

It's not so much where you shoot that's important, but what you bring to the image.

Yes, I confess, I did it. This was back when I was a student at Brooks Institute of Photography in the 1970s.

In my very first class, the instructor had us study many of the well-known photographers throughout the history of the medium, including David Muench. I quickly became a David Muench fan, and, in fact, he has been my hero since those early days. He is a groundbreaker, capturing countless never-before-seen locations in new and innovative ways as many of the early landscape photographers did.

So many times I wished I had entered the business when David Muench had. It must have been easier. If you documented the landscape where nobody spent much time, then every image would be a new, never-before-seen image. There were fewer photographers then and less competition.

In reality, I'm sure it was not that easy. Most likely, many of the battles would have been the same as they are today: working hard to build name recognition; finding clients; creating unique imagery; and building a successful business.

As a student at Brooks, I made my first trip to Death Valley with another student after I had seen a David Muench image of Lake Badwater. As a new student of photography, I wanted to emulate my hero.

A buddy and I arrived at Lake Badwater before the sunrise and I quickly started trying to figure out where David had photographed his iconic image. It didn't take long to locate the rock out there in the water. As I moved my 4 x 5 left and right

trying to get close to the same composition as David's picture, my buddy hollered, "Does it have to be exactly the same?" His comment went in one ear and out the other. Of course it had to be exactly the same or as close as I could get. I wanted my work to be as good as that of David Muench, and the best way to do that, I thought at the time, was to shoot like him. Of course, only the composition was close. You can never recreate the lighting of an image taken at a different time.

I placed my image of Lake Badwater in my growing stock photo files. Over the years, I wished I had entered the business when David Muench had. I could license it, thus validating that I was as good as David Muench. It never sold. Why? I don't know and often wondered. In my opinion, it is a good photo. Maybe the markets where I was sending my images had already seen David's image, published it, and had no use for my version. Maybe I had bad karma from attempting to copy another photographer's picture.

It is common for art and photography students to emulate the work of others. It's part of the learning process. We study how the masters use light and how it shapes the land, as well as how they compose the grand scenes before them. A few years after college, however, I learned that attempting to duplicate the work of other photographers may be good for learning but less so for business. (Still later, I learned that it is also illegal.)

If you look at today's markets and consider that there are many more working photographers now than there were in the 1970s, you cannot

help but wonder how much image emulation takes place. I've heard other photographers and workshop students discuss whether they've been to a certain location and "got the shot." It's that urge to photograph places that we see published and have never visited that drives much of our decision-making on where and what to shoot. It's not so much our desire to engage in smart business decisions or what we should shoot as it is to have the experience of shooting these places where "everybody shoots."

Many photographers have all the usual locations covered: Delicate Arch, Half Dome, Toroweap, Mount Rushmore, and countless more. The need to get the shots we see published is often mistaken as a good business practice. But is it really?

The hike to Delicate Arch will often result in photographers lined up shoulder-to-shoulder for the same shot. Granted, not all of them are there to take photos that they hope to market and license. But some are, and that means competition with the same shot taken on the same day.

In practice, there are only so many calendar publishers. The photo buyers for these companies see many new and striking compositions, but they also see many of the same locations shot in the same old way. The perception of the stock photo industry is changing, and complaints are growing among photo buyers that there is too much duplication of imagery and it is increasingly difficult to find fresh material.

As the market gets more and more crowded, photographers, hoping to



While I was a student at Brooks, I made my first trip to Death Valley after seeing a David Muench image of Lake Badwater. On that trip, I photographed the image shown here as a homage to the one taken by my hero. My image never sold.

prosper (or even simply survive), will have no choice but to innovate rather than imitate. We do not have the option of redesigning the landscape with new rivers, mountains and oceans like some computer game. Instead, we have what we have: national parks, wilderness and natural areas, coastlines and wildlife, and they have all been photographed before we came on the scene. The challenge to today's nature photographers is to look at these areas in a new way.

Those photographers doing something innovative rise above the crowd. A photo editor's job is not only to obtain needed photos, but to find and nurture promising talent. We see this all the time in the major publications dedicated to photography. They showcase the work of photographers

who do it differently. Those creative thinkers who have a different take are the ones grabbing the image sales and assignments. No matter how long you've been in the business, the need to innovate, experiment and do things differently should be a high priority.

I see pictures published of places I have never been and I certainly wish to go there myself. Today, if the locations fit my business plan I go, but I don't try to mimic pictures I have seen published. The markets are too small these days. I want my work to stand out from the crowd. At the same time, I can continue to honor the work of David Muench by simply looking at his pictures. ☺

Charlie Borland has been a professional photographer for close to 30 years. His images have been used in many major magazines, including National Geographic Adventure, Newsweek, Outdoor Photographer, Outside, Women's Sport and Fitness and others. Charlie is vice president and cofounder of www.fogstock.com, an online picture agency. He teaches an online course, "The Business of Outdoor and Nature Photography," at the Perfect Picture School, www.ppsop.com and is publisher of www.pronaturephotographer.com.



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