

**Comparing frequencies of three key elements of conservation
photographers' posts on Instagram;
Does the number of followers play a role?**

(Inquiry Action Project II)

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Abstract:

The use of Instagram to advocate for conservation issues is a relatively new practice and a literature review reveals a general lack of study in regards to best practices to maximize engagement with social media posts specifically under the conservation photography umbrella. There also lacks robust research and information about Instagram and its relationship to the field of conservation biology and management. This Inquiry Action Plan (IAP) includes original research focusing on identifying the key elements of conservation photography posts on Instagram by established professionals in the field. The investigation identifies different strategies that can be best employed in creating social media posts that engage and facilitate learning, discussion, and action around conservation issues. What follows is a comparison of the frequencies of strategies used by fifteen established conservation photographers from one hundred and fifty Instagram posts. Three key elements emerged from an investigation of the existing peer-reviewed literature of conservation photography. When the frequencies of use of these three key elements were compared against the number of followers for each account, no significant patterns emerged. The results of several regression analyses suggest that regardless of Social Media Influencer status, conservation photographers use these key elements in similar ways.

Introduction:

Conservation Photography is a term that effectively combines the two distinct fields of art and science into a form of photojournalism; storytelling using imagery. The intersection of these fields is thought to be the oldest form of photography to affect social change, dating back to the 1860s (Ward, 2008). According to conservation photographer Carlton Ward, the meaning of the term, Conservation Photography, is “simply photography that empowers conservation” (Ward, 2008). A study by Farnsworth (2011), asserts that professional conservation photographers can reach students through their images and have real impacts on their learning. In his Master’s thesis, Carlton Ward (2008) contends that documentary photography forms a window to social issues, promotes awareness, and can influence positive changes. This form of

photojournalism can help to bridge the knowledge gap between scientific communities and the public (Ward, 2008).

The International League of Conservation Photographers (iLCP) is a non-profit organization at the forefront of identifying and uniting efforts of Conservation Photographers world-wide. The group strives to “support environmental and cultural conservation through ethical photography and filmmaking” (iLCP, 2020a). The iLCP accomplishes this through mentoring and sharing educational documentaries aimed at artists and photographers while advocating for sustainable practices in the creation and distribution of visual media (iLCP, 2020a). In one of the organization’s educational videos entitled, “What is Conservation Photography?” iLCP fellow and photojournalist Chris Linder exclaims that making the visual content is only the first step in the creative process. He explains that the real responsibility and level of commitment comes after the fieldwork; how those images are then used to effect change being the critical piece (iLCP, 2020b). Another iLCP fellow, Jamie Rojo, adds that the role of a conservation photographer is to amplify the efforts of the conservation communities through storytelling and documenting all sides of an issue (iLCP, 2020b).

With social media, artists and organizations can control their distribution of messaging in the promotion of conservation education and action. One form of visual media employed by conservation photographers is the use of the social media platform Instagram. According to Wang et al. (2020), Instagram has established itself among other top platforms for amateur and professional photographers to share their work. The account holder can post about conservation research, monitoring, education, outreach, or other causes, made relatable to the audience through eye-catching pictures and videos. Through these posts, the artist’s or organization’s followers can engage with the content and establish a discussion (Waters et al., 2009). Additionally, social media provides insights into the public perception of wildlife issues. These web-based platforms can be used as a substitute for traditional methods of gaining information such as surveys or polls (Sullivan Robinson & Littnan, 2019).

The use of Instagram to advocate for conservation issues is a relatively new practice and a literature review reveals a general lack of study in regards to best practices to maximize engagement with social media posts specifically under the conservation photography umbrella.

Key Elements of Conservation Photography Instagram Posts

There also lacks robust research and information about Instagram and its relationship to the field of conservation biology and management (Baksh, 2019). This Inquiry Action Plan (IAP) includes original research that focuses on identifying the key elements of conservation photography posts on Instagram by established professionals in the field. The investigation also seeks to identify different strategies that can be best employed in creating social media posts that engage and facilitate learning, discussion, and action around conservation issues.

F. Similarly, four key elements of visualizing biodiversity defined by Seppänen & Välvirronen (2003) included: 1) summarizing a complex scientific problem 2) constructing social relationships 3) providing opportunities for affective involvement, and 4) depicting “reality”.

