

Ethics of Digital Imaging

Drawing the line on image manipulation

TEXT & PHOTOS BY JACK & SUE DRAFAHL

Digital imaging is the modification of an image using computer tools. It seems that everyone has a different opinion as to its place in underwater photography. We hear everything from "Every image should be presented exactly as it was shot underwater," to "You give us the computer tools to edit and manipulate images, so why not use them?" There is a real battle between the traditional film users and those who have embraced digitally charged ions.

One issue that drives the wedge between these two groups is the ability for digital photographers to alter their images after they have been shot. Yes, digital photographers import their images into computers for final editing, but they're not alone. Many of today's film photographers are in a sense digital photographers, even

though they have never taken a digital picture underwater. They join the digital factor once they scan their negatives or slides into their computers and adjust them. The problem is that some traditional film photographers feel that digital imaging is a form of cheating. So, who's right?

We've been on the analog side of photography for more than 30 years but have now permanently moved into the digital arena. We try to see both sides of the argument, but in reality, we really don't see the reason for a rift. The whole reason we take pictures underwater is to document the underwater realm and have a good time doing it. In an effort to help close the gap between the two forces, we will present our opinion based upon both our film and digital experiences. Although it won't satisfy everyone's concerns, hopefully it

will help present both sides.

First, we need to define the different levels of digital editing, as we feel there are two distinct groups. The first type, which we call enhanced digital imaging, employs the darkroom rules. This means that digital images, whether from a digital camera or a film scanner, are corrected for color balance and cropped, and adjustments are made to the contrast, gamma and saturation. The final image is then spotted before it is printed or projected. In other words, it's fair game to do anything to the image that could be performed in a traditional darkroom. The difference is that it is a lot quicker and easier to do.

The second type of digital imaging is the prime source of arguments, and we call it image manipulation. This is when the image editor takes portions from one under-

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ULTIMATE TEST Which of these images do you think was manipulated? The answer might surprise you.

water image and pastes them into another photo, creating a brand-new image. Quite often, the results reflect a situation that may have been almost impossible to photograph without the aid of a computer. You know the type of image we are talking about —two breaching whales pointing at each other with a beautiful sunset in the background.

Personally, we see no problem with editing images using the image-enhancement criteria, but we do see a problem with manipulated images. Once you cross the line and manipulate an image, no

one will ever be able to trust your images as true. To illustrate this point, we took an image of a single lionfish and pasted two more from other images to create a “lions’ den.” To some readers this would be acceptable, while others would be infuriated.

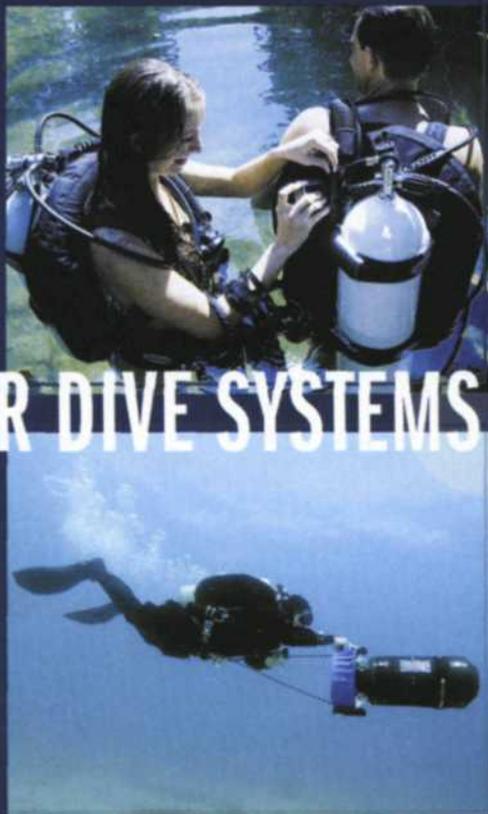
Let’s say you manipulate an image like the one we have with the lionfish and present it as an original image. Then a few months later, you take a picture of two blue ribbon eels side by side in one hole. Most people would assume from your previous lions’ den creation that the twin eels had

been manipulated. You could talk until your face was as blue as the eels, but no one would believe you, as you have been labeled an image manipulator. Although some photographers don’t care, others may not realize the trap they have stepped into until they have manipulated their first image.

The solution is actually simple. Years ago, the National Wildlife Federation’s magazine for children, *Ranger Rick*, received complaints about

images taken of animals in captivity that were presented as though they were photographed in the wild. The problem vanished once the magazine added an editorial explaining that all images that were posed, or photographed in captivity, would be identified with a circle with a P inside.

We suggest that underwater photographers take this concept and modify it by using a circle with an M inside to indicate that an image has been manipulated. We think this will clear the murky waters and put photography back on the fun track.



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