VISUAL VALUES
2017 Nonprofit Photo Use Survey
A Blue Earth Alliance Report
Survey and report prepared for Blue Earth Alliance by
Tim Greyhavens | May 2017

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Row 4, L to R: Eberhard Riedel, Daniel Beltra, Greg Constantine, Mustafah Abdulaziz, David Moskowitz
Row 5, L to R: Paul Colangelo, Jake Naughton, Leonardo Mercon, Greg Kahn, Michael Hanson
Row 6, L to R: Leonardo Mercon, Tom Reese, Eberhard Riedel, Daniel Beltra, Richard Street
Blue Earth Alliance believes documentary photography can inspire positive change. We support visual storytelling on critical environmental and social issues through direct assistance to photographers and filmmakers and by fostering a collaborative community of professionals.

Our sponsored projects have been at the forefront of issues affecting contemporary society and the environment: climate change, wildlife preservation, threats to ancient and emerging cultures, social injustices, and healing the wounds of war-torn societies, are just a few representative projects.

Our project photographers and filmmakers help educate the public by raising awareness that encourages support and understanding and, in some cases, contributing directly to charitable causes.

Our project support includes:
- Nonprofit fiscal sponsorship for fundraising
- Marketing consultation
- Mentorship
- Technical resources like Shooting from the Heart, a Blue Earth Alliance-published instructional book for personal projects
- Collaborations for Cause, our annual conference designed to educate and inspire our project photographers/filmmakers and other professionals in the nonprofit, academic, communications, and agency fields
- Quarterly meetups in Seattle to help foster relationships among individuals, companies, and nonprofits

Since 1995 Blue Earth Alliance has sponsored more than 140 projects and helped them raise over a million dollars. Projects have been published as books, exhibits, as full-length films, and on websites. Some have been adapted into school curriculum and government programs.

Blue Earth Alliance believes in the strength of the individual. We know the power that happens when individuals band together. Our goal is simple: we want to help change the world.

For more about Blue Earth Alliance and what we do, please check out our online resources:

blueearth.org  @BlueEarthPhoto  @BlueEarthPhoto  blueearthphoto

Blue Earth Alliance | 4557 51st Pl SW | Seattle, WA 98116 USA | 206.569.8754
about the survey

Our purpose was to collect data that would help us better understand the challenges and opportunities facing organizations that depend upon current, compelling images to tell their stories.

Many organizations that advance environmental and social progress are challenged by the demands of acquiring, publishing, and cataloging compelling images to help tell their stories. These burdens place significant costs, both direct and indirect, on the organizations in terms of staff time and on the organizations’ abilities to respond quickly and effectively.

In an effort to help organizations find solutions to these problems, in March of this year Blue Earth Alliance launched an online survey of these organizations. We sent survey invitations to a list of 400 staff members at 350 organizations. The majority of these staff positions were communications directors/managers/coordinators. If a group did not have a communications staff member, the invitation went to the executive director. If there was more than one person involved in communications, the invitation went to the top two positions in the communications department.

Because of Blue Earth’s focus on environmental and social progress issues, the survey responses are heavily weighted by organizations that work in these areas. We received 102 responses to the survey invitation, or slightly more than a 25% return. This is the predicted average return or a cross-sectional survey such as this.

Because of the issue biases in the responses and the relatively small sample size, the survey results should not be viewed as applicable to all nonprofits. These responses provide a snapshot of some of the issues that affect many organizations with similar interests as Blue Earth, and, as such, they provide useful insights into the challenges and opportunities of the working relationships between certain nonprofits and photographers.
key findings

The number and quality of photos used by organizations varies with the size and budget of the group. Larger organizations use more photos, and they are more likely to work with professional-level photographers.

Facebook is the most common platform where organizations post photos, followed closely by the organization’s website. About one-third of the groups we surveyed also post photos on Instagram and in digital newsletters.