In an iLCP video entitled “Conservation Photography and Science”, Chris Linder comments that interdisciplinary collaborations among photographers, scientists, and resource managers is a key element to the field of Conservation Photography. His goal is to help communicate conservation projects to the public at large through being a “science translator”, by which he means sharing images in a way that makes information more broadly accessible to ordinary people (iLCP, 2020c). Carleton Watkins and William Henry Jackson were among the earliest conservation photographers, whose work promoting natural spaces for conservation was often a collaborative effort among explorers, scientists, and politicians (Ward, 2008). Their images presented to Congress resulted in long-lasting legal protection of millions of acres of wilderness and led to the creation of the first National Park, Yellowstone (Ward, 2008).

For policy change to occur, public support is essential; social media is a way to call for action (Wu et al., 2018). An investigation of student impressions of conservation photographs by Masters candidate at Montreat College, Alexandra Morrison, suggested that participants in her study demonstrated a desire to engage in environmental action after being exposed to the images (Morrison, 2018). Jennifer Adler is a photojournalist known for her work bringing awareness to the conserving and protecting the freshwater springs and aquifers of Florida. Key elements of conservation photography according to Adler are 1) depicting places or scenes that need conservation action in a way that is beautiful, 2) demonstrating through imagery what is at stake;

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what could happen to these places/organisms in danger, and 3) creating a desire in people to take action towards saving environments (Walker, 2019).

Comparative Question: *Is there a significant relationship between frequency of use of three key elements of conservation photographers' posts to Instagram and the number of followers of their accounts?*

Methods:

In this investigation, social media Instagram posts of established conservation photographers' accounts were compared. To be considered an "established" conservation photographer, their names were required to be listed under "senior fellows" by the International League of Conservation Photographers (ILCP) on their [website](#). Fifteen unique artists were compared, surveying ten of each of their posts on Instagram (sample size of $n = 150$ posts). Posts were selected starting on a set date of September 30, 2020. The most recent post on or before the set date was surveyed, working back in time consecutively until ten posts were surveyed for each artist/account. This helped eliminate selection bias from the choosing process.

Based on the review of the literature above, this IAP investigation surveyed for three common elements as identified in existing peer-reviewed studies and by established professionals in the field (**Table 1**). The fifteen Instagram accounts and their posts were surveyed against the following questions; does the social media post: 1) Identify a threat to biodiversity? (**Image 1, Appendix**) 2) Demonstrate interdisciplinary collaboration? (**Image 2, Appendix**) 3) Elicit a call to action? (**Image 3, Appendix**).

Table 1: Three Metrics of Conservation Photography in Instagram Posts

Key element	What is found in the post
Identifies a threat to biodiversity	Describes a hazard or risk that an organism or ecosystem is exposed

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Demonstrates interdisciplinary collaboration	Demonstration that the photographer is working with a partner(s) representative of another discipline
Elicits a call to action	Engages the viewer by listing an actionable step(s) that can be taken to support a conservation cause

Description of Table 1: The three key elements represented in the left column were counted in the data collection phase if they meet the criteria described in the right hand column.

The prevalence of the three key elements (independent variables) were compared among photographers using the number of followers (dependent variable) as a metric. The number of followers has been used as a way to measure the reach and impact of Social Media Influencers (SMIs) in other peer-reviewed studies (Peters et al., 2013). To determine whether there was a correlation between the number of followers and the frequency of use of the three key elements, multiple linear regression statistical tests were used in Google Sheets. The XL Miner Analysis ToolPak was used to perform the analyses. Four separate linear regressions were performed to determine whether the number of followers was correlated with each of the three key elements. The P-value generated by the regression analysis was used to test the hypotheses. There were four questions tested in this investigation: 1) Is the percent of posts that identify a threat to biodiversity related to the number of followers? 2) Is the percent of posts that demonstrate an interdisciplinary collaboration related to the number of followers? 3) Is the percent of posts that use any of the three key elements related to the number of followers? and 4) Is the percent of posts that use *any* of the three key elements related to the number of followers?

The presence of each of the common elements in a post was determined by a yes/no answer. For the sake of data analysis, answers of yes were recorded as a numerical digit, 1; answers of no were recorded as a numerical digit, 0. A Google Sheets [spreadsheet](#) was used to keep track of the frequency of common elements found in each senior fellow's social media posts. As posts were surveyed, when other common or repeated elements were present, they were recorded and described as well.

