

The Maximum D.O.F. (Depth of Field) Myth of Landscape Photography

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There exists amongst many landscape photographers a notion that all landscape photographs must be razor sharp near to far – f64 and be there (not!). Unfortunately, this one-size-fits-all approach to landscape photography quite often increases the visual complexity (busy-ness) of an image and creates visual competition amongst its elements. Most importantly, displaying everything in the frame in brilliant sharpness leaves very little to the viewer's imagination.

Razor sharpness throughout the entire frame of a landscape/nature photograph often runs counter-effect to the photographer's intention. When attempting to depict the vastness of the scene before the camera, employing maximum Depth of Field (DOF) ironically often destroys the very depth depth that the photographer seeks to create. This is a particularly egregious habit of view camera users (i.e., users of large format sheet film cameras), many of whom feel that since camera movements afford precise control of focus, the image *should* employ maximum DOF and be in precise focus throughout.



Let's take a look at a photograph I made in September 2007 in the Wasatch Mountains of Utah (click to enlarge):

This photograph was made with a 4x5? view camera with a 120mm lens, and my focus was placed somewhere on the tree limbs. I restricted the aperture to about f11 to focus the viewer's attention on the elements that grabbed my attention. The radiating form of the tree limbs and mixed splashes

of color and light sucked me right in. As Guy Tal and I discuss in all our workshops, the elements that draw you to photograph something are the elements that you should seek to emphasize, while all other elements in the scene should be diminished or absent. This is a basic and solid theory of composition, and it magically works every time. In the brilliant words of Antoine de Saint-Exupery, "*a designer knows he has achieved perfection not when there is nothing left to add, but when there is nothing left to take away.*"

When I first began showing this photograph, non-photographers reacted very favorably towards it, whereas many photographers made comments about the shallow DOF/lack of sharp focus throughout. Naturally, I was humored by the latter comments, as the shallow DOF was intentional – not the result of an unfortunate error!



Now let's take a look at a second but nearly identical photograph – same everything but aperture. For this exposure the aperture was f32 (or possibly f45) (click to enlarge):

With greater DOF, the background elements become more distracting, and the splash of light in the background becomes more glaring. Not only does greater DOF ruin my impression of the scene, it makes for greater visual clutter. Not something I strive for

in a photograph.

When I am attracted to photograph something, I analyze the elements and ask questions: What is it that drew me over here to make this photograph? What are the *important* elements here? What is it that I want to emphasize? When I have answered these questions, where I place my tripod and camera, where I focus, and what aperture I use are essentially answered for me. I don't blindly apply maximum DOF rules just because my equipment is capable nor because that's what is instructed by the how-to guides of landscape and nature photography. In image-making, the primary goal for any photographer should be to do what best serves the subject matter. A one-size-fits-all approach to DOF in landscape photography rarely does that.

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