Overwhelmingly, organizations look for images that illustrate an important aspect of a key issue. Images also must be highly appealing, technically strong and easy-to-find.

Photos from staff and volunteers are the biggest source of new images for almost all organizations. The next most common sources were donated photographs from professional-level photographers, photos from Flickr, and photos from government agencies.

Organizations most commonly use images selected by their communications staff, followed by policy/advocacy staff, the executive director, and social/digital media staff. Most people in these positions have some training in communications or journalism, but only a small number have degrees in these areas.

Nearly three-quarters of the respondents have worked with professional-level photographers, and most of the photographers approached the organization directly. Those that have not worked with a photographer felt it was too expensive to do so.

The single biggest obstacle to finding better professional-quality photos is a lack of staff time. A smaller segment felt that higher-quality images cost are too expensive for their organization’s budget.

A majority of organizations don’t have problems finding the images they want in the own files, but many respondents felt they did not have enough training in the most efficient ways to manage digital assets.
1. How many photographs do you estimate your organization uses each year? (n=102)

Responses to this question followed a predictable pattern, with larger organizations using more photos and smaller ones using less. There was no discernable correlation between the issues that an organization focused on and the number of photos that the organization used.

This finding indicates a clear recognition by organization of the importance of photography in conveying their messages. On average, most organizations were using 7-15 new images each week.
2. On which platforms do you use the most photographs? (n=102)

With its ease of updating and its ability to immediately connect with people around the world, Facebook is the first choice of communication platforms used by organizations of all sizes. Most organizations heavily also rely upon their website for posting new images, although smaller organizations tend to rely upon their website less frequently. The larger organizations (those with revenues of $1 million or more) also use Instagram, but at this point it has not been widely adopted by a broader range of organizations.
3. What are the primary considerations when deciding if a photograph is “good enough” to use? (n=102)

Not surprisingly, organizations look first for images that show the issues that are important to their work. Images must also be highly appealing and have high technical quality.
Overall, organizations of all sizes have little difficulty in finding and publishing the kinds of photos they need. Smaller organizations have more trouble finding the right images when they look online (the first sub-question), but once they have an image they do not have problems utilizing it in their publications. The responses indicate a high degree of satisfaction in using the software needed to prepare a photo for publication, which may be due in part to the higher technical quality of photos being produced today by all types of cameras.
5. What sources do you use on a regular basis for acquiring new images?

(n=102)

Organizations rely heavily on staff and volunteers for many of the photos they use. This is most likely due to the combination of staff and volunteers being in the right places to document activities that are most relevant to the organization, to the higher quality of images produced by today’s phones and simple cameras, and to the need by organizations to keep costs as low as possible. It’s interesting to note that organizations of all sizes make use of photos donated by professional-level photographers, whereas few organizations have paid for images from photographers. Photographs from Flickr and from U.S. government agencies are frequently used as well.
6. What staff positions at your organization typically select the photographs that you use? (n=102)

Most organizations with more than a few staff allow different staff positions to select the images they publish. Communications staff are the most frequent decision-makers, followed by policy or advocacy staff. In smaller organizations this task commonly falls to the executive director. As organizations have become more sophisticated, some have created positions to specifically handle social media or community engagement programs.
7. Does/Do the person(s) responsible for selecting images for your organization have any specialized training? (n=102)

Organizations have recognized the importance of having proper training for the staff who are involved in communications, but only the largest organizations are employing people with specific degrees in communications or journalism. While a majority of respondents have taken some classes or workshops in communications/journalism/photography, many respondents also reported that they would like additional training in organizing and maintaining their organization’s image file system (Questions 12 and 13).
8. Has your organization worked with professional or semi-professional photographers to create and/or obtain new photographs? (n=102)

Yes | 75
No | 28

This data is consistent with responses to Question #5, where more than half of the respondents reported that they use images directly donated by professional-level photographers.
8a. How do you usually begin to work with photographers?  (n=74)

