

The sad demise of 'wow!'

Honest to God. Jack Swenson, who took this picture on the Sea of Cortez, had been working with marine mammals for 20 years and had never before seen this happen. Yet thanks to computers

and trained animals, you might think dolphins tail-walk more often than they swim. Genuine wildlife photographers still take genuine photographs, but does anybody believe them any more?

This picture is of real wild dolphins really tail-walking. Almost every other picture you've seen of this is 'faked'.

Kevin Schafer laments image manipulation in wildlife photography.

There was a time when nature photography's greatest gift was its authenticity, when a picture was seen as a window on the world, whether it was a revealing moment of animal behaviour or a landscape captured in glowing, evanescent light. Those days are on their way out. Today, the assumption that a photograph represents a real event is being undermined by the rise of manipulated images and the widespread use of captive animals as 'models'. The result? In many cases, we simply can't believe what we see any more.

Perhaps the most compelling sign of the change is a comment I hear more and more: "Nice picture – but do you think it's real?" Those words signal what I call 'the death of wow', the steady erosion of confidence that photography is anything more than a clever trick. The fact is, our response to an image of nature has always been intimately connected to our perception of it as something unique and true. Take that away, and what is left? An appealing illustration, perhaps, but gone is its ability to evoke our sense of awe and wonder.

Indeed, the moment we learn that a picture of an animal is staged or significantly altered on the computer, its magic evaporates. We may still admire the subject's beauty or its physical grace, but we no longer feel the same connection with its wild spirit. It is the difference between watching a cheetah beneath the searing African sun or seeing it in a zoo – between art and artifice. There is simply no comparison. Yet this is precisely what is happening in the world of nature photography.

Let me give you an example. We are all familiar with those 'perfect' shots of dolphins leaping into the air at sunset or 'tail-walking' for the camera that appear in so many advertisements, calendars, postcards and travel brochures. They seem to symbolise freedom and the joy of life. They probably also earn heaps of money.

What you may not realise is that virtually all are taken of a single group of trained bottlenose dolphins at a resort in Honduras' Bay Islands. Legions of photographers travel there every year to take essentially the same pictures already taken by



hundreds of others before them. As a result, these images have all begun to look alike – staged and as dull as dishwater. (Hard to do, one would think, with an animal that personifies both animation and wildness.) They are dull because these pictures have lost their essential spark, the sense of wonder and delight that can only come with the knowledge that what we are seeing is genuine, wild and unaltered. Take away the 'wow!', and you're left with 'so what?'

Then recently a friend showed me some pictures he took this past winter of a pod of wild bottlenose dolphins in Mexico's Sea of Cortez leaping out of the water and performing their magical tail-walks. No trained animals here: these were unfettered, unrehearsed displays of pure, exuberant joy. I found the pictures electrifying.

To me, simply the knowledge that these pictures recorded wild behaviour gives them a special magic. (What's more, as far as I know, tail-walking may never have been photographed in the wild before – or if so, only very rarely. My friend Jack had certainly never seen it before, even after 20 years of working with marine mammals.) No, the pictures are not technically perfect. The animals are not full-frame and there is no idyllic setting sun in the background. But who cares? To me, they have a hundred times more power than any of those dolphin-model pictures – simply because they are real.

This is, after all, how it should be. A picture of a rare moment of behaviour, captured by a skilled (and lucky) photographer, possesses something special that sets it apart from a shot taken in any zoo or aquarium. The only trouble is, it is getting more and more difficult to tell the difference.

The use of trained animals is increasing among photographers, particularly in the US. Those dramatic shots of tigers running

through the surf? Trained models forced to perform stunts again and again for the camera. Those close-up portraits of wolves? Almost all are of rental animals, posing on cue.

There is, of course, nothing wrong with shooting portraits in zoos or with hiring animal models. But do they compare with images taken of wild animals, pictures that may have taken weeks of hard work and patience on the part of the photographer?

The situation is further complicated by the use of computers to alter, correct, retouch or otherwise fiddle with pictures in an effort to make them 'better'. Adding sunsets where there are none, or multiplying the number of migrating animals to make a more 'visually pleasing' herd. This kind of alteration has become increasingly sophisticated – and nearly undetectable.

Again, there is nothing wrong with this, and railing against digital manipulation smacks of the ranting of a Luddite. But what concerns me is that the increasing prevalence of these pictures gradually, insidiously undermines whatever value genuine pictures once had. If people can't tell the difference, or if photographers are unscrupulous enough to avoid making the distinction, then one day soon, all pictures will be suspect, and no one will believe what they see. Worse, no one will care. ■

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