Results:

All three key elements appeared in the posts sampled, although the frequency to which they appeared in posts varied among photographers as well as in-between elemental categories. Twenty three percent (34 out of 150) of the posts surveyed identified a threat to biodiversity, thirty nine percent of the posts (58 out of 150) surveyed demonstrated an interdisciplinary collaboration on a photography project and twenty three percent (34 out of 150) of the posts surveyed elicited a call to action (**Chart 1**). When looking at how the elements were used in combinations with each other; forty six percent of the posts (69 out of 150) contained none of the three key elements, thirty percent of the posts (45 out of 150) contained one, nineteen percent (29 out of 150) contained two, and only five percent of posts (7 out of 150) had all three elements present in a single post (**Chart 2**). The regression analysis for the question, “Is the percent of posts that identify a threat to biodiversity related to the number of followers?”, produced a P-value of 0.1789. Therefore, the number of followers was not a predictor of the use of this key element. The regression for the question “Is the percent of posts that demonstrate an interdisciplinary collaboration related to the number of followers?”, resulted in a P-value of 0.2626. Consequently, the number of followers was also not a predictor of the use of this key element. A regression analysis for the question, “Is the percent of posts that elicit a call to action related to the number of followers?”, generated a P-value of 0.9287. Once again, the number of followers was not a predictor of the use of this key element. Finally, regression for the question “Is the percent of posts that use any of the three key elements related to the number of followers?”, resulted in a P-value of 0.2068. The “Variable 1” P-values were all greater than 0.05, suggesting that number of followers is not an accurate predictor for frequency of use of these three key elements because there were no linear relationships discovered (**Table 2**).

Chart 1: Comparing the frequencies of 3 Key Elements

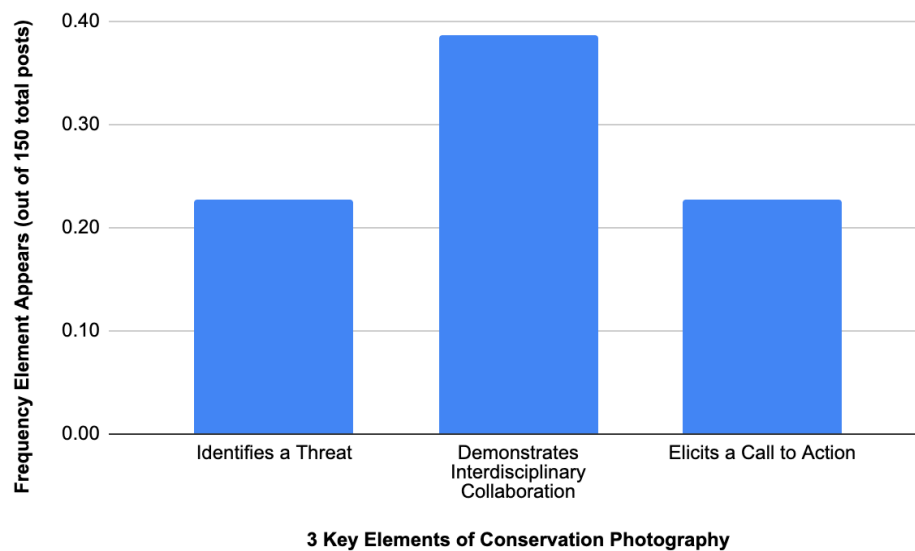


Chart 1 Description: Identifying a threat as well as eliciting a call to action both produced the same frequency, 23% (34 out of 150). Demonstrating interdisciplinary collaboration was slightly more frequent, at 39% (58 out of 150).

