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Consuming Nature: Mass Media and The Cultural Politics of Animals and Environments

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**CONSUMING NATURE:
THE CULTURAL POLITICS OF ANIMALS AND THE ENVIRONMENT IN THE MASS MEDIA**

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At the end of his non-fiction book *Collapse*, after outlining how the destructive practices of most human societies are steering them toward ecological collapse and causing extinction of species, Jared Diamond (2005, p. 522) pins his hope for change on the global awareness-raising potential of the media: "Our television documentaries and books show us in graphic detail why the Easter Islanders, Classic Maya, and other past societies collapsed. Thus we have the opportunity to learn from the past mistakes...an opportunity that no past society enjoyed to such a degree."

Diamond indicates the two most important factors to prevent collapse are "long-term planning, and willingness to reconsider core values" (p. 522), both of which, we contend, can be instigated by the media, as the agenda-setter of public policy, as the cultivator of national identity and values, and as the primary cultural storyteller. The stories media choose to tell matter. Scientists can discover all kinds of problems and solutions to species issues, but if the media fail to convey and frame these discoveries productively, and if people's media-cultivated value systems don't allow them to care, then all the information in the world won't matter.

The commercially-driven mass media package human identity and all our surrounding environment for daily consumption in the public sphere. It is of critical importance whether they choose to ignore humanity's responsibility toward the natural world and simply have us consume it as a product, or whether they actively cultivate ecological responsibility and newfound respect toward animals as fellow sentient beings. This chapter explores the necessity, potential, and challenges of relying on the media (journalism, television, advertising, film, radio, internet, etc.) to inspire the social change needed to reverse the destructive behaviors and beliefs that are contributing to our global ecological calamity. We address this both in specific terms related to how media raise awareness about habitat and wildlife

protection and also in broader terms of how media could change humanist worldviews and consumptive lifestyles to promote self-awareness of humanity's position as a fellow species in an ecological web in crisis. To begin, we review scholarly literature on the social function of mass media and the way they represent nonhuman animals (NHAs). We then suggest methods for addressing environmental challenges through the news and entertainment media, including ideas for media practitioners as well as concerned citizens.

Media, Culture and Nature

The role of media in modern industrial society cannot be understated. The media are a vital link in systems of information that transmit and create meaning through representation. These representations serve to bind social networks together in a way that is both imaginary and real. Communication is a process of meaning making that constantly creates, modifies, and maintains a shared culture and reality (Carey, 1989). This reflects a view of language as a social construction which attempts to fix meaning and a "truth" to signs so the signification appears natural rather than arbitrary or contrived. According to critical scholar Stuart Hall (1997a,b), media are now the dominant means of social signification that both reflect and manufacture discursive "truths," and as such are the site of much ideological struggle to define meaning within modern capitalist society.

Television, for example, is not just an entertainment medium; it is a cultural artifact with a mainstreaming effect (Gerbner et al, 1978, Earp, 2010). Because it is a commercial institution, television's version of social reality conforms to the interests of its owners and sponsors, which ultimately cultivates widespread support for the status quo and resistance to change. This bolsters political economy scholars' critiques of a commercially-structured American media system that presents itself as a democratic free marketplace of ideas while ultimately serving the vested interests of owners and advertisers (McChesney, 1999).

Newspapers and books combine narratives about events in the world into a daily consumer product that serves to bind social groups together and maintain community (Anderson, 2006). When an individual privately reads about tangible things in the world, he/she is also confident in the knowledge that the same action is publicly undertaken by other citizens in the same way. Therefore, consumption patterns related to the maintenance of society are normalized into routine – a process critical to the creation of national consciousness.

Western media representations of nonhuman animals (NHAs) provide a fascinating look inside the cultural practices and attitudes of society toward the fellow members of biotic communities. As Maxwell Boykoff (2009) explains:

Media representations are convergences of competing knowledges, framing environmental issues for policy, politics, and the public and drawing attention to how to make sense of, as well as value, the changing world. Emanating out from these processes, public perceptions, attitudes, intentions, and behaviors, in turn, often link back through mass media into ongoing formulations of environmental governance. (p. 434)

The mass media are the tools used by institutions and members of society to create intellectual frames that are critical to the dissemination of environmental values and attitudes. The media transmit and reflect these beliefs, functioning as a link between different discourses of knowledge. Boykoff (2009) notes the media face many important issues in regards to the environment, particularly questions of "fairness, accuracy, and precision" (p. 440). As the link between the environment, science, and government, the media participate in a "cultural politics of the environment" that perpetuates a system of domination and control.

Predators, Prey, or Friends?

A substantial amount of scholarship has focused on media coverage of types of species, such as those portrayed as threats or pests. Judy Cohen and John Richardson (2002) trace the development of public fear of pit bulldogs, something that they claim was exacerbated by the news media coverage of pit bull attacks on humans. They claim this coverage is part of a traditional story of man vs. beast: "The deviant incident of beast attacking man has fascinated and horrified people for millennia" (p. 295). Indeed, the theme of evil animals is detailed by the work of Rod Giblett (2006) on alligators and Jan-Christopher Horak (2006) on sharks. Colin Jerolmack (2008) also identifies the *New York Times'* vilification of pigeons as pests. Then there are animals designated as prey or "game." For example, hunting video games encourage resistance to environmental protection because they embody a conception of nature as an object for pleasure and personal use (Sawers and Demetrious, 2010). Dolphins present an interesting case because they fall into a category that is different than "attack" or "prey" animals. A study found popular literature portrays dolphins in four primary ways (1) as friends to humans, (2) as a symbol of freedom and peace and a romanticized view of nature, (3) as innocent and in need of our protection, and (4) as superior to humans (Fraser et al, 2006).

Advertising

Television advertisements use six primary frames to portray NHAs: 1) as an object of affection and love, 2) as a symbol of something else, 3) as a tool or object that can be used in a practical way, 4) as wildlife in their natural habitat, 5) as an allegorical creature, and 6) as a pest (Lerner and Kalof, 1999, p. 574). The researchers found the most common frame was animal identified as a loved one who provides assistance or participates in family life. The second most common frame was animals as symbols, where animals become logos, transferring their traits to the product advertised.

Companies use animal imagery to symbolically convey their green nature (Spears and Germain, 2007). As attitudes toward nature have shifted to value NHAs more inherently, ads less often depict NHAs with humans and more often portray them in a natural setting. The role of green advertising is an increasingly important issue, as many companies try to brand themselves to appear environmentally friendly, which can be called "greenwashing" if it is misleading. Others, like fast food chains, often resist ecological framing to emphasize masculine hedonistic consumption (in this case, men eating lots of animals) unrestrained by "feminine" concerns about health, ethics, or ecological consequences (