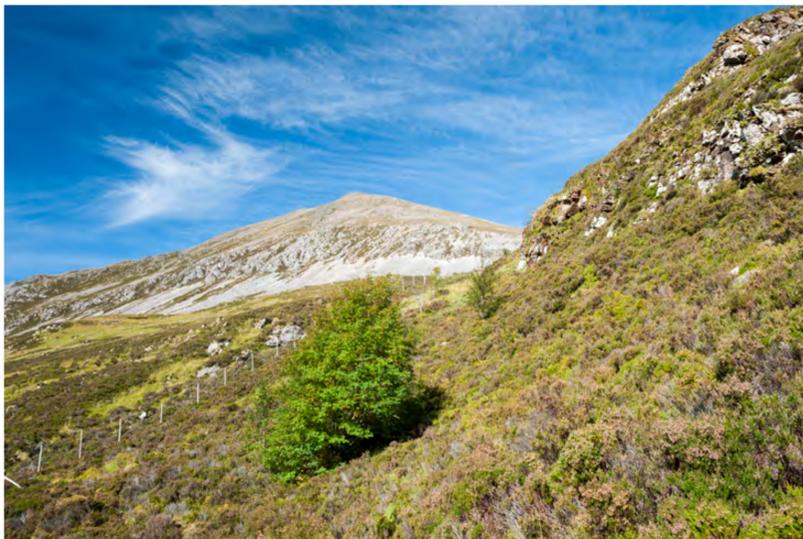


# Legacy



Does our photography have any relevance beyond our own lifetimes? I believe it can – and it needn't be high art either.

One of the things that has always appealed to me about being a photographer is that week in, week out, I'm accumulating what critic Susan Sontag called, "...pieces of evidence in an on-going biography or history". Photographs are visual accounts of a life, the things that have mattered to the photographer, the experiences they have had. They bear witness to a life in a less subjective way, perhaps, than diary entries. Moreover, people in our culture, Sontag points out, "...[need] to have reality confirmed and experience enhanced by photographs..." For photographers, the wish to make a photograph is often the reason for seeking the experience in the first instance. Normally, the reach of these photographs is restricted to our, and perhaps our children's, lifetimes. Nevertheless, by nature of their content, some may endure much longer and to those of us of a certain age who quietly fret about legacy (quietly, because it might just be one massive conceit) this is very interesting. As I have discovered, the sorts of images with the potential to endure can be lot more pedestrian than you might expect. A few years ago, I spent the autumn working on Beinn Eighe Nation Nature Reserve in Wester Ross on a commission for Scottish Natural Heritage to produce fixed point

photography. The object was to create a visual baseline to monitor changes, particularly to the vegetation, in the landscape. Along with the reserve manager, we identified 30 locations from where geo-tagged images would be taken as well as finding 20 "historical" locations, some of which had been photographed 60 -80 years previously, and shooting them again. Finding those locations sometimes proved a challenge in itself but, guided by crisp black and white prints, we were successful. The work that resulted from this commission doesn't look beautiful by contemporary standards of landscape photography: that wasn't the brief. But it will help to describe a rapidly reforesting mountain landscape when viewed alongside the work of those photographers who visit the same locations in 20, 50, 100 years time. An acid-free box of highly detailed cotton rag prints with the location coordinates and bearing printed in the bottom left corner will be my legacy in that part of the world. Changes in the landscape over time are fascinating (just think of those old plates of now shrunken glaciers or of the Aral Sea, before and after grandiose irrigation schemes) but so too are changes in society. As I was growing up in eastern central Scotland, the majority of school children spent at least part of their summer holidays earning money by picking raspberries and strawberries and the autumn holidays, "howkin" potatoes. The school holidays were timed (and still are) around these

traditional harvest times. But towards the end of my time farming in the late 1980's it was getting harder and harder to find local people willing to do this work and now it is all done by (often highly educated) migrant workers from central and eastern Europe. Part of our local culture has changed – as it must inevitably – but it has done so largely unrecorded and this is a source of personal regret especially since it happened on my own doorstep. Despite some good news stories from “the environment”, catastrophic species loss (which to a greater or lesser extent we are accelerating) may lead to some nature photography acquiring a significance beyond its usual roles of consolation and entertainment – and beyond the lifetime of its creator. In Joel Sartore's Photo Ark project, many species on the brink of extinction are recorded in the studio so that, if nothing else, a clear photograph will remain to prick the conscience and provoke later generations to question the priorities that allowed mass extinction to happen on our watch. Photographs provide evidence of what was there: a baseline, not in this case of vegetative cover, but of species diversity. And it's necessary because people forget – and quickly. The concept of “declining baselines” is all about forgetting from generation to generation. It's about adjusting to ever-poorer quality landscapes, species diversity and wild experiences and thinking of them as normal. You can think of it as a negative form of the ratchet effect. This is where our archives have

the potential to do some good – or at least to alert future generations to the fact that they have inherited a worn out version of what was owed to them. One final thought: if you're creating for posterity, don't leave your images on a computer drive. Print. Print onto archival stock like cotton rag, use archival inks, put the print in an acetate sleeve in an acid free box with a small sachet of silica gel. It's no good if your images become extinct too. © Niall Benvie 2018.

These three photographs show the current state of vegetation on the Beinn Eighe National Nature Reserve in north western Scotland.. They were taken as part of a commission that will allow change to the vegetation cover to be monitored in the decades to come. Pictures of this sort shouldn't be dramatically lit (because that hides detail) nor need they be attractive - that's not the point of them. They should, however, be highly detailed, well exposed, printed on archival stock and have their coordinates and bearing printed on the photograph.