- They approach us about using photos they already have
- They are referred by someone else
- We approach them about using photos they already have
- They approach us about creating new photos for our organization
- We approach them about creating new photos for our organization
- They have participated in a photo or calendar contest we held
- Other

One of the benefits of running a mission-driven nonprofit organization is that the work attracts volunteers with a wide range of expertise who believe in the same mission. Many photographers, especially those who are advanced amateurs or who are just starting a professional career, are eager to gain exposure by placing their work in front of larger audiences. Donating images to a cause they believe in is seen as beneficial to both the organization and the photographer.
8b. Is there a reason that you don’t work with a photographer?  (n=26)

While the majority of respondents indicated they have worked with professional-level photographers, some of the smaller organizations felt that doing so would be too expensive or too-labor intensive.
9. Under what circumstances would you decide to pay a photographer to work with your organization?  (n=102)

- If we received a grant or other dedicated funding for it
- If we need specific photos that aren't readily available
- If we shared the costs with other organizations as part of a collaborative campaign
- If she or he donated photographs for other projects
- Other
- If the photographer's name would add prestige to a project
- If an author or writer requested to work with a specific photographer

Cost was a major factor in an organization’s decision about working with a photographer. While this response is consistent with answers to Question #5 indicating that most organizations use images from staff and volunteers, it should be noted that many organizations appear to be willing to spend money for specific photos that are not readily available. However, other responses indicate that most organizations feel they are able to access a wide variety of images that meet their needs and therefore do not see a compelling need to buy additional photos.
10. Has your organization ever applied for a grant to support a campaign or other collaborative effort with one or more photographers? (n=102)

- Yes / 70
- No / 18
- Don’t know / 14

Respondents appear to differentiate between spending funds specifically for photographs vs. including photography as part of a campaign or project. It’s significant that nearly three-quarters of the groups that responded have applied for grant funding that including the participation of photographers. However, these responses do not indicate if the photographers who are involved are part of the organization’s staff/volunteers or if they are independent photographers.
10a. Was the grant awarded? (n=18)

There is a major inconsistency between the number of responses to this question (18) compared with the number of respondents who said they had applied for a grant (70 “yes” answers to Question #10). Additional research is needed to determine if there was some confusion about the two questions, or if some respondents skipped answering this particular question. The large positive response rate for this question also needs to be further explored.
10b. How satisfied were you with the process of working with a paid photographer? (n=14)

Those respondents who have worked with a paid photographers viewed the process as highly positive.
11. **What are the biggest obstacles to finding professional-quality images that meet your organization's needs?**  
(n=102)

- I don't have time to search for better images
- Great images cost too much
- We're good. We don't have any big obstacles to finding the images we want
- Don't know where to find the images I want
- Too many great images to choose from
- Other
- Not enough great images to choose from

Limited staff time is seen as a major factor for most organizations, although the responses to the next two questions provide some additional insights into that factor.
12. What are the biggest obstacles to managing your organization's image files? (n=102)

- No training on properly managing them
- Too many images to accurately tag and label
- No standardized filing or tagging system
- It takes too long to label and tag each image
- We're good. Our file management systems works for us.
- No one has complete responsibility for managing the files
- Other
- Files are spread over different computers
- Each staff person keeps their own set of files

While responses to the previous question indicated that limited staff time was a big factor in being able to find the right images, this data indicates that a large majority of organizations may not be using their file management systems efficiently. Many organizations are hampered by a lack of training, a standardized filing system, and by the volume of images that they have to manage.
13. What would make managing image files easier for your organization? (n=102)

While a large majority of organizations indicate that they need more staff time to manage their image files, responses to the previous question indicate that additional training and a more effective file management system may relieve some of the staff’s burdens in this area.
14. What are your organization's issue interests (i.e. what is your mission about?)?  (n=102)

Respondents could pick up to three issues. The “other” category includes responses of where fewer than 3 of the same issue was selected. Some examples in this category include, but are not limited to, animal welfare, democracy, economics, military power, native and aboriginal rights, transportation, war, and women’s rights.
15. What is your organization's overall budget this year? (n=102)

