

Boyd Norton: Nature Photographer

LENNA KEITH

WRITER'S COMMENT: I've always enjoyed writing, but as I completed research paper after research paper, collegiate writing became more stressful and redundant than fun. I took Journalism during Spring Quarter 2006 for a temporary change of pace, but I ended up getting so much more out of it. From the beginning of the class I knew I wanted to write a piece about my Great Uncle Boyd, the published world-traveler of my family. I've only met Boyd a few times, but my family owns most of his books and I've always wanted to know him better. Writing this piece allowed me to learn more about his work; but more importantly, it allowed me to get to know a person that I admire a lot better. I would like to thank my Uncle Boyd for taking the time to speak with me and for inspiring me to pursue a meaningful life. I would also like to thank my Journalism lecturer, John Boe, because without him this article would not exist. His humor, positive attitude, and encouragement helped bring back a love of writing I haven't experienced in years.

—Lenna Keith

INSTRUCTOR'S COMMENT: I think it's true for all writing courses but especially true for journalism: the most important factor is content. If you don't have an interesting story, it doesn't matter how well you write it. And Lenna Keith first found a terrific subject (nature photographer Boyd Norton) for the profile required in my journalism class, then she wrote the profile well. I especially liked how she organized her article, telling the story of Norton's life and career in a way that unfolds like a natural progression, then ending, for a kind of surprise bonus, with a poem by Norton's sometime collaborator, Yevgeny Yevtushenko.

—John Boe, University Writing Program

AS A YOUNG 1960s college graduate, Boyd Norton worked as a nuclear physicist studying nuclear reactor safety at the Atomic Energy Commission's National Reactor Testing Station in Idaho. His work was modern and exciting, but Boyd—who once blew up a nuclear reactor deliberately—was a free spirit who wasn't made to spend his days in a laboratory. His first passions were nature and animals, so in 1969 he gave up his career in physics to pursue environmental journalism.

Looking at him, you could guess he has a unique and stimulating career. His grey hair is longer than most men's, his blue eyes are the same color as the bodies of water he so often photographs, and his smile shows he's really enjoying life. Although he is a photographer, writer, editor, business manager, world traveler, and award-winner, he is a simple man.



© Boyd Norton

Boyd and Friend in Borneo

These days, Boyd is most famous for his photographs. His pictures of bears and gorillas are common in office buildings and classrooms throughout the country. But this great photographer actually started out in journalism as a freelance writer, publishing articles about nature conservation in small magazines and newspapers in Idaho while working as a nuclear physicist. As he learned more about the outdoors, Boyd began to take photography more seriously. Taking photos soon became easier than writing articles, and so his 40-plus-year career in photography began.

Since then, Boyd's photographs and articles have been published in a number of national magazines, including *Time*, *Vogue*, *National Geographic*, *Popular Photography*, *Reader's Digest*, *Money*, and even *Playboy*. He is also the author of thirteen acclaimed books, including *Baikal: Sacred Sea of Siberia*, *The Mountain Gorilla*, *The African Elephant: The Last Days of Eden*, *Safari Journal*, and *The*

Art of Outdoor Photography, which is on Amazon.com's Bestseller List.

Boyd the Science Guy

CONSIDERING that Boyd spent his adolescence writing equations and performing experiments, it wasn't obvious that he'd grow up to be a famous nature photographer. In fact, anyone's best guess would have been that he'd end up spending his days in a chemical plant, not in the wilderness. "He used to win prizes at the science fair," Boyd's nephew Jeff said. "Boyd was always very smart."

Boyd's interest in science was more than just academic, though. "Science was a fixation for me," Boyd said. "By the time I was twelve I taught myself chemistry in a fully equipped laboratory in the basement." He used to order chemicals from local plants and make mini-experiments, forming the reactions and writing the equations on his own. And even though he had never taken a chemistry class, Boyd's knowledge was enough to convince a high school teacher to let him use the school's lab for experiments without ever enrolling in a chemistry class.

After high school, Boyd's skills in the sciences led him to a job as a lab technician at a Metals and Controls Corporation in Massachusetts. After gaining some work experience, he enrolled in what is now Michigan Technological Institute with a major in physics and the goal of a technical career in nuclear research. But before he could realize his career in science, nature called.

His First Passion

BOYD'S FAMILY, the people who know him best, remember him as passionate about the outdoors. "He always had a great love of nature," Jeff said. "I remember hearing how he always used to bring critters home as pets." His attraction to the wilderness came from his parents, who used to take him and his siblings on fishing trips and let him keep wild animals as pets.

"I used to go out and catch snakes, until I discovered you could order them through the mail," Boyd explained. "So, I ordered an iridescent blue, six foot long Florida Indigo snake." But the collection of peculiar animals did not stop with snakes: he and his mother

once found an injured squirrel at the bottom of a tree, nursed it back to health by bottle feeding it, and kept it healthy for months. As a true nature lover would, though, he set the squirrel free on a friend's farm.

