

As Adobe has added more and more controls to Adobe Camera Raw, it is easy to understand why you would become slightly confused about some of them. There is a lot of power packed into this RAW conversion tool!

The Recovery slider is similar in concept to the Fill Light slider, which I generally describe as the "fill flash" control. Instead of recovering shadow detail that would have otherwise been hidden in darkness, the Recovery slider allows you to recover detail that would have otherwise been lost in bright highlights. Think of it as a way to tone down bright highlights that haven't yet been blown out due to an exposure that was too bright. In most cases you could accomplish the same result with Curves by utilizing an anchor point that darkens the brightest areas of the image slightly without adjusting the white point (dragging an anchor point placed near the top of the curve downward slightly, based on the default settings for Curves).

The Clarity slider is one that I actually consider to be very well named. The other way I describe it is as a "haze buster". It provides local contrast enhancement, which is very similar to applying sharpening with a rather high Radius setting but relatively low Amount setting. It can be very helpful, but as with sharpening it can also create some edge highlight artifacts. If you have a photo that could use a boost in clarity, I recommend zooming in to a high-contrast area of the image to verify your setting before applying it. While it can take a healthy dose of Clarity to produce a visible effect in the image, it is also easy to get carried away and produce an artificial (or just plain bad) result.

The Vibrance setting, which is now also available as an adjustment layer in Photoshop CS4 is quite helpful with many images. It is similar to the Saturation slider (and the Saturation control found in the Hue/Saturation adjustment), but it only affects primary colors and thus protects things like skin tones. It also has a built-in protection mechanism that prevents it from producing colors that are too garish. In short, it is like applying Saturation with automatic self-control. However, because of the way it affects the colors in your image, it sometimes doesn't provide the strength you need. What I find is that I typically apply a rather strong increase in Vibrance, and then a very slight increase in Saturation to boost overall colors. The combination works quite well.

All three of these are controls I use sparingly in Camera Raw. I use a Curves adjustment via an adjustment layer rather than Recovery, and I use a Vibrance adjustment layer to achieve what would otherwise be accomplished with the Vibrance control in Adobe Camera Raw. As for Clarity, I'll use it when needed, and then use a high-Radius application of Unsharp Mask as needed to cut through the haze in some photos.