



PSNZ Help Sheet No 21

January 2001 Edition

Using Wide-Angle By: Dr Newell Grenfell FPSNZ

Produced for the Affiliated Camera Clubs of the Photographic Society of New Zealand Inc. by PSNZ

In the popular mind a serious photographer is one with a telephoto lens. Many of the people who join camera clubs have recently acquired a long lens and want to learn to use it better. On club field trips it's not uncommon to see members surrounding a subject with long lenses almost in the manner of a firing squad!

But while the value of a long lens must not be understated, there's something of a paradox in the fact that many of the most successful 'serious' photographers make less use of long lenses than wide-angle ones.

The term 'wide-angle' can be applied to any lens with a focal length less than 50mm. Most popular in this category are 28mm and 24mm lenses. There are zoom wide-angles which cover a range, like 20-35mm. There are also extreme wide-angles, ranging from 18mm to fish-eye. The comments in this paper, however, refer mainly to lenses from 35mm to 24mm.

Why Wide-Angle

The key characteristic of a wide-angle lens, as the name suggests, is that it captures a wider field of vision. In simple terms, you *get more in*. Travelling the world, if you aim to photograph great buildings, grand vistas, or even large groups of travelling companions, you will include more by using a wide-angle lens. (The fact that such lenses are shorter and lighter also commends them for travel photography).

On the downside, while the additional width of the wide-angle allows you to *get more in*, the subject matter will appear *further away*. Using a wide-angle from the same position as a standard lens, you will be pleased to see how much more you can include, but may be disappointed to see how much further away it looks.

By the same token, while subject matter at a 'normal' range looks further away, anything you do choose to retain in the *immediate foreground* will appear much *larger* and have more prominence when photographed with a wide-angle lens. Unless your objective is simply to include more, you will therefore need to adjust your photographic style and viewpoint to get the best out of a wide-angle lens. You will frequently need to move closer to the subject matter.

The mere process of moving in close leads to one of the major advantages of using a wide-angle. It encourages you to *communicate* with your subject. It gets you involved. Instead of being an *observer* -- standing back like a firing squad -- you become a *participant*. Your pictures have a greater intimacy and carry more impact when you move in close with a wide-angle lens.

It is the impact achieved by placing subjects right in front of the camera that particularly attracts serious photographers to wide-angle lenses. The physics of such lenses give a much greater depth of field at each aperture stop than long lenses. You can therefore focus on an object in the immediate foreground - say only 2-3 metres from the lens -- and still have the background apparently sharp.

Photojournalism

The most avid users of wide-angle lenses are photojournalists. Setting aside sports action and contributions by the paparazzi, most pictures which appear in newspapers and magazines are made with lenses in the range 20-28 mm.

Editors usually like the people featured to appear large in the frame. They frequently want to provide information on the background as well -- where the person was, what was happening around them, and so on. Photojournalists create such pictures by getting in close with wide-angle lenses.

The hoards of photojournalists covering international events like royal weddings or important press conferences have to be restrained behind barriers and are therefore compelled to use long lenses, but in less formal settings photojournalists invariably use wide-angle lenses. Watch how they swarm around players at the end of a football match, or push cameras into the faces of participants after of a court hearing. Or merely watch them working at the annual Santa parade. Professional photojournalists know that the 'in your face' photographs made with a wide-angle can have an impact rarely achieved standing back with a long telephoto.

It requires courage and takes some practice to get in close and communicate with strangers. But if you're friendly, casual and quick, it's amazing how accommodating most people are. Don't take yourself too seriously. Have fun! If your subjects sense you are enjoying yourself, they are unlikely to spoil your enjoyment by declining to be photographed.

Photographing up close overseas can be a challenge if you don't speak the local language. But smiling and joking go a long way. The subjects may sometimes think you're slightly crazy, but *does it really matter?* For photojournalism, take your courage in both hands and get in close with a wide-angle.

Portraiture

Conventional wisdom advises against making portraits with wide-angle lenses. Because the wide-angle accentuates the size of objects close to the camera, faces easily become distorted. The biggest risk is elongating the nose.

Nonetheless, PSNZ annual exhibitions down the years have regularly included successful portraits made with wide-angle lenses. Many are environmental portraits, depicting a person in a setting which is relevant and important to their character. Such portraits typically include most of the subject, not merely their head and shoulders. The wide-angle enables the portrait-maker, like the photojournalist, to create an image in which both the person featured and the background are sharp.

This is not to say that all portraiture with a wide-angle must necessarily include the whole figure. Tremendous impact can be achieved by almost filling the frame with a head & shoulders, using a 28mm lens. There will be a tendency for such photographs to alter the appearance of the subject so great care must be taken. Be particularly aware of the nose and adjust your viewpoint accordingly. When using a zoom, it is safest to fix the focal length at, say, 28mm, then adjust your position rather than zoom in and out.

Remember that portraiture aims to capture the character of the subject. A good portrait is not necessarily always a flattering portrait. A 28mm lens may make the subject look slightly 'different',

but there are cases where a subtle change in the subject's appearance results in a more powerful expression of their personality.

Landscapes

For photographing urban landscapes, the wide-angle has no equal. The very fact that you are able to *get more in* makes it incredibly valuable. In cities, you seldom have the flexibility to photograph from an ideal position. In narrow streets, for example, sometimes you physically cannot go further back.

In photographing tall buildings, a wide-angle can produce particularly dramatic results. It improves your chance of including the whole of the building and, most importantly, enables it to be sharp all the way up. Best of all, from a low viewpoint you can often include interesting foreground material, such as lampposts, to add a three dimensional feeling to the image.

The wide-angle brings similar benefits to rural landscapes. It has been observed that the New Zealand landscape is basically a beautiful 'backdrop'. For a strong pictorial image, this backdrop invariably needs a point of interest in the foreground. A wide-angle lens exaggerates the significance of material in the foreground. And with a reasonably small aperture it can make distant mountains appear as sharp as your focal point in the foreground.

Some of the most interesting landscapes are those with repeated shapes and textures in the foreground and background. Such pictures are frequently made with wide-angle lenses, say 24mm-28mm, and the camera positioned only 2-3 metres from the point of interest in the foreground.

Using a wide-angle lens in the countryside requires a search for *foregrounds*. This process, in itself, is enriching in heightening one's awareness of beauty everywhere.

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