

PSA Nature Definitions – Editing, An Alternate View

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‘The truthful and natural connection between the nature subject and the nature image will be *best* assured by the honesty and integrity of the photographer having knowledge of the PSA editing guidelines.’ That’s the conclusion by John Davis in his article *The Truth, The Whole Truth, And Nothing But the Truth....* (PSA Journal, June 2009). The purpose of his article is to explain the addition of the following to the PSA Nature definition:

“No element may be moved, cloned, added, rearranged or combined. No manipulation or modification is permitted except resizing, cropping, selective lightening or darkening, and restoration of original color of the scene. No special effect filters can be applied. Any sharpening must appear natural.”

These changes were introduced because, with the increasing availability of digital editing tools, *“the special connection between reality and a nature photograph needed the protection....”* This may seem well intentioned enough, but it introduces many problems. For one thing, these changes are referred to as guidelines when that is not the case – they are rules; guidelines suggest room for flexibility and judgement, rules do not.

Davies acknowledges that there can be differences of opinion and in such cases suggests considering: *Is the image the truth? Is it the whole truth? Does it appear natural?* These may be interesting considerations, but they can also be obfuscating and misleading as will be illustrated.

At the outset it must be noted that doing whatever is possible to perfect an image before capture is always recommended. Furthermore, the **objective** of truthful, accurate, honest nature images is not in dispute. But one can certainly dispute the claim that these new rules are the *best* way to assure that objective. This is because 1) the *truth* needs some perspective, and 2) the rules exclude many practices that perfectly well satisfy the objective and which already are, many would say, an integral part of photographic practice.

The Whole Truth? In photography, *truth* is a precarious word to use. Consider the examples in Figure 1. The left image shows a sharp-shinned hawk standing out from the background with only the hawk being in sharp focus; on the right, the hawk is fully integrated with the background, everything being sharp. The latter is a composite because the necessary depth of field was not possible in one exposure. It is the *truth* in relation to human vision of the natural scene, but it is not acceptable under the new rules because it is a composite.

The image on the left, a single exposure, has a major distortion of the background (de-focusing) caused by the telephoto lens, and there could be any number of variations on this depending on aperture setting. Each would be different and each *truthful* in terms of the capture or through-the-finder view, and acceptable under the new rules. But they are not truthful of the scene nor of nature and may in fact be far from it. Therefore they certainly cannot be said to be the *whole truth and nothing but the truth*.

Fig. 1a - The shallow depth-of-field of many telephoto lenses distorts backgrounds resulting in a blurring that can help to focus attention on the subject. The extent of the blurring can usually be altered by changing the lens aperture, and this distortion is allowed. © Douglas Goodell, Perched Sharpie 2



Fig. 1b - The real scene in nature without the distorting effect of the lens looks quite different. Since the depth-of-field requirements can often be quite extreme, combining multiple images may be required to accurately render the scene. This is not allowed. © Douglas Goodell, Perched Sharpie 3



Different Truths. While Figure 1 suggests that *truth* may be very slippery, it also emphasizes that different parts of an image may have different demands for fidelity to the natural scene. That's why pre-capture blurring of a background is acceptable – the background is not the primary element of the image even though it has a major impact on its appeal.

That is also the case in Davis' example of lighting adjustments around the gyrfalcon. His adjustments are subtle. But the allowed lighting adjustments can have a profound effect on an image – so much so that the restrictions on other editing tools seem very arbitrary in comparison.



Fig. 2a - This scene suffers mostly from bad lighting. Fill flash should have been used but it is not allowed at some sites.



Fig. 2b - The light balance can be corrected using fill light, curves, and shadow-highlight control. These tonality edits are permitted. But the distracting bright spot to the left of the owl is blown out and cannot be recovered by tonality adjustments.



Fig. 2c - The bright spot can be corrected by patching or cloning from a nearby area. Even though this makes only a small change in image appearance (less than the tonality edits) it is not permitted.

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Spectacled Owl 2.

Editing and Truth. Consider the three versions of the owl in Figure 2. The first shows the original exposure with the bright leaves in the upper right, but the rest of the scene is too dark. The light balance can be adjusted by post-capture editing and the result is shown in the second image. The tonally corrected image is probably not very close to the actual scene – fill flash should have been used but was not (some sites do not allow flash). Instead, virtual fill flash saved the day. This is within the framework of the rules even though it is major alteration of the image.

But there remains an opening in the leaves resulting in a very distracting bright spot. The opening is real, it happens in nature, though it was probable not so dramatic at the real scene where human vision has a much higher tonal range than does the capture medium. In the view of most, it would not be a critical part of the presentation of the subject. It simply does not warrant the same fidelity as does the owl itself. Just as in the case of the hawk, the background need not be one hundred percent accurate.