Chart 2: Distribution of Three Key Elements Represented

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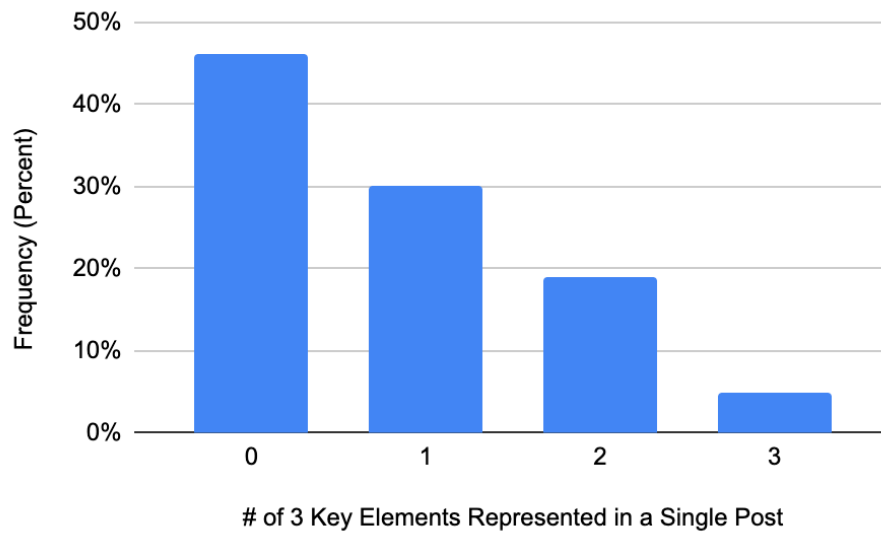


Chart 2 Description: Almost half (46%) of the total Instagram posts surveyed contained none of the 3 key elements of Conservation Photography. 30% of the posts contained only one of the key elements by itself. 19% of the posts contained two of the elements, appearing together. 5% of the posts contained all three of the elements in a single post.

Table 3: Interpreting P-Values from Multiple Linear Regressions

Question	P-Value	P-Value is < or > 0.05?	Is there a significant relationship? (Yes/No)
Is the percent of posts that identify a threat to biodiversity related to the number of followers?	0.1789	>	No
Is the percent of posts that demonstrate an interdisciplinary collaboration related to the number of followers?	0.2626	>	No

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Is the percent of posts that elicit a call to action related to the number of followers?	0.9287	>	No
Is the percent of posts that use any of the three key elements related to the number of followers	0.2068	>	No

Table 3 Description: The percentage of posts that include three independent variables are compared against the number of followers. All P-values were all greater than 0.05, suggesting that no significant correlation exists.

Discussion:

It is encouraging that the three key elements from the literature review appeared in conservation photographer's posts on Instagram. I did not have a prediction as to how frequent the strategies would appear in posts, but certainly did not expect every post to have one or more of the elements. The findings of no significant relationships with the number of followers may show that conservation photographers use similar strategies regardless of their Social Media Influencer status. Perhaps the number of followers is a less important metric when considering a conservation photographer's social impact. A recent investigation by Gräve (2019) used a regression analysis to test the validity of quantitative success metrics (eg., number of followers, number of likes) to evaluate the impact of SMIs. The study suggested that number of followers and number of likes did not positively correlate with professional content evaluations. Gräve (2019) did find however that "net sentiment" did correlate positively with professional evaluations of SMI's. Net sentiment was defined as the difference between the number of

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positive comments and the number of negative comments of a post (Gräve, 2019). Therefore, using net sentiment instead of number of followers to compare against the frequency of use of the three key elements of conservation photography may be a useful analysis in future studies.

An additional observation made was that some accounts had a series of consecutive posts where the text content was very similar; almost an exact copy of the caption was presented in multiple instances, except for a different accompanying image. For example, conservation photographer Jasper Doest had five out of ten sampled posts which contained very similar captions to describe a project he was working on to spread awareness for window collisions with birds. It seemed like some of the photographers had a pattern to their image captions--almost like a copy and paste formula of sorts; with similar caption format, structure, and use of the same hashtags, callouts, and links.

Besides the three key elements, there were other common elements that became apparent as well. The other common elements found in conservation photographers' social media posts to Instagram were described as, "behind the scenes", "animal portrait" and "landscape portrait" (**Table 3**). By recording the dates at which posts were shared to the accounts, I was also able to determine average post frequency. Based on dates and correcting for one outlier in the data, the fifteen accounts posted approximately once every 4 days. The outlier in the data was the account of Karen Kasmauski, who was inactive for a long period of time between posts within the ten posts surveyed; which resulted in an inflated average of 65 days between posts for that account. Since the mean date between posts was inflated, the median of 4.22 days was used instead of the mean, 8.07 days (**Chart 3**).

Table 3: Other Common Elements Represented

Other Common Elements	Description
Behind the Scenes	The post offers a behind-the-scenes look into the creation of an image or project and/or offers a glimpse into the personal life of the photographer (self-portrait, an image of camera setup, portrait of project collaborator, etc).

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Animal Portrait	An animal is the main subject of the post.
Landscape Portrait	A landscape or natural scene is the main subject of the post.

