

## From Research to Publication – Framing Picture Stories

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### ANALYSIS

Most people who open a National Geographic magazine and peruse through one of the expansive photo stories could safely assume that a fair amount of research went into finding the pictures to tell that story. Before a photographer can begin actually making pictures for a story, basic questions like what is the main issue, where and when are things related to this issue happening and who are the key players must be answered. Research beyond those initial questions however, varies widely from photographer to photographer.

How does the research that a photographer does before (and during) shooting a photo story shape the way that story is shared with the public?

Learning more about the ways that photographers go about researching story ideas can provide future photojournalists with a better understanding of the thought-process behind successful picture stories, and possibly how to navigate researching a story, before shooting in the field.

This article will examine the research methods conducted by three photojournalists working today and aim to identify to what extent their research plays a role in the final outcome of their stories. Interviewed are: Joel Sartore, a contract photographer for National Geographic Magazine, Melissa Farlow, also a



contract photographer for National Geographic Magazine, and Matt Eich, a freelance photographer based in Virginia. These photographers have produced environmental picture stories like wetland conservation, mountaintop removal, and alligator hunting, but the amount and style of research they conduct for stories is quite different.

### **Where story ideas originate can determine what kind of research goes into them**

Both Melissa Farlow and Matt Eich discussed the difference between a photo editor pitching a story to them, versus coming up with their own idea for a story to pitch to a publication. Both alluded to the fact that when someone else comes to them with a story idea, that person's prior research on the story does play a role in how they go about photographing it. Farlow said that if a story idea comes to her, initial questions revolve around if there has already been an article written that her photos would accompany, and what research has already been done shedding light on what the story is really about. "It doesn't necessarily color everything I do, but I want to understand exactly what the interests of those who are hiring me are." Similarly, Matt Eich said that for a client-driven piece, he tries not to dive in blind if they don't provide him a plethora of information, but more often than not, Eich said:

I don't have enough time to do research and I just have to take whatever paragraph they hand me and that's what I've got to work with. That and the conversation with the photo editor too, or the writer, so I'm just kind of



communicating with people about like, what the intent of the story is and what they're trying to communicate, and that will influence or inform what I gather for them.

Alternately, all three interviewees said that when coming up with story ideas on their own, they have to do their own initial research and that research seemed to vary immensely.

### **Joel Sartore's Style of Research – One Stop Shopping**

Joel Sartore says he doesn't want to re-invent the wheel when researching a story idea. “Most of the time, most things have been photographed.” Once Sartore has an idea for a picture story, he contacts other photographers who have worked on the same subject matter, and he does google image searches to look at pictures of the story location. Before going into the field, he said he puts together a shot list of things he is confident that he'll be able to photograph for the story, and says that if he thinks he won't get most of what is on his list, he won't go. Sartore expounds on the importance of his research before going into the field to shoot, “You know, my stories are made or broken in the research phase. They are only as good as the research usually.”

An important component of Sartore's research is identifying one person who really knows the area where his story will take place, or is a sort of expert on Sartore's story topic, and he uses that person as a sort of picture guide. He calls this, one stop shopping.



This method of using one person as a main “point person” for an entire photo story might lead one to believe that Sartore is possibly missing important aspects of a topic that perhaps their point person isn't familiar with. When asked about this issue, Sartore responded, “Well, yes, but I'm only one guy. I'm one guy, and I try to focus on an area and do it to the best of my ability. If you try to think about covering the whole world, then you'll go insane.”

Sartore did discuss examples of where using a point person (or area expert) as his photo guide created the opportunity to make photos in the field that he couldn't have prepared while researching the story on his own. For example, while photographing his for National Geographic called, “Brazil's Wild Wet: Pantanal” in August of 2005, he made an incredible photo of an anaconda eating an egret.





Photo by Joel Sartore

Daniel spotted that bird out in the marsh, and he was pretty sure something was eating it and that we should wait out. He thought it was either a cayman had it, but more likely a snake, because a cayman just douses something and drowns it, so no that was Daniel spotted that, and I think that was probably one of our last days there, we were actually leaving, and we waded out to get to it, and there was this anaconda there, it was, that was awesome. Not awesome for the bird though.

### **Melissa Farlow's Style of Research – Holistic Approach**

Melissa Farlow said she first identifies what kind of story she is considering shooting to determine how she will first began her research. She differentiated her research between stories based on current events versus stories



with a more historical background, and discussed how one might go about researching a story idea where nothing has been written about ever before. For stories that are more current, Farlow said that she would likely read information online, as that would be the most up to date. For story ideas that have a more historical background, she suggested looking at older magazine articles. For ideas that have literally never been covered before, she cited her husband Randy Olson as an example, and said that he would first identify contacts to learn more about the story idea.

Farlow did mention that she makes a point to not look at what other photographers have done on a similar story idea in the past, citing that she didn't want to be affected by the way they saw things and wanted her story to be more about personal discovery and what things she had learned as journalist along the way. She said:

I feel often like if I can figure out things for myself of who is important or where to go, I'd kind of rather do that than rely on other things other people have already done. I don't want that to affect me, nor to steal from them what they've worked to get.

From a more general research standpoint, Farlow said:

I'm going to go online, books, magazines you know, traditional places you'd look and a lot of that I'm trying to find who good people to talk to are. You know, in the field, I want to talk to officials, people behind the scenes, people



who are grassroots, people who are on the ground doing thing, anybody involved with it.