Apart from keeping wild animals as pets, the most life shaping experience Boyd had was in his own neighborhood. "On the end of our street there was a broken fence that went through our neighbor's farm," Boyd said. "To get to the local park to meet my friends, I'd have to go through the farm." Seeing these animals roam open land no doubt developed Boyd's passion for protecting and nurturing even the wildest of animals.

Even though nature was his first true passion, Boyd chose a career in the area he was skilled and knowledgeable in. After graduating from Michigan Tech in the early 1960s, he started working at the nuclear testing station in Idaho. His work was cutting edge and important; after all, he was developing nuclear weapons during the height of the Cold War. "The project was studying reactor safety with reactors operating on remote control from a mile away," Boyd said. The researchers would purposely let the nuclear reactors run wild for moments at a time, studying how each reacted to different situations. "There was no real hazard because it was a cold core," Boyd added. Though his lab work kept him interested and busy, Boyd found himself more attracted to Idaho's beautiful nature.

While still working on nuclear development, Boyd took up hiking and other outdoor hobbies. As he became more involved in the wilderness community, he became aware of some of Idaho's environmental battles, the first over a dam proposal at Hell's Canyon. And reverting back to his passion for preserving nature, he wanted to help save it. Through his and his colleagues' dedication to the project, they won the battle and preserved the canyon's natural state. This environmental work prompted Boyd to write nature pieces for small magazines and newspapers in Idaho and take photographs of the areas he wanted to save. As he gained more experience with the camera, nature photography became more than just a hobby.

Protection through Photography

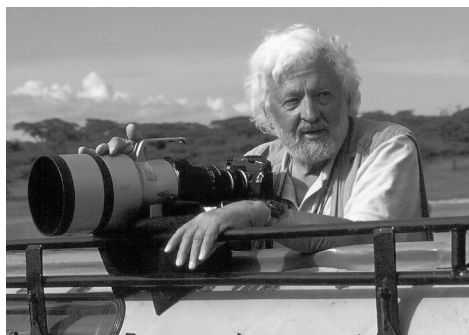
BOYD'S BIG break in environmental photojournalism came when the Sierra Club asked him to create a book about endangered

snake areas in America. “My first book was mainly text with small photos in the middle,” Boyd said. Even though this first book, *Snake Wilderness*, contained far more text than photographs, Boyd received praise for his pictures. And shortly after *Snake Wilderness* was published, Boyd’s career in freelance photography began.

After this first book came many more picture books raising awareness for nature, including *The Grand Tetons*. Boyd has even combined forces with other world-renowned artists, like Russian poet Yevgeny Yevtushenko, who coauthored and cophotographed a book about Alaska and Siberia titled *Divided Twins*.

Boyd’s publications aren’t limited to nature magazines and books: he once published a photo in *Playboy*. The picture wasn’t of a naked woman, though, but of a neon sign he found in a Malaysian travel agency. “*Playboy* published a collection of weird signs from around the world,” Boyd explained. “The sign I found said ‘Go Fuku Tours.’”

Boyd has taken hundreds of thousands of photographs, each with its own story, adventure, and purpose. His unusual experiences include meeting with African heads of state and witnessing thousands of wildebeests migrate across the Serengeti. One of his most thrilling adventures happened while he was traveling through Tanzania on a photo tour. As they were driving through the wilderness, a man stepped out from the bushes with an AK-47 and shot at their tour bus. The travelers managed to get away, but bandits robbed Boyd and his friends at the next checkpoint. But instead of quietly leaving the country, Boyd took action to help protect future travelers. “I was interviewed on national television about the inci-



© Boyd Norton

Boyd on a Photo Safari

dent,” Boyd said. “I told the government they could not allow this to happen again.” The event’s publicity outraged Tanzanians, and later that night the President gave a live speech stating his intention to put an end to such robberies.

Something for Everyone

BOYD CONTINUES to risk his life by traveling to these remote and often dangerous places to capture people and animals in their element. His bravery and hard work have paid off: his photos not only look pretty, they have an impact on environmental politics.

Some pictures are simply meant to capture a moment in time so people can admire it in the future. “It’d be frustrating to travel without a camera,” Boyd said. “I feel like I’d risk missing out on something important.” And he doesn’t just capture important moments in political or environmental history, but moments in the everyday lives of the animals he loves so much. Both children and adults cherish these nature photos, and I frequently see one of them—like a photo of a mother grizzly bear and cub snuggled up together—on a poster in elementary school classrooms.