Table 2 Description: As data on the 3 key elements were collected, other common elements were also identified. In the left-hand column is a phrase used to describe the element. On the right-hand side is a description of the use of the element in the post.

Chart 3: Days between conservation photographers' posts

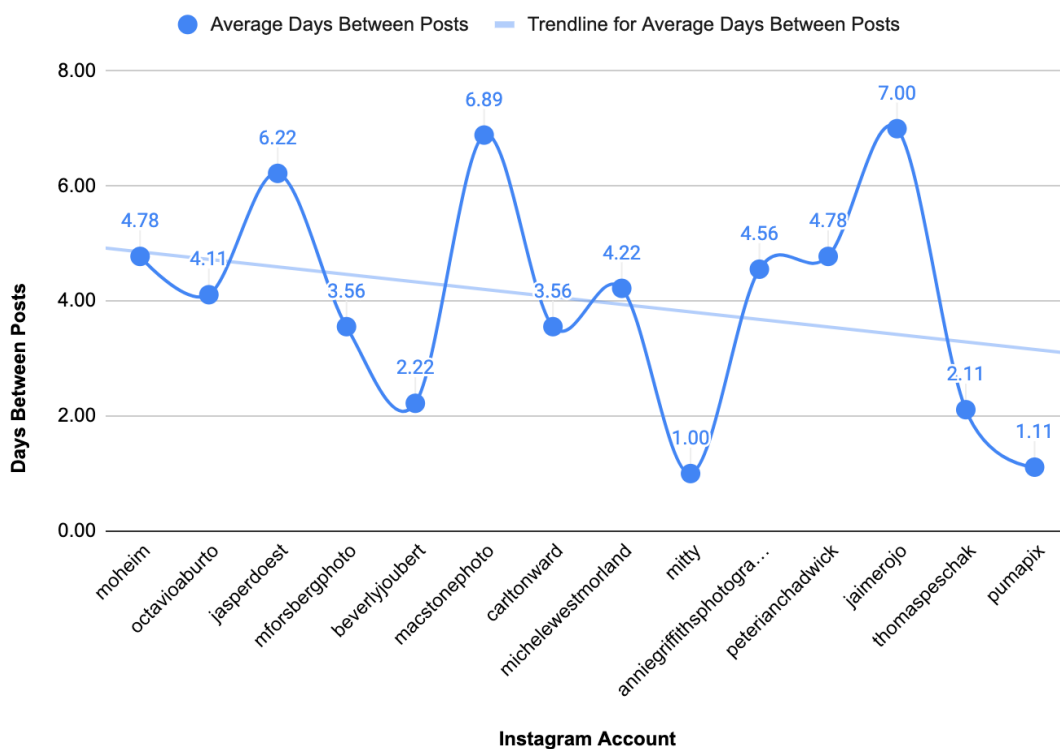


Chart 3 Description: This chart shows how frequently conservation photographers post to Instagram on average. The median of days between posts was 4.22. This chart does not include the outlier in the data by the account @karencayphoto.

Studies of the successful design of a social media post that maximize engagement are limited, especially in regards to the field of conservation photography. Bakhshi et al. (2014) measured engagement by comparing the number of likes, which signals for the extent to which users find content interesting and comments on posts, which quantifies the level of conversation on the post's topic. Posts on Instagram that contain *human faces* in the images have also been suggested to receive more engagement than those that did not (Bakhshi et al., 2014). A future investigation of conservation photography posts could investigate; does the presence of human faces add to engagement? What about human faces compared to animal portraits or natural scenes as the main subject? Another interesting observation made during this IAP was that posts seemed to vary widely in their text length; it would be interesting to compare the word count of posts and see if they correlate with engagement (likes, comments). If a post is too long, it may discourage visitors from reading the entire post or engaging with the content (Herman, 2019). Furthermore, posts varied in their use of multimedia (a combination of images and video) and multiple images as a series in a post. It would be interesting to compare the frequencies of these strategies and see if there is a significant relationship with engagement.