Tonal editing will not correct the opening in the background. But it might be fixed by patching (or cloning) in leaves from a surrounding area. The third image shows such an edit. It doesn't make anywhere near the radical change in the image as the first edit, but it makes a difference in appeal of the image. Except that patching and cloning are not allowed under the new rules!

This is similar to the example that Davis uses to show that pre-capture blurring of a background is acceptable but the same result accomplished post-capture is not permitted. This is a contortion that emphasizes process distinctions which do not differ in their consequence with respect to the objective: "the truthful and natural connection between the nature subject and the nature image."

Fake Truth. But, it gets more convoluted! In a situation where a background is not optimal, one might consider interposing a fake background. They are occasionally used in photography of hummingbirds, butterflies and other insects, and flowers. The controlling rule here appears to be that of 'natural appearance.' And fake backgrounds can look quite natural especially if they are out of focus. They are not real but they are acceptable. So why is it not acceptable to make a post-capture background adjustment that looks quite natural, and may in fact be much closer to reality?

Better than Truth. Or consider the other extreme where editing brings a subject closer to reality. Examples include high-dynamic-range processing (HDR), and field-depth-extension (FDE), and there are others, including panoramic stitching. These processes require pre-capture operations that enable post-capture processing to combine the best sections of multiple images. The result is a better representation of reality than is possible with a single capture. But this editing requires combining elements, which is specifically prohibited. Thus, reality and *truth* are not necessarily at the core of the new rules.

The prohibition against combining elements is further emphasized by inclusion therein of combining differently processed versions of *a single image capture*. This typically involves separate optimizations for shadows and highlights. Following this logic, the use of any layers with masks, even for tonal adjustments, must be prohibited because separately treated elements are combined. And so, one of the most significant and time-honored tools in photography has been rejected.

Truth by Restriction? It is likely that the restrictiveness of the editing rules will satisfy the objective. But they throw out the baby with the bath water. We are working with newly accessible tools which are going to be around and developing well into the future. It would provide a more understandable and logical approach to the primary objective if more of the tools were allowed and their appropriate and responsible uses encouraged. Indeed, that should be the role of an organization like PSA rather than the more Luddite approach taken by those with less interest and knowledge.

It may be that the reason for imposing the new rules was that editing is being handled badly or that the primary objective is being abused (from teaching and judging, I know both of these are true). This is not surprising since many digital editing techniques are easy to attempt and very difficult to master. But the purpose (hopefully) is not to level the playing field for the editing-challenged. The response should be education not restriction.

But, if the thrust really is to have no editing, then **no** editing should be allowed, including that of tonal adjustment. After all, this was the norm for many years when photographers used slide film, and there was much success in that era. But times change.

And, these rules are insulting to the photographer and logically flawed. In effect they say: we won't trust you to adhere to the principles but we will trust you

to follow the rules. In the end, the outcome rests on the integrity, honesty, and ability of the photographer, and this is equally true of following rules or adhering to principles – better to focus on the principles.

Finally, it should be noted that less restrictive editing rules might have an environmental benefit. Post-capture editing can reduce the temptation to make 'adjustments' in the field – removing a stick, can, or rock that may be considered undesirable in the final image. Being able to fix such problems post-capture can reduce disturbance of the environment and impact on the subject. This is an important consideration, and is consistent with Davis' later PSA Journal article about protecting nature.

Recommendations. To get back on track, the newly stated PSA nature definition and code should be modified to allow more use of modern digital editing tools. The proper and responsible use of all tools and processes (as well as the objectives and principles) should be promoted by example, explanation, and education. There should be no need to specify and institutionalize process details. Guidelines can have a role, but they should not be interpreted as rules.

Inherent in this is that different elements of an image may have different requirements for fidelity to the natural scene. It is disingenuous to suggest otherwise. My preference is to simply say that *the nature image be faithful to the subject and its relevant, natural environment*. No process micro-management need be involved.

If it is felt necessary to address editing, it might be along the line: any editing should be minimal and should not introduce foreign elements, unnatural features (over saturation, sharpening, etc), or artifacts (halos, edge faults, etc). If it is felt necessary to restrict cloning, adding, rearrangement, or other manipulations, this might be referenced to just the primary subject since that is where greatest accuracy is most important. However, this is really unnecessary because it should be controlled by the honesty and integrity of the photographer understanding the principles.

Unless modified, the serious photographer seems to have three options: 1) comply with the rules, though this may occasionally preclude many valuable benefits of digital technology, 2) don't dignify the rules by participating in events where they are operative, or 3) ignore the rules, and leave it up to judges to recognize violations, if they can (After all, judges regularly ignore certain other PSA rules.) I prefer option two.