
Environmental Problems in the Lens of Daniel Beltrá

David Attenborough describes the human population as “a multiplier of all other environmental problems” (People and Planet, 2011). As our population grows so does the impact we have on the planet, with an increase of about 4 billion of the entire world population in the last 67 years’ humans now have a massive impact on the environment.

In the form of agricultural practices like overfishing and land loss for farming, the energy industry depleting natural resources and the effect of climate change as a result coupled with the risks of oil spills and other disasters surrounding ways of exploiting energy sources. Light pollution, other than being an eye sore is to blame for the change in predator prey interactions disrupting food chains. Our vast transport links and sprawling cities destroy habitats and tear up huge amounts of space. This is just an overview on some main human impacts which go far deeper.

Alongside the large range of human issues there is a large range of photographers who either directly or indirectly expose this human impact on the environment in different ways. Daniel Beltrá directly photographs the human impact sometimes working for Greenpeace. Edward Burtynsky photographs the balance between humans and the environment demonstrating how in some situations one can overtake the other. Nadav Kander explores the urbanisation of nature in one of his most famous series Yangtze - The long river. Like Burtynsky, Joel Sternfield also demonstrates the balance between urban and nature in New York, nature taking back control. Mitch Epstein examines how energy influences American lives. (Epstein, No date)

The Deepwater Horizon oil spill which occurred in 2010 is considered the largest marine oil spill in the history of the petroleum industry after 4.9 million barrels were polluted into the Gulf of Mexico. It killed 11 people and had devastating effects on the marine system for example, prior to the spill 0.1% of fish found in the gulf had lesions or sores but, after the spill some areas contained 50% of fish with lesions and sores.

Daniel Beltrá is a photographer who makes work on the human impact on the environment and one of his most well-known series “Spill” is of the Deepwater horizon oil spill. Beltrá photographed the oil spill for 2 months using Aerial photography throughout this series to illustrate the sheer scale of the disaster, “this perspective gives the viewer a wider context to the beauty and destruction he witnesses, as well as revealing a delicate sense of scale” (Edelman, No date) this is evident especially in “Oil Spill #17”, the gigantic oil streak is offset by a boat which almost looks like a toy in the bath because of the abnormal colours in the image not usually present in the ocean and the large scale created due to how removed Beltrá is from the situation in a plane. The Oil streak acts a leading line drawing your eye from one corner of

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the image to the other, the boat in the image acts metaphorically as humans in the environment... disturbing the oil spill shown by the interrupted coherent lines the spill was initially forming, like humans have disturbed the ocean by causing the spill itself. It also acts as a leading line also as the viewer gazes to where the boat came from to where it's going.

The colours presented make the image look like a painting and makes me question whether Photoshop was involved but a quote from Beltrá himself disproves this "I shoot raw files and make adjustments to the contrast and saturation, nothing is added or subtracted from the original capture." (Hirsch, 2012) This creates a more eye opening image that the colours of such a disaster can be so vivid and draw you in, allowing for more awareness to be created about the human impact on the environment. One major drawback of the use of Aerial photography is that it makes fine detail of the human impact hard to achieve as he is so far away from the event.

Oil spill #20 addresses this issue and is the only photograph in the series which breaks the genre of Aerial Photography, the subjects are 8 Brown Pelicans covered in crude oil awaiting cleaning at the International Bird Rescue Research Center.

When I first saw the image it took me by surprise, firstly because of the condition the birds are in as a result of the oil spill and secondly, the way Beltrá breaks the series genre so abruptly it brings the series back down to a serious level moving away from the beauty in the disaster by portraying animals that have been directly harmed by the disaster, short scale instead of large scale. The image logically would be shot in landscape to ensure that all the birds fit in the frame however, Beltrá shot it in portrait. This works well because it creates a more huddled effect of the birds as they look for security magnifying the distress the birds would have been in at the time and also allows for the capturing of the cloth they are on, smothered in oil reflecting the true scale of how oily the situation is.

The "Spill" series has a pivotal role in the conservation movement and as and as to why is stated by Beltrá himself "What separates my work from many photo-journalists is that my photographs turned out to be quite beautiful. This has allowed me to put work in public places, such as galleries and aquariums, where they have a longer life and larger audiences." (Hirsch, 2012) Meaning ordinary people are more likely to engage in Beltrá's work who otherwise may not be interested in conservation.

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