Further expansion upon the insights from this investigation may include a future study experimenting with several different forms of social media posts employing the key and common elements of conservation photographers' posts (insights from surveying iLCP conservation photographers posts in this phase). As an emerging conservation photographer, I have been managing an account named, [@ryan.pennesi.photography](#), since 2016 and have amassed an audience of 3,470 followers. In a future investigation, I plan to compare the performance of different posts through the level of engagement, by releasing one post a day for a set number of days. In order to avoid bias, Bakhshi et al (2014) needed to control for social network reach and activity. The study used two control variables to adjust for reach--the user's followers count and for user activity--the user's photo count (Bakhshi et al., 2014). The "Reach" of a post is a

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viewable statistic of how many people actually saw the post, regardless of whether they interacted with the material. With each post, only a fraction of an account's followers may actually see it. Furthermore, there is a possibility that Instagram users other than followers saw the post. Therefore, determining the reach to likes ratio, reach to comments ratio, reach to saves ratio, and reach to shares ratio will be how to control for the fact that different posts will be seen by a different audience.

Action Component:

Based on the results of this original research, I have been able to develop a list of insights for conservation photographers. As an emerging conservation photographer, early on I struggled to find best practices in designing my own Instagram account around conservation issues. The content that I originally posted to Instagram relied heavily on trial and error as well as mirroring techniques that I noticed, employed by prominent conservation photographers. These key elements and frequencies analyzed have been compiled into an infographic guide (**Image 4, Appendix**) that is both informative and practical. This guide will help current conservation photographers as well as interested individuals emerging in the field. From how often to post to Instagram to a description of the three key elements defined in this research and how to implement them. This information will be shared by posting the infographic to my own Instagram account as a series using the stories feature as well as to my professional website. Comments are enabled on both sharing methods and I intend to encourage a dialogue with folks that choose to engage with the material. Furthermore, the insights from this IAP will be adapted in a PowerPoint virtual presentation to deliver to aspiring conservation photographers. The social outcomes are to form a conversation surrounding the importance of utilization of the three key elements of conservation photography: 1) Identifying a threat to biodiversity 2) Demonstrating interdisciplinary collaboration and 3) Eliciting a call to action. I anticipate the educational benefits of this Action component mostly to be gained by emerging conservation photographers, whom it will aid in their creation of content on social media and beyond.

Conclusion:

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Results from this study are initial steps in building some foundational guidelines for conservation photographers so they may more effectively and efficiently deliver messages around conservation issues. The hope of this study is that it aids other artists, organizations, emerging professionals, and even amateurs who are interested in the field to build upon this work. According to Krista Schlyer, iLCP fellow, “anyone can be a Conservation Photographer”; all one needs is a desire to use their images to be an advocate for the natural world (iLCP, 2020d). The aspiration of this IAP is to create a research framework that will increase the efficiency and effectiveness of social media posts focused on conservation education. Analyses from this investigation suggest that conservation photographers use these key elements as strategies in their posts, regardless of their audience size. It may be true that conservation outreach has a greater potential for change if it reaches more people, but we all have to start somewhere. All of the established conservation photographers sampled in this study used some combination of the strategies described, which provides evidence that these are important to consider in spreading conservation messages.