This bell curve of budget ranges indicates that the survey respondents reflect a reliable cross-section of organizational sizes, with most organizations falling into the $500,000 to $2.5 million budget range.
Nearly half of the respondents’ organizations have program budgets for communications. Larger organizations are more likely to have specific budgets for this program function.
16a. If yes, what is the current communications budget amount? (n=58)

The communications budget ranges fall roughly into the same patterns as the larger organizations’ overall budgets (Question #15).
17. Does your organization have a specific budget for buying or licensing photographs? (n=102)

Only the largest organizations that have specific budgets for buying or licensing photographs. Responses to previous questions indicate that a large majority of organizations acquire photos from staff, volunteers, and through donations.
17a. If yes, what is the current budget for photography?  (n=6)

Those organizations that have a budget for buying or licensing photos have relatively modest amounts allocated for this purpose. These amounts reflect the current lower costs of stock photos and the increased ability to license photos for specific uses (web-only, print-only, etc.)
18. Please offer any other thoughts or feedback on this subject. (n=8)

I'd be very interested in learning more about cost-effective ways of acquiring high-quality, relevant photos from professional photographers.

I have worked here over 5 years and in that time we have never paid for a photo.

We SHOULD be paying attention to all of the issues you raise, but we are a very small organization... coordinated by only two or three people. So, we don't have the people or expertise...even though we have the photographs and video clips!

We are looking for grant opportunities convert our extensive slide photo library over to the digital world.

Hope I win $100!

Thanks for doing this

Looking forward to seeing the report

Hiring professional photographers is the best way to get high quality images that tell the story we want and also builds relationships for future work.
The responses to this survey indicate an increasing sophistication in how some nonprofits are using photographs to tell their stories. Organizations understand and value the importance of compelling images to convey their messages, and they especially use them on social media to reach both broad and targeted audiences.

At the same time, most organizations are caught in the struggle to keep up with the massive numbers of photographs that are now being produced. The numbers are indeed staggering: It’s estimated that a trillion new photographs are now created worldwide each year, and leading online photo platform Instagram recently announced it now has 700 million followers, with 100 million of those having joined in the past four months.

It was not that long ago that organizations that wanted to feature high-quality images had to work with professional-level photographers to get the images they needed. With the greatly increased quality of images from smaller cameras and smart phones, the market place has become flooded with outstanding images that people were happy to donate to the causes they believe in.

Now one of the major challenges that organizations face is how to find the very, very best images from tens of thousands of very best images. It’s not just a matter of keeping up with the huge inflow of images, it’s about finding and training staff to have a visual intelligence that keeps pace with today’s media and consumer markets. Visual intelligence is not simply having the technical know-how to select and publish great images; it’s about understanding how the photographs you use can most effectively cut through the visual clutter that is an inescapable part of our lives.

The photographers who work with Blue Earth Alliance are not only specially trained to bring back gripping images, they know what it takes to command a viewer’s attention through a visual story. These photographers, and many more like them who work around the world, are critically important communicators because they have the knowledge, skills and experience to tell stories that leap off the screen or the page.

Blue Earth Alliance is committed to helping photographers and organizations collaborate to inspire positive change. We will use the data from this survey as part of our engagement in critical dialogues about new ways for photographers and organizations to work together.

If you’d like to be part of these future dialogues, please let us know at contact@blueearth.org
I would like to express my appreciation to the Board of Directors of Blue Earth Alliance, who allowed me to conduct this survey on behalf of the organization. I also want to acknowledge the assistance of three people who helped me think about the design and implementation of this survey: Liz Banse, Vice President at Resource Media; Dean Ericksen of Ericksen Initiatives; and especially Natalie Fobes, multi-talented photographer and co-founder of Blue Earth Alliance. Without their insights and guidance this survey would not have happened.

Tim Greyhavens
awelldefinedstart.com