

Worth a thousand words: the use of photographs in geoscience outreach

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In communicating our science to the public, writing in an easily understood and interesting style is vital, and well-designed schematics are essential; but nothing catches the attention more than an attractive photograph. A wellcrafted image can indeed be worth a thousand words! From experience in making and selecting images for several prominent outreach projects over the past two decades, I share some thoughts on what makes a good “outreach” geological image or set of images. In our more technical work, the tiniest detail is usually the main focus (pun intended). But in conveying geological ideas to a general audience, the “big picture” is usually more important than details, and setting the geological subject matter in a broader backdrop (for example rocks with a beach or cliff in the background) puts the general viewer more at ease. Technical-looking scales, especially in the centre of an image, are very off-putting for a general audience, for whom a leaf, or tree or person would give an unobtrusive sense of size. Other aspects of more general photographic appeal — attractive colours, thoughtful composition, interesting contrasts — are also obvious assets for a successful image. I will use examples from outreach products such as *The Last Billion Years*, *Four Billion Years and Counting*, and *Nova Scotia Rocks* to illustrate images that in my view work in an educational context. Also, I will discuss the collaboration between the Atlantic Geoscience Society (AGS) and the Photographic Guild of Nova Scotia since 2001. In conclusion I encourage geologists in the field to consider making images for outreach purposes in addition to those for technical needs: maybe when the AGS website is revamped, it could include a bank of images that members and educators could use for educational purposes, including public engagement exercises.