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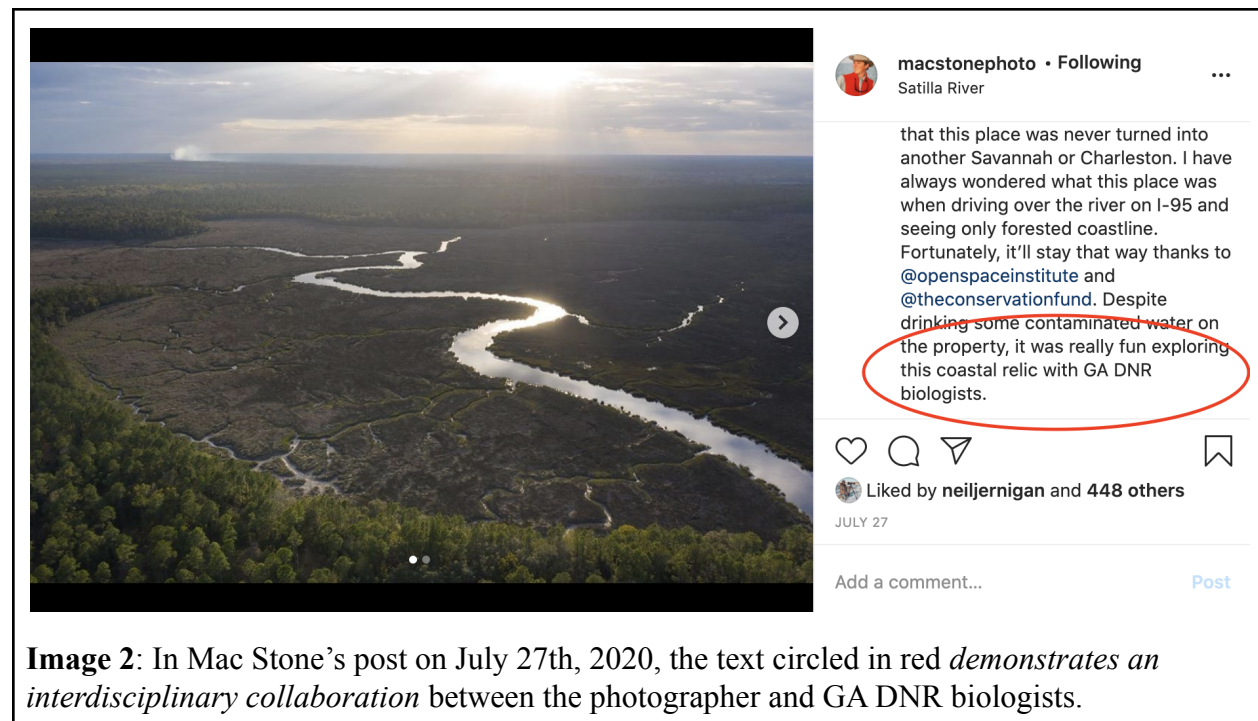
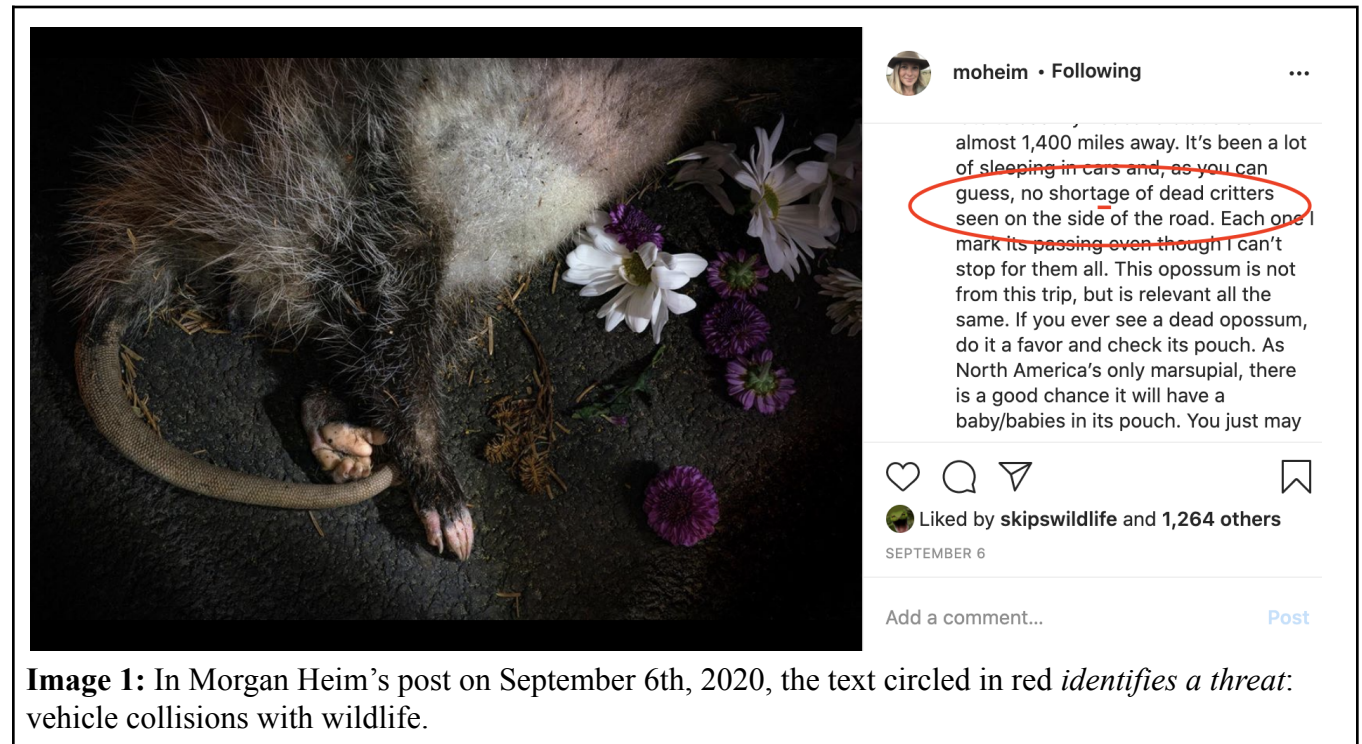
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Appendix:



Key Elements of Conservation Photography Instagram Posts



Image 4: Infographic for the Action Component:

CONSERVATION PHOTOGRAPHY

A guide to Social Media Posts to Instagram



WHY INSTAGRAM?

