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We Are Not Just a “Tiny, Landlocked, Impoverished Sub-Saharan Country with HIV Burden”

It does not please me when I read articles that start like this: “Malawi is a tiny, impoverished, landlocked, sub-Saharan African country...” But this and its derivatives are, unfortunately, the starting point of many articles in the popular press and scientific publications. It seems to everyone that writing on Malawi should emphasize how deep-in-poverty and small and insignificant this country is. And then the articles continue to suggest that, thanks to the researchers, someone is watching over this little insignificant country. And hurray, here I come, a researcher with solutions.

My country, Malawi, continues to be ranked as lower-income among the many low-income countries. It has a small land mass of just about 118 480 km² and a third of its area is covered by Lake Malawi. For Americans, it is just little smaller than the State of Pennsylvania. However, it is much larger than many European countries: Iceland (103 000 km²), Belgium (30 510 km²), the Netherlands (41 516 km²), Croatia (56 542 km²), and Switzerland (41 290 km²). I doubt that many authors would refer to these European nations as “tiny,” “with a huge obesity burden,” or “given to wine.”

WHAT IS OFTEN NOT SAID

Malawi has one of its highest peaks at Sapitwa on Mount Mulanje, with maximum elevation of 3002 m. Malawi is host to a fresh water national park, home to tens if not hundreds of species of cichlids. The emphasis on the negative sides often escapes the scrutiny of manuscript reviewers and editors, even in the description of the study setting. Next time when I read irrelevant things in the study setting section of an article on Malawi I will suggest the authors to add: “the country stands occupies the fifth place in the world in netball after Australia, New Zealand, England, and Jamaica.”

INSENSITIVITY WHEN TAKING PICTURES

Not only that descriptions of countries can be condescending, paternalistic, and offensive, but patient and other photography can also have these characteris-

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tics. It is for this reason that I thought that when we train our doctors, especially surgeons, we would touch on the ethics of photography. Chitrabani, Christian Mass Communication center in Kolkata, India has developed a Code of Ethics that is a good starting point for those who want to treat subjects of photography with the dignity they deserve (1):

“What to Photograph

- *What* you shoot and *how* you shoot is determined by why you shoot and **whom** you shoot for.
- When photographing people do not treat them as if they were things.
- Do not *take* people’s pictures, give *images*, especially to the imageless.
- Never depict people as useless or inadequate. It is their helplessness which has to be shown.
- Do not invade anybody’s privacy except when it is necessary for depicting certain social situations.
- Yet, boldly reach into personal life, bearing in mind that the photographs you take are your brothers’ and sisters.

How to Photograph

- Never art for art’s sake, just try to make the best possible picture.
- There is no need to prettify people and objects; they have their beauty, and a good photograph exudes beauty.
- Sensationalism diverts attention from the essential.
- Shun extra long lenses. A short lens draws you near your subject.
- Try to establish a rapport with the person you photograph.

Social Concern

- Let not your photographs drift away from context.

- Earn the right to see what you wish to show.
- Your social concern is to document life with empathy.
- Be true to the image people want to have of themselves, but at the same time do show what you believe is their real image. The dignity of the poor, in particular, demands that their situation be known.
- A documentary coverage can never be total. Complete a biased image by another biased image.
- Be an iconoclast – a destroyer of established images.

Your Public

- Photos should not be used to exploit the persons portrayed.
- Refrain from showing a photograph if undesirable manipulation cannot be averted.
- Your photos have no place in art shows.
- Lending your photographs for “illustrating” articles that have hardly anything to do with the persons photographed is like lending your voice to somebody else’s speech.
- Destroy the myth that photographs are duplicates of reality.
- Ethical documentary photography is not your sole responsibility. But your photographs encourage certain responses in the viewer.”

The National Press Photographers Association has the following code of photographing ethics (2):

1. “Be accurate and comprehensive in the representation of subjects.
2. Resist being manipulated by staged photo opportunities.
3. Be complete and provide context when photographing or recording subjects. Avoid stereotyping individuals and groups. Recognize and work to avoid presenting one’s own biases in the work.
4. Treat all subjects with respect and dignity. Give special consideration to vulnerable subjects and compassion to victims of crime or tragedy. Intrude on private moments of grief only when the public has an overriding and justifiable need to see.
5. While photographing subjects do not intentionally contribute to, alter, or seek to alter or influence events.

