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Selfies blight the “super bloom”

By Wade Graham

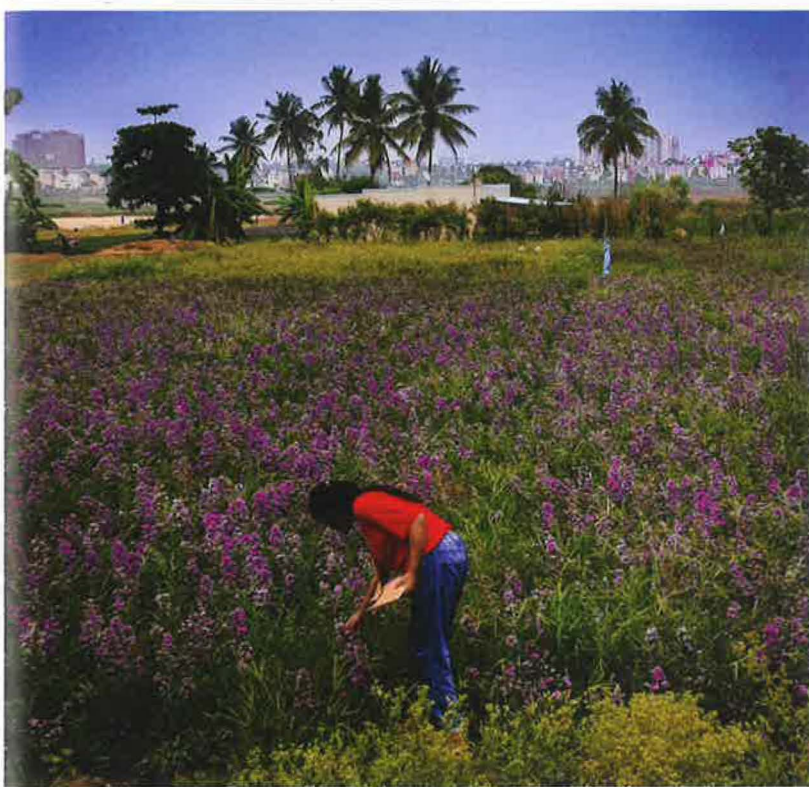


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When April showers bring May flowers what could be better than flocking to see them? In the UK, late spring brings swathes of bluebells, the glory of England and Wales’ ancient forests, and harebells in Scotland. Ramsons, columbines and lily-of-the-valley carpet limestone woods and pavements, milkmaids and cornflowers sprout in hay meadows, honeysuckle climbs the hedgerows, and, as summer progresses, heather brightens even the dourest moors. Wherever flowering cherry trees grow, from Cornwall to Clackmannanshire, Brits go mad calculating the trajectory and pace of the blooms, plotting cross-country pilgrimages to see their pink flowery clouds.

In the highly variable climate of the American West, alternating extremes of dry and wet years



The visual orgasm of the flower fields has become a target of the Instagram Selfie generation

yield feasts and famines of flowers, as plants adapt by holding most of their seeds dormant in the soil until, after a soaking winter, they germinate en masse. This winter has been exceptionally wet, especially in California where snow and rain records have been crushed by an endless series of “atmospheric river” storms. Its sequel is a “super bloom” of wildflowers. (The term only appeared in 2016 and has no scientific definition. But, to paraphrase the US Supreme Court justice who attempted to define “hard-core pornography” in the 1964 obscenity case against Louis Malle’s 1958 film *The Lovers*, starring Jeanne Moreau, you’ll know it when you see it.)

All over the region, normally brown hillsides are aflame with prismatic hues: the gold of poppies, the blues and purples of lupines and phacelias, the dazzle of distinct yellows in lemon, butter and day-glo. There’s no better example of the adjective “spectacular” than square miles of hills and valleys splashed with colours, as if from the painted brushstrokes of an abstract expressionist God.

And “super bloom” describes equally well the explosion of flower pictures on social media, since 2016 [*why then?*]. The rarity and visual orgasm of the flower fields has inevitably become a target of the Instagram Selfie generation, with its fear-of-missing-out anxiety and compulsion towards image repetition and appropriation. A single upload of a false-eyelashed lass posing in a field of poppies can unleash 10,000 more, as small-screen-possessed legions head to the often-remote locations where exuberant flowering occurs.

The spring of 2019 was frankly a debacle: a spectacle of bad behaviour masquerading as an appreciation of nature’s beauty. People descended in their hundreds of thousands on the most-publicised “secret” beauty spots: traipsing, trampling, picking and picnicking on delicate plants. In their wake they left compacted earth, trash and even human waste, as well as causing epic traffic jams and creating vast car parks in the flower fields. Most, if not all, were intent on capturing photos of *themselves* – selfies with the wildflowers for background styling. Professional influencers and wannabes brought costume changes such as wedding gowns, flouncy pastel dresses, gigantic hats, and Kardashian-worthy makeup, as if every day was Easter and we were all Benjamin Bunny or Bo Peep. One engaged couple even paid a helicopter pilot to put them down in a virgin field of poppies for their Instagram apotheosis.

People have been attracted to unusual, spectacular natural phenomena for millennia: the rarer and more difficult to access, the better. The Romans, for example, were fascinated by the smoke and fire of Mount Etna volcano in Sicily – though unfortunately they believed Mount Vesuvius near Naples to be extinct, and built towns like Pompeii at its base, unaware of the danger. In the eighteenth century, the British ambassador to the Spanish court at Naples, William Hamilton, obsessively catalogued the volcano’s changes and eruptions; his dispatches and sketches made it a *de rigueur*

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stop on the Grand Tour, the original tourist route from which one was expected to bring home exotic evidence to display to jealous friends and family.

Even then, *being there* was as much about claiming bragging rights as about witnessing nature's rare and wonderful glories. Though in the case of Hamilton, the attention he paid to nature considerably advanced scientific understanding, becoming the basis for modern volcanology.

Today, such tourism brings new difficulties. First, in the phrase of the architect Moshe Safdie: "the problem of scale is real... the result of fundamental changes in the statistical condition of humanity". In other words, there are now too damn many of us. But this challenge is theoretically manageable. The Poppy Reserve in the California desert, after being overrun by Instagrammers in 2019, upped its game this year with a webcam for vicarious thrills, more parking lots, and friendly minders on the trails to try to keep the trampling hordes in line.

But the second problem – the unbridled vanity of our current culture, in which narcissism is both the diagnostic and the feverishly desired condition, reducing the real world to digital wallpaper for our projected selves – might not be manageable. It has given new urgency to an old argument among conservationists: is it good for Nature if lots of people are encouraged to go and see it up close? Or does mass visitation do more harm than good? Especially in this era of over-tourism, where we're in danger of loving natural beauty to death.

I'm tempted to say: let us be tourists anyway and if we screw up it shows we can't have nice things. At least we'll have learned something – if not about flora, the environment and the miracles of their evolution and adaptation on a changing planet, then about ourselves. We'll have learned that many of us are incapable of intelligent reflection, only of seeing our own reflections, like Narcissus in the pond.

However, there may be grounds for hope. This spring's "super bloom" predictably brought out influencers posting from the flower fields, some with picked poppies in their teeth, harvesting "likes" by the tens of thousands. But a backlash ensued, in which such posts were bombed with condemnation for "despoiling Nature" and "selfish selfies". Tutting hashtags like #Horribleperson were attached to the flower-offenders' threads. So, we might already be learning something useful, after all.

Wade Graham is an author, environmentalist and academic. He lives in LA



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