

Research interests arising from photos of nature

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There are many different ways and motivations for researchers to come up with research ideas and subsequent implementations.

For me, the mindsponge and serendipity methods work.^{1,2} But they require “inputs.” And in several cases, those inputs have the form of photographs of nature and its living things, mainly plants, and animals.

Initially, the idea of taking photos of nature came from reading the National Geographic’s call for contributions to its annual National Geographic Photo Contests.³ Gradually, the photos taken have sparked a new kind of interest, which finally leads to specific studies. Needless to say, those photos do not have to be very beautiful. They just need to be intriguing.^{4,5} To this end, I tend to have likened the researcher to the traveler, who is “summarizing tourist destinations by mining user-generated travelogues and photos.”⁶

Some examples of the photos, taken with the purposes mentioned above in mind, follow. In Photo 1, we can see the shed skin of a cicada left on the bark of an old tree.

In Hanoi, during the late 1970s and early 1980s, a pastime for children at the beginning of summer was to catch cicada juveniles, around 6 P.M. to 9 P.M. We then brought them home, put them inside the mosquito net, and watched them shed the shell. After a beautiful molting moment, and the just-shelled-out cicada looked like a

fairy. The shells were, supposedly, collected as an input for making some traditional medicine.

Photo 1. The cast exoskeleton of a cicada after molting



A cicada's shell left on the trunk of a *Dracontomelon* in my garden, Son Tay, Hanoi. Copyright ©2016 of the author.

Next is the photo of a baby sparrow trying to drink from a wastewater pipe. In fact, there are three of them, but this higher-quality photo shows only one.

Ironically, the photo was taken when there was a huge flood in Hanoi, 2018, summer.

And this little bird, not yet able to fly fluently. I could take this photo because the birds were able to hop around only. They flew only over a very short span.

Photo 2. A sparrow seeking water



A day-old-chick was desperately seeking drinking water, even when it's wastewater, coming out from an aircon. Copyright ©2018 of the author.

The photo of the flowerpecker nest, shown in Photo 3, was taken on a Sunday morning. I found it while cleaning the family's cemetery in Bac Giang province, Vietnam. The cemetery had rarely been visited by family members except for the festive seasons.

The parents-birds must have thought that the land had been abandoned. Still, they hid the nest very "thoughtfully" under the wild plants, so people looking at them from afar could not see the nest. Therefore, children playing around the land had left them safe.

From my observation, the time from building the nest, laying eggs to completion of hatching for flowerpeckers is around 8-9 weeks. Thus, I guess the mother-bird would

soon finish hatching and move on, teaching the chick to fly in about two weeks. So I was lucky to have seen this before they all left the nest.

Photo 3. A bird's nest



A bird nest in the wilderness, having a flowerpecker egg inside.

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The interests in these photos, among many others, have been with me since I was still a little kid. They continued to be present, at times not very clear, and would one day develop to become real interest in scientific literature, i.e., genuine research publications.^{7,8,9}

Naturally, the interests combined with data, analytical techniques and many work hours have turned into manuscripts and publications.¹⁰⁻¹⁴

Now, my final words are that these living creatures are really beautiful and amazing. Frankly, I could spend many hours looking at them and reflect on their existence. Their beauty brings not just emotion and memory, but also hope and determination in pursuing the good. To this end, research publications represent only a small contribution.

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