Farlow used a recent photo story that was in National Geographic Magazine about wild horses, “Mustangs: Spirit of the Shrinking West”, as an example of how she typically goes about conducting research both before and on the ground for a photo story. Her approach could best be categorized as holistic. She first went to the Bureau of Land Management and said, “I quickly figured out where all the wild horses are, the information about their history from their point of view, what they're doing now, how they saved them, what their goal is, their mission, all of that.” Farlow then attempted to identify who was in charge in a particular state or area regarding wild horses, taking note of anyone who she might have previously had contact with, citing that a person who she has already met could be helpful for insight. She also looked into groups that are interested in saving the wild horses, and had to determine which groups were respected and which were not. Lastly, Farlow said that making phone calls to people in charge, she gains a lot of insight about what a story is about. “I really do rely a lot on finding the right people on the phone to give me a leads or at least a point of view about what's going on.”

Farlow also spoke about the difference in doing research before shooting a story, and things you discover on the ground. For example, she didn't know that the foaling season, when the mustangs are fighting, would be one of the best opportunities for pictures.





Photo by Melissa Farlow

So that's one thing that I learned only on the ground, once I was there seeing things, and as the season went on and I wanted more of what I had seen when I first hit the ground, I got that, well, you'll have to wait until next spring to see that because, the season was over. So I didn't know that. So there are things that you learn in the field, I guess you might luck onto that information if you ask all of the right questions and had thought of everything, and I always try to, but it seems like there are often key bits of information, what we call is, you do research before you go, and then you do field research.

Farlow also went into detail about how she organizes her time while on the ground shooting a story. She said that she likes to lay out a list of priorities and then groups them geographically or time-wise. This means that she is able to



maximize her time shooting and photograph several visual events in one place, or in the span of two weeks. Ahead of time, by talking to people and learning about possible photo opportunities, she tries to figure out how much time to set aside for shooting certain events related to her story.

For example on horses, if I knew I was going to be in Nevada, I tried to think, are they going to do a gather while I'm there, is there a horse sanctuary there, there's also a prison there where they train horses after they're captured, then I tried to think of anything else that would either be drive-able from there, or places I wanted to go to see if I even saw horses.

### **Matt Eich's Style of Research – Get up and Get Out There**

Matt Eich, a freelance photojournalist based in Norfolk, Virginia was the youngest of all three interviewees. His style of research could best be summarized as a just “get up and go” attitude, or as Eich called it, the “newborn approach”. He said that more often than not, he'll hear about an event that sounds interesting, and without a second thought, he'll find a way to get there and dive in. Eich pointed out that his ignorance on the issue could be seen as an asset.

Depending on what Eich finds while in the field, his story idea usually shifts over time. He used the story, Trouble in the Water, a photo story about alligator culture in the south, as an example of how he approaches researching a story idea. This story first came to him by way of a friend who was a photo editor at the Advocate in Baton Rouge, LA. Eich thought it sounded cool, and dove in.



I happen to have the rare juxtaposition of a little bit of spare cash with a little bit of free time and could jump on a plane and go down there and I literally did zero research, I didn't have any contacts there, and I was sick as a dog too, and he picked me up at the airport, and the next morning he dropped me off at a boat dock with a guy named Rebel and a guy named Julius.



Photo by Matt Eich

Eich spent a few days photographing these men hunting alligators, and then decided to spend more time on the story. He looked at different facets of the industry, and began doing research only after he spent time shooting in the field. He discovered wild hunts, and alligator farms as interesting photo possibilities, and said that if he had continued the story, he would've looked into the alligator



tourism industry, and where and how alligators are exported outside of the state of Louisiana.

Although Eich said that he did zero research before heading to Louisiana to begin initially shooting this story, he did mention later that his contacts for the story (Rebel and Julius), were literally handed to him by his editor friend. He said that he wouldn't have made the trip if he wouldn't have had any contacts.

Eich said that he thinks the editorial story-telling approach is close-minded. "We're going to this place, and we know what the story is about, that it's going to be about this," he said as an example. Eich said that his own approach to telling stories is much slower, and more about listening to people, re-evaluating his own thoughts on the story, and then identifying his own beliefs about the community, and his beliefs about his own life.

Eich pointed out that although it is good to be prepared (he said he spends most of his time in the logistics department of research), that spending tons of time researching a story idea before going into the field could result in a lot of wasted time.

### **Drawing Conclusions from Sartore, Farlow and Eich's Style of Research**

In conclusion, it seems like a well-rounded research approach both before *and* during the photography of an environmental picture story would yield a more holistic-style coverage of a topic. Both Joel Sartore and Matt Eich's approaches seemed to leave open the possibility of missing certain perspectives on a topic. In



Sartore's case, this could be because he typically uses only one main point person as a research guide, and in Eich's case, his method of jumping straight in to see what he finds out on the ground could mean that he misses broader aspects of a topic he is photographing.

Melissa Farlow seemed to have a more well-rounded and fluid style of research, by looking at various sources, identifying multiple point people, and being very open to changing course when she found out things were different once she was on the ground shooting.

While there are unlimited ways that a photographer might research an environmental picture story, learning about the different approaches of these three professional photojournalists helps provide a basis for understanding the amount and variety of research that goes into framing a picture story, and can help future photojournalists gain ideas on how they would like to best research their own stories.



