

The Image Cycle

Many photographers, like myself, do not have the luxury of waiting four days for a storm to clear and the perfect light to appear at a given location. All too often, the clouds I waited for arrive as I am heading home. Because of my limited time in the field, I have learned how to maximize the photographic opportunities provided during these short trips.

In order to maximize my photographic opportunities, I have created a process that helps me think about my photography and the images I hope to create during my phototrips. I call this process, "My Image Cycle." Beginning with my research about a particular location or subject, and hopefully ending with a set of images to add to my professional portfolio, the four stages or processes of the Image Cycle help me to maximize the opportunities I have for creating quality images during my limited time in the field.

The Image Cycle consists of four interrelated stages or processes; 1) The Research Process, 2) The Envisionment Process, 3) The Creation Process, and 4) The Review Process. I see the Image Cycle as a recursive, or continuous cycle, meaning that the Review Process leads to new information for subsequent photo opportunities, and the cycle begins anew.

The Research Process

Before I step into the forest or desert, I spend hours looking at what images have

been created by other photographers. I want to know what the possibilities are about a particular place or biome before I ever get there. After researching previously published images, I make notes about possible locations, times of day, vantage points, themes and even a mood that other photographers have worked from.

I also want to know what rivers, plants, wildlife, rock formations and other features I can expect to find there. Bookstores in the National Park visitor centers, photography magazines and the Internet have been great resources for doing my research.

I keep a photography journal, where I take notes about my photography and the places I have been, and use this journal to collect examples of quality images of a particular location or subject that have been created by other photographers. I do not approach these "classic" images as photos to copy; rather I see them as possibilities. I ask myself, "What is it about these images that catches my eye? Is it the quality of light, the composition, or the unique perspective? What light has worked best here, morning or evening?" This critical analysis helps me to envision the photographic possibilities for a given location. I have learned that the more I know about a particular location, the better my chances of creating quality images.

When I am in a location, I often think of a theme, a color or a mood that I may want to convey in a series of images. Blue is an important color as you work near the ocean, and dryness is something I think about as I photograph the desert. I try and create an image that captures the mood or time of day and think about what

composition and lighting will help create this effect.

I have realized I need to spend more time learning about the places I am traveling to before I take my camera out. My first trip to a specific location rarely provides my best photos of that place. I need to wonder and wander around. I need to find out what a place offers and what light and perspective best captures the sense of place. I have purchased numerous books on animals, plants, geography, history and anthropology to understand the places I go. I have collected various charts that plot the sunset and sunrise, as well as the phases of the moon. I have spent time in visitor centers looking at the postcards and photography books that contain those "classic" images of a place. When I have done all this, I create a possible "shot list."

The Envisionment Process

After I have gathered all the information I have available about a particular subject or location, I create a "list of possibilities" for my upcoming excursion. My list might include some images from other photographers or descriptions of images I hope to create. When I am in the field, I am always looking around for new images, hiking into new areas, trying new lenses and new points of view. I want to remain open to all possibilities, however, I have been more successful during my photo trips if I have done my research and am able to envision what is possible.

Here is an example of my shot list for the book Looking Closely Around the Pond coming out in 2010.

Shot List – Around the Pond

- Cattails
- Dragonfly
- Lily Pads
- Water lilies
- Salamander
- Turtle
- Fish
- Tadpole
- Beaver / Dam
- Algae
- Mallard Duck
- Heron
- Water grasses
- Banana slug
- Flowers
- Moose
- Water strider

This shot list contains more images than I ended up gathering for the book. I also added a few images that weren't on my list as I explored various pond environments. I guess you will have to check out the book to see what made it in!

The Creation Process

All of my research, and all of the analyses of images I have done up to this point, prepares me for my time in the field. By researching what images have been created by other photographers, I am in a better position to know what is possible and how I can improve upon the images I create. In order to do this, I have designed an "Image Log" that I use to record important technical and descriptive information for each series of images. Although, there are instances when I just don't have the time, due to changing light or weather conditions, to record data on every image, I have found that taking the time to write down this information forces me to think about what I am doing.

The Image Log is divided into 6 columns (see figure 1), including subject, aperture / F-stop, over or under exposure, lens used, filters and expectations. The over or under exposure column is used to record the exact difference from the camera's exposure recommendations and the exposure readings I used.

For me, the most important column in the image log is the "expectations" column. In this column, I record what I want the image to be, what I expect will be on that particular slide when I get it back from the lab. The process of recording my expectations forces me to articulate my expectations, and helps me focus on what I am doing in the field. The data recorded in this log is the primary information I use when I review the images I get back home.

The Review Process

When I receive my images from the lab or I download them from my data cards, I immediately discard any images that are not in focus or display any technical flaws of any kind. I use a professional quality loupe or a close up viewer on my computer screen and a color corrected light box for the initial review. If the technical aspects of these images aren't perfect, I don't waste my time considering them for my files. As you have probably heard before, ruthless editing is the hallmark of an accomplished photographer.

However, I do not make immediate decisions about the composition or other artistic qualities of my images in my initial review. Instead, I keep all newly created images in a "review folder" and let them sit for awhile. I will review these images several times before making any final selections. I have found that allowing some time to lapse between the creation of my images and the review process allows me to assess my images more objectively.

After reviewing all of the images I created from a particular trip, I take extensive notes in my journal for my next excursion to that location. As I described earlier, the Image Cycle is a recursive, continuous process, and the knowledge I gain from my review sessions becomes part of my research for the next trip.

Conclusion

The Image Cycle I have described, is certainly not the ONLY way to think about and create images. This cycle has forced me to slow down and articulate my expectations for each image that I create. The image log provides me with detailed

information during the review process, and allows me to see what worked and what didn't. By researching the details of a particular location, creating a list of expectations for my photography and remaining open to the possibilities that arise in the field, I am able to take advantage of all the opportunities that nature provides me. To be sure, some images just happen, however, the more I know, and the better I prepare, the better my chances of taking home stunning images for my portfolio.