6. Editing should maintain the integrity of the photographic images’ content and context. Do not manipulate images or add or alter sound in any way that can mislead viewers or misrepresent subjects.

7. Do not pay sources or subjects or reward them materially for information or participation.

8. Do not accept gifts, favors, or compensation from those who might seek to influence coverage.

9. Do not intentionally sabotage the efforts of other journalists.”

It is interesting to note that organizations promoting photography of animals have come up with a code of ethics. The National Photographers Network Principles of Birding Ethics state the following: “Everyone who enjoys birds and birding must always respect wildlife, its environment, and the rights of others. In any conflict of interest between birds and birders, the welfare of the birds and their environment comes first.” The National Photographers Network Principles of Birding Ethics are outlined in its entirety in Box 1 (3).

Why would I bring birding ethics for presentation here? It is to show that attention to ethics of photography has extended to animals. These ethical principles are relatively comprehensive compared with the salutary beneficence, non-maleficence, autonomy, and justice story that we often hear when dealing with the photography of humans. Although it would be improper to equate humans to birds, some of the above guidelines could be adapted for use in human photography. For example, the suggested: “Avoid stressing birds or exposing them to danger, exercise restraint and caution during observation, photography, sound recording, or filming” could also be applicable in the photography of humans.

I am yet to read a comprehensive ethics guideline for taking human photographs in the health sector. There are certainly general publication ethics, research ethics, public health ethics, and medical ethics. But what about medical or health photography ethics?

It is often the case that doctors, medical students, and other who have the opportunity to take picture of people in a difficult condition perpetuate the same old images of disrespect toward human beings. I would imagine the health professionals would lead the world in ensuring that the same rigor that we expect in conducting medical research will be considered when taking pictures, and especially of people from the “tiny, impoverished, sub-Saharan countries.”

BOX 1
Code of Birding Ethics
1. Promote the welfare of birds and their environment.
1(a) Support the protection of important bird habitat.
1(b) Avoid stressing birds or exposing them to danger, exercise restraint and caution during observation, photography, sound recording, or filming.
Limit the use of recordings and other methods of attracting birds, and never use such methods in heavily birded areas, or for attracting any species that is Threatened, Endangered, or of Special Concern, or is rare in your local area.
Keep well back from nests and nesting colonies, roosts, display areas, and important feeding sites. In such sensitive areas, if there is a need for extended observation, photography, filming, or recording, try to use a blind or hide, and take advantage of natural cover.
Use artificial light sparingly for filming or photography, especially for close-ups.
1(c) Before advertising the presence of a rare bird, evaluate the potential for disturbance to the bird, its surroundings, and other people in the area, and proceed only if access can be controlled, disturbance minimized, and permission has been obtained from private landowners. The sites of rare nesting birds should be divulged only to the proper conservation authorities.
1(d) Stay on roads, trails, and paths where they exist; otherwise keep habitat disturbance to a minimum.
2. Respect the law and the rights of others.
2(a) Do not enter private property without the owner's explicit permission.
2(b) Follow all laws, rules, and regulations governing use of roads and public areas, both at home and abroad.
2(c) Practice common courtesy in contacts with other people. Your exemplary behavior will generate goodwill with birders and non-birders alike.
3. Ensure that feeders, nest structures, and other artificial bird environments are safe.
3(a) Keep dispensers, water, and food clean, and free of decay or disease. It is important to feed birds continually during harsh weather.
3(b) Maintain and clean nest structures regularly.
3(c) If you are attracting birds to an area, ensure the birds are not exposed to predation from cats and other domestic animals, or dangers posed by artificial hazards.
4. Group birding, whether organized or impromptu, requires special care.
Each individual in the group, in addition to the obligations spelled out in Items #1 and #2, has responsibilities as a Group Member.
4(a) Respect the interests, rights, and skills of fellow birders, as well as people participating in other legitimate outdoor activities. Freely share your knowledge and experience, except where code 1(c) applies. Be especially helpful to beginning birders.
4(b) If you witness unethical birding behavior, assess the situation, and intervene if you think it prudent. When interceding, inform the person(s) of the inappropriate action, and attempt, within reason, to have it stopped. If the behavior continues, document it, and notify appropriate individuals or organizations."

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