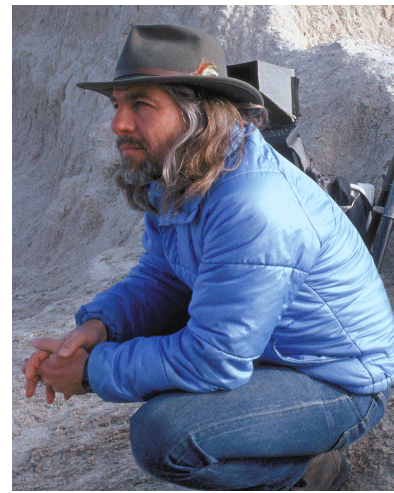


A landscape photographer applies science to nature and makes art

THE ASSUMPTION IS that communing with nature requires an absence of technology. Any crossover—like bringing a blow-dryer on a camping trip—seems incongruous. But Stephen Johnson's digital landscapes challenge this assumption. For three years he has documented wilderness scenes with a state-of-the-art filmless digital camera that, in under three minutes, records distinctions in color, time and contrast as they actually occur in nature. The result, images with an intimacy that brings subject and viewer close in ways conventional photographs cannot. "Our world has been so influenced by film portrayals of reality that we start to think the world looks that way," he says. "It doesn't. Shadows aren't black, dark greens really do exist. The world is full of subtle pastels and gentle color." Capturing these nuances, Johnson hopes, will train our eyes in a new aesthetic.

"I was amazed at the clarity I was getting," Johnson (below) says of a mineral formation (right) at Mammoth Hot Springs in Yellowstone National Park.

Stephen Johnson





One touch on a keypad, and a magnificent landscape appears on-screen

A LANDSCAPE PHOTOGRAPHER for 25 years, Johnson began his career taking pictures and developing them the conventional way. But the delayed gratification inherent in film frustrated him. When a colleague introduced him to digital cameras six years ago, he was so struck by the immediacy of the medium—a portable view camera is connected to a laptop that displays the recorded image on-screen within seconds—that he traded in film and darkrooms for a leap of faith. He has never looked back. “I rarely use film now,” he says. “It seems primitive, and somewhat blind.” The new tools—a Dicomed Field Pro digital camera, an Apple Powerbook with Adobe Photoshop software and Iris printer—have changed his methodology but not his motivation. “Light, color, sky and land remain my reasons for making landscape photographs,” says Johnson. His current work, “With a New Eye: The Digital National Parks Project,” pushes the envelope. Johnson says he chose such an expansive subject because he thought it would be a challenge. Sure enough, three years and 1,000 photographs later it is a work in progress. “I’m sorting through and discovering new things all the time.” ➤

To date, Johnson has downloaded digital images at more than 45 national parks. The glacier above is in Alaska’s Kenai Fjords National Park.

Johnson’s photography is not about digital manipulation but about “seeing more clearly.”

DIGITAL photography tends to arouse a certain amount of skepticism. Johnson understands the wariness but believes it is unwarranted: “People can’t seem to separate digital picture-taking from the digital manipulation of images.” The difference in many cases, he says, is that the latter involves “film-based photographs that have been scanned into a computer.” Johnson says that when he works in the field he has no desire to present anything more than what is there. Like any photographer, he works with such variables as composition and mood. But the use of a monitor allows him to react to the variables on-site. There are some occurrences—the sudden rain that began to fall just as he set up a shot (top right), wind marks on a sand dune (bottom right)—that Johnson acknowledges are simply serendipitous. Such happy accidents call upon the timeless low-tech virtues: experience and skill.

—VANESSA BUSH

Natural wonders; Dusk falls on the Hoh Rain Forest in Washington’s Olympic National Park (top right); greenery in Death Valley (bottom right).

