of using the flash outdoors. Take close-up pictures of people doing things—action shots. Get right in there up close to take the photograph.

Don't take too many long distance shots because it's difficult to understand what they're about. Don't take pictures of the back of people looking at something -- take pictures of the front of people looking at something. When you're composing your photograph make sure that there are not a lot of busy things happening in the background to distract from your subject. Here are some examples:

If you are not comfortable with photography, take a photographer that can take candid shots. The local office will know of a good one, and it will be an inexpensive investment in comparison to the cost of your trip and the value of the professional photos once back home for use in reports, proposals and newsletters.

I know this sound like a lot to do, but there is plenty of free time if you are tagging along and not being actively engaged by a handler or herded along with a group. If your donors have their hearts warmed with your images and feel that you captured the essence of their mission in your project report, you will have a greater likelihood of maintaining your partnership. Good luck with your next writing and photo assignment: get out there, smell the dust, feel the heat, meet the people and enjoy your new friends—the people that are the source of your compelling photos.

Sincerely,

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