Instagram has established itself among other top platforms for amateur and professional photographers to share their work. The account holder can post about conservation research, monitoring, education, outreach, or other causes, made relatable to the audience through eye-catching pictures and videos [5].

Conservation Photography effectively combines the two distinct fields of art and science into a form of photojournalism; storytelling using imagery [6]. Based on peer-reviewed literature, 3 key elements of conservation photography have emerged.

3 KEY ELEMENTS




IDENTIFIES A THREAT TO BIODIVERSITY







DEMONSTRATES INTERDISCIPLINARY COLLABORATION

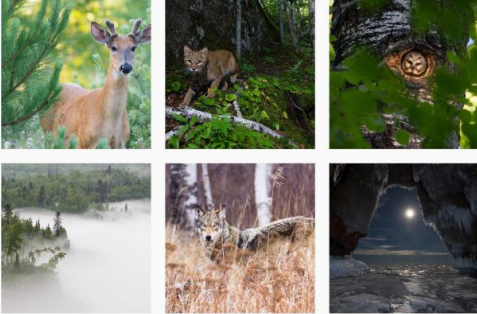
Key Elements of Conservation Photography Instagram Posts



ELICITS A CALL TO ACTION



www.conservationalphotographers.org

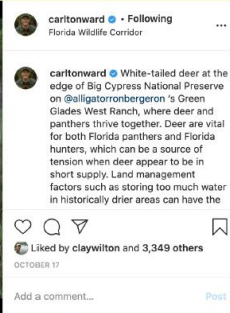




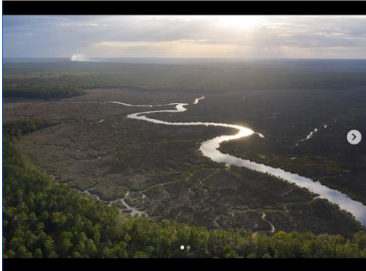
Other Common Post Content

Below are other elements of conservation photography posts to consider...

Animal Portrait

The photographer depicts White-tailed deer at the Big Cypress National Preserve and highlights this species' importance to ecosystem health.





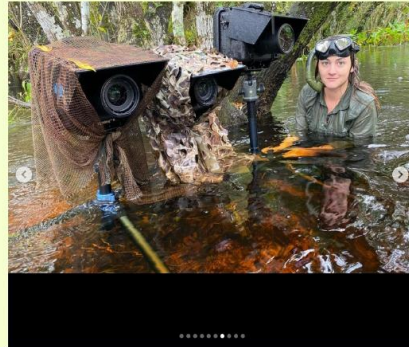
Landscape Portrait

Here the photographer depicts a landscape-level shot of an ecosystem to highlight the importance of coastal ecosystems.

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Behind the Scenes

The photographer shows a glimpse of the camera trap used to monitor wildlife using a motion sensor. Also shown is a project collaborator/colleague.



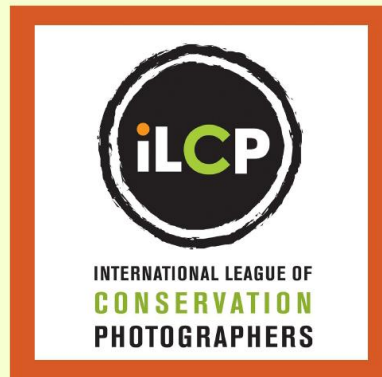
HOW OFTEN TO POST?



On average, professional conservation photographers post once every 4 days to Instagram. It may not be advantageous to overwhelm followers with content. Save your very best images for sharing and craft posts in a thoughtful and strategic manner.

LEARN MORE...

To learn more about the field of conservation photography, check out the International League of Conservation Photographers (iLCP). If you are interested in joining, there is an application process to become an iLCP fellow.



www.conservationphotographers.org

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