Boyd’s photos are also historically and politically educational. From the time he published *Snake Wilderness*, Boyd’s top priority has been to show people animals and other cultures of the world that they may never get to see firsthand. Boyd explained that although some African nations, like the Hadza people, may still live in what we would consider the Stone Age—hunting and gathering, living in stone huts, and making fire by sticks—“they are not a whole lot different than us.” He said that while we think we can teach them about technology, art, and fashion, they are the ones that should be teaching *us* about leading a simple life and enjoying what we have. “It’s important to record as much as possible about these tribes so it doesn’t get lost in history,” Boyd said.

Another one of Boyd’s books, *The African Elephant: The Last Days of Eden*, was published to educate readers about the dwindling elephant populations in Kenya and Tanzania and the animal’s uncer-



© Boyd Norton

Grizzly with Cub

tain future. “Boyd feels a connection to animals he photographs,” his nephew Jeff said.

Since he is such an experienced freelance photographer, Boyd also uses his pictures to instruct his viewers about photography. In the past few years Boyd has started giving photo safaris through Africa, helping others with their photography skills while introducing them to the parts of the world that he loves so much.

Finally, Boyd’s work helps animals by raising awareness about protecting them from a continuously global and industrialized world. Boyd has maintained the same passion for protecting the environment that he developed at the beginning of his career. He has received various awards, including an award from the Environmental Protection Agency, presented by Robert Redford, for his “exciting, important environmental photography and writing.” He has also testified in front of the United States Senate on protecting the country’s wildlife parks.



© Boyd Norton

Sibling African Elephants in Kenya

Changing with the Times

SINCE BOYD began his career in photojournalism over forty years ago, most of his equipment has undergone major changes. Photos are no longer developed in dark rooms, cameras are primarily digital, and thousands of pictures can be stored on a disc smaller than my finger. Luckily for Boyd, he has been able to adapt—and even improve—from these changes.

“It wasn’t until about a year ago that I went over to the dark side,” Boyd joked, speaking of when he switched from a traditional camera to a digital one. He explained that while lugging around numerous cameras and hundreds of cans of film was a problem with the traditional cameras, digital cameras require even more work: he has to carry around hard drives, laptops, and cables so he can transfer the photos to permanent storage. To help other pho-

tographers make the transition from traditional to digital, Boyd is currently working on a sequel to his bestseller *The Art of Outdoor Photography* titled *The Art of Digital Outdoor Photography*. This second book will cover the best ways to photograph the outdoors using a digital camera and offer tips on using other technological techniques.

Boyd has also used technology to his advantage by developing a computer program for organizing photos, The Norton Slide Captioning System (NSCS). It includes features that help photographers sort, caption, price, and manage photographs. Since it's marketed to a wide audience—pretty much anyone who finds themselves overwhelmed with hundreds of photographs—it's received excellent reviews from professionals and amateurs alike.

Boyd continues to pursue nature photography and environmental protection issues. "I have over 400,000 photos filed away," Boyd said. "Publishers email me every day with picture requests." In addition to countless magazine articles that will feature his photos in the future, Boyd also plans to release three new books in the next few years: a picture and text combination book on the Serengeti, *The Art of Digital Outdoor Photography*, and a guidebook titled *Safari Journal*.

Boyd is also making huge strides in environmental conservation. In fact, he just finished working with Yevgeny Yevtushenko again, this time on protecting Lake Baikal in Russia from oil pipelines. "The Russian government wanted to build a huge oil pipeline through the lake, which



© Boyd Norton

Lake Baikal

is the purest water in the country," Boyd explained. "If an earthquake broke the lines, millions of gallons of oil would spill into the lake." Boyd's efforts to persuade President Putin weren't successful, so he contacted Yevtushenko, who hadn't yet heard about the issue. As one of the most renowned Russian poets, Yevtushenko

published an open letter to Putin in the largest newspaper in Russia, demanding that the pipeline be moved away from Lake Baikal. “One week later, Putin redrew the plans to move the pipelines out of watershed,” Boyd said.

No doubt Russians will appreciate Boyd and Yevgeny’s hard work for decades to come. These small victories inspire Boyd to keep questioning, fighting, photographing, and publishing. And although I haven’t seen half of the places Boyd has photographed, I understand his respect for nature and his desire to preserve it when I read “On the Komandors,” one of Yevtushenko’s poems in *Divided Twins*¹:

Flippers flipping,
sea lions caress,
or kill,
rearing up.
And on the Komandors midnight couples meet,
and the gold-crowned teeth
of fish cannery girls
tingle, picking up vibrations from
the border guards’ caps
and they blush modestly.
And on the Komandors
mushrooms grow without aspens,
sturdy,
fresh,
without worms,
and the eyes of irises,
treacherous and blue,
lure you into the bogs
of black oil.
And like a bull seal,
clutching at
a faint hope of survival,
I crawl dying,
ready to call for any lure...

¹Yevgeny Yevtushenko, “And on the Komandors,” *Divided Twins*, 1998.