

DEC – A Solution to the Digital Dilemma
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Do no harm. While that credo applies to medicine, nature photographers should also follow it equally faithfully as the welfare of our subjects should be the most important aspect in any photographic interaction.

I mention this because at a recent meeting of an association of nature photographers a discussion on digital ethics brought up the pros and cons of digital manipulation versus altering the habitat or immediate environs of a subject. One faction argued that digitally removing a stick or hot spot or trash altered the veritable truth of the image, and should not be done. An example of a hawk owl perched on a limb with a few extraneous sticks included in the image focused the argument. It was suggested that it would be preferable to physically remove the sticks, breaking them off if necessary, than to simply remove them digitally as the image would then be untrue.

I vehemently disagree with this view, but before I offer a sane solution to this dilemma let me explain why. Everyone's sense of aesthetics may differ, and in any individual's attempt to make the perfect image one might feel that this stick, or that weed, or that flower in the background weakens the photographic statement being made. Accordingly, the stick, weed, or flower might be bent out of the way, broken off, or plucked to satisfy that photographer's aesthetic whim.

Now imagine, the next photographer comes along and thinks, "Well, that stick doesn't belong" or "That flower is intrusive," and so on, and breaks, bends or plucks as well. Follow this with more photographers following the same philosophy and one might end up with a very different landscape from that which the first photographer stumbled upon, one that might be quite sterile.

Now consider this. While we might look at any given element of the environment as separate and independent, that's not the case, as each element may play a role in the health or attractiveness of a microenvironment that is essential for all of the inhabitants of that locale. Another example may further illustrate this point: A few sticks intrude into your frame as you photograph a bird nest or a bird on a regularly used perch. To you, these sticks are distracting from your perfect composition, either obstructing your view or creating a visual distraction. You know that removing them would enhance the composition, indeed, one of those sticks is dead and bleached white by the sun, and glows obnoxiously inside your viewfinder. That stick has to go, and maybe that other stick, and that one there, too, should be removed to clean up the composition.

Removing those sticks digitally, by artful use of Photoshop's clone stamp or patch tool, could easily do the job, but by doing so you know you've altered the truth of the scene. You try framing differently and using a longer lens, but try as you might, the sticks still intrude. You consider the digital solution again, but dismiss that alternative because if you do so, and label the image as 'manipulated' you fear that the image will be dismissed as fake or untrue. It's a great shot and a great subject, except for those darn sticks, and you really believe that this shot has great sales potential; in fact, this might be 'the shot' that propels you to instant fame.

You're an honest person, so you wouldn't even consider doing a digital clean up and then lying about it, and you know that those who don't share your ethics could easily be caught if the editor you are targeting simply asked to see the original RAW file along with the finished TIFF or JPG. Knowing that photographic truth trumps all, you leave your blind, and with a few quick snaps remove all of the sticks that had offended your aesthetic sense and compromised your perfect image.

Now wait a minute! While those sticks may not have been important to you, were they important, or critical for the bird? Were those sticks acting as cover for a nest? Did they serve as additional perches for the bird or for insects that that bird hunted? Breaking them off may radically change that bird's microenvironment.

So there can be consequences to your actions. Well, not yours, because you wouldn't do that. You, of course, would choose to simply not shoot that subject rather than risk doing any harm. You would, but what would a more ambitious

and less ethical photographer do? Snap!

I believe there is a sane solution here, one that could honestly label an image without requiring an editor to go to the trouble of comparing RAWs with TIFFs or JPGs, but where a spot-check would verify a photographer's honesty if there were any doubt. I've proposed the use of an acronym, DEC, a 'Digitally Enhanced Composition' which indicates that an image was enhanced without affecting the 'truth' of the shot. What would qualify as a DEC? If you could remove or alter a scene in real-time, physically doing so, but choose instead to do so digitally, that's a DEC.

Examples? The offending branches in the owl image used in the ethics session, or the sticks in the hypothetical example with the bird I just cited. A flower that intrudes as an unpleasant blob of color behind your beautiful bouquet, one that could have been bent over, tied back, or plucked. A bright leaf on the otherwise pristine coat on a black bear ... whoa! How, you're asking, would you remove that leaf in real-time on a wild black bear? That brings up a gray area, but one could argue that a good breeze or an accommodating bush a moment later could have scraped the leaf off, but either way, did that leaf really affect the truth of the composition? I've seen people frighten off a gator once, and turtles several times, from a favored basking site when they tried, via a long stick, to flick off a leaf or cluster of vegetation. They wanted a 'clean' shot, and in their efforts to get one they frightened the subject back into the water. It could have been done so much easier via Photoshop, without bothering their subject, and would have followed the credo, "Do no harm."

I left that ethics session with a disheartened sense that some photographers could potentially harm habitats or subjects by clinging to an historic limitation, and by doing so might place 'the truth' of an image above the welfare of their subjects. A universal label, like DEC, would alleviate this problem, and still satisfy an editor's quest for truth, since a RAW file could always be requested and examined.

This idea of a DEC label would certainly reduce the impact unethical, unthinking, or clueless photographers might have upon the environment, but it does open the door for other aspects of 'digital manipulation' that may, or may not, fall under the umbrella of DEC.

As an example, adding catchlights to an image brings us into the shady area of DEC, but one could surely argue that adding a flash or reflector in 'real time' can accomplish the same thing, and both are merely tools to improve the over-all look of the image. Just as a reflector or fill-in flash can soften shadows, so too can the Shadow/Highlight feature in Photoshop, as can Curves and other adjustment layers in a more controlled fashion via Masks. To some extent, the Photoshop techniques were employed in the wet darkroom under different names, but the end results were basically the same.

I don't know what to say, or decree if I had that power, about adding an eye highlight via Photoshop, but I think it should fall under the same DEC label as the other points I addressed. For, bottom line, the eye highlight could have been added via a flash or a reflector, which produces a far less natural-looking eye highlight than one made by an artful application of some Photoshop.

Does this take us down a slippery slope? Where does a DEC label slide into a truly digital manipulation? How about removing wires or buildings or other background distractions? Recently, on another website, I saw a lengthy tutorial about cloning, which involved the removal of an unwanted background. I was a bit uncomfortable reading this, but it got me to thinking. If a car's shiny chrome or color suddenly appeared in the background of your image, momentarily popping into view between gaps in the foliage, does its presence or absence change the over-all truth of the shot? Perhaps in that brief moment in time when this obtrusive vehicle passes into view the bird feeder you are filming gets spectacular action. A moment earlier the background was clear. But this time, just as you shoot, a car passes! An instant later, the car is gone and, of course, so is the peak action that you happened to catch. But the reflection and the color of that hot chartreuse Corvette your neighbor drives is now within the frame.

Although I must admit to being a bit uncomfortable about this type of digital solution, I'd like to think that if 'man put it in,' whether that's a car's reflection, a power line, or a distant church steeple, 'man can take it out' via Photoshop if those background elements have nothing to do with the veracity of your image. The question then is, can we label this a DEC or should we call it a Digital Manipulation (DM), or a photo illustration? I don't have the answer to this question but I'd hate to think that the fine-tuning of an important, environmentally friendly label like DEC could stall its acceptance.

The bottom line is this: I'm less worried about the label DEC than I am about the welfare of the subjects we should be striving to protect even as we photograph them. I am afraid that an editor or a photography judge with a similar view as the one who generated the idea of this article might summarily dismiss a DEC image, considering it 'tainted' and go on to one without a label. Would that photographer reconsider using a DEC label? Would he or she, instead, simply lie about removing offending branches via Photoshop, and possibly risk any consequences if the editor or judge asked to

see the original RAW file for verification? Would that photographer risk rejection and simply choose to keep the sticks within the frame? Or choose to just 'go with the editor's flow' and break off the branches rather than risk having those images rejected? I'm afraid some would choose to break off the sticks as the only recourse, and we're back to risking the welfare of our subjects for an image.

I wonder, are there plenty of DEC's going on right now, without anyone saying so? Some magazines have a standard 'not one pixel can be changed!' policy, but are they really checking? Are some editors simply being complicit, following a 'Don't ask, don't tell' policy so that they can avoid this sticky problem? I'd bet some are.

Are photographers submitting digital 'little white lies' that are simple DEC's, knowing that the editor or photo contest judge isn't going to check and knowing, too, that they may have done so little 'enhancement' to the image that even if they were spot-checked, the editor might not notice the difference?

In writing this, I'm trying to address these potential contradictions, while offering a solution, however rough, that can address the harmful consequences of breaking sticks, plucking flowers, disturbing animals or other actions that a photographer may do to clean up an image. It shouldn't happen but it does, and if you're out in the field much you've probably seen it happen. I certainly have, but I don't think it has to, even if one is compelled to make the perfect image. The sane, honest solution I see is adopting the DEC label.

This idea will have to evolve, there's no question about that, but I'd like to think that a DEC label would imply a basic truth, again completely verifiable with a RAW file if an editor or judge required one. A DEC would not imply putting elements -- like another bird, mammal, person, etc. -- into the picture. That's manipulation, and such images would have to be labeled as digitally manipulated. To me, a DM has nothing to do with a DEC, since the latter does not alter the truth of the scene.

Nature and wildlife photography is growing increasingly popular, and with that popularity I fear increased pressure will be placed upon our subjects. I think it is our duty to help insure the welfare of our subjects and our environment. I propose that adopting a universal label is one important step in doing just that.



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