

## Seeing Beyond Crisis: Analyzing Photographs and Photographer Bylines in Solutions-Oriented Environmental Journalism Stories

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The environmental journalism beat is a relatively new one, dating to the 1960s and a global postwar shift in how people understood their own interactions with and impacts on the world around them. Photography was and continues to be an important medium for conveying these impacts, with images helping to raise awareness of environmental issues. But environmental photojournalism tends to be highly reactive, occurring in the immediate aftermath of a crisis and showcasing obviously visible problems—for example, [photographs of seabirds coated in oil](#) after the *Exxon Valdez* spill and the Deepwater Horizon explosion.

With more research now taking into account the effect of a solutions-oriented focus in [written environmental journalism](#), particularly around climate change, we sought to examine what taking a solutions approach might mean for images in environmental journalism.

In [our recent research published in \*Journalism Studies\*](#), we addressed a) how solutions were depicted in solutions-focused environmental stories and b) how the environment was visualized in these stories. Using a sample of stories from the Solution Journalism Network’s Story Tracker database, we explored these broad questions as well as the relationship between image and *congruence* (that is, does the image actually depict what the story is about?); the relationship between image and [solutions success factor](#) (e.g. Creative Financing, Expanding Access, etc.); and which [issue areas](#) (air quality, forest preservation, etc.) were most commonly depicted.

### Key Findings: Depicting the Solution

Solutions are not always easy to photograph, but environmental solutions may be slightly more visible. Nearly 93% of the images we studied showed something that was explicitly discussed in the story (as compared to, for example, a stock photo). Within our data set, we also found that about 68% of the images depicted the solution discussed in the article—a slightly higher rate than other studies have found for solutions images in general (Lough & McIntyre, 2019). Just under 13% of the photos showed the problem— a noticeable break from the reactive-crisis approach to environmental photojournalism.

Most photos showed people working to implement the solution, or those who had already benefited from it—particularly images coded with the success factor “Community control and ownership.” For example, one *Mongabay* story showcased agroforestry and its impacts on daily life. A piece from the *Detroit Free Press* included photographs of urban beekeepers, putting faces to the solution. The inventor of the solution rarely appeared in photos on their own, but was more likely to show up in images alongside implementers, and stories tagged with the success factors “Cultivating collaborations” and “Meeting people where they are.” We took

these findings as a positive step for visuals, in that they showed long-term engagement with a solution rather than its beginnings.

### **Key Findings: Depicting the Environment**

While climate change was the most common story topic depicted in the data set (13% of the photos), it did not have as many images associated with it as other topics. This is consistent with previous findings ([here](#) and [here](#)) suggesting that long-term challenges like climate change are hard to depict, extending these findings to solutions-specific stories. Stories about wildlife had the most photos included with them – typically more than five per article. However, in a noticeable break from environmental photo patterns, pollution-centered stories tended to have fewer photos per story than other topics. It is possible that a solutions approach means that editors do not want to overwhelm a reader with reactive imagery, and are more likely to choose photos accordingly. One useful area for follow-up would be exploring the production of solutions stories, and learning more about the photo selection process.

### **Wider Implications: Professional photojournalists and job opportunities**

We coded only the images from each story, taking care to note where the image came from— Did the author of the story take it, or was it provided by an outside source? Accounting for this detail in addition to our main research questions led to one of the more surprising outcomes from this research. The category with the highest number of photo bylines (just over one-third) was ‘Courtesy’, referring to a photo being provided to the journalism outlet by someone who appeared in the story or by an outside organization—a government office or a nonprofit, for example. These photographs were more likely to appear in stories showing a multinational solution. In some cases, the story writer took their own photos, but it was much less common for freelance photographers (16.8%) or staff photojournalists (9.2%) to appear on a photo byline. This finding hints at an increase in image management at the expense of documenting ‘life as it happens,’ a core photojournalism tenet. The story editor is more limited in how they choose to illustrate the story if they are given pre-existing images rather than being able to choose from a wide variety captured on the scene by a trained visual journalist. The byline finding also reflects the dwindling opportunities for professional photojournalists to work on stories and the lack of staff jobs available. Future research could break down exactly where the courtesy images come from—if there are more from NGOs than government organizations, for example.

Despite the benefits of solutions reporting, it’s worth noting that solutions are not always easy to photograph, and investing the time and resources needed to successfully capture a story visually may not be feasible for all newsrooms. And in the future, if more reporters are responsible for photographing their own stories, as our research suggests is the case, we would encourage solutions journalism trainings to include photojournalism as well as reporting and writing skills. This would elevate the status of the solutions image within the newsroom, so that it is not an afterthought to be considered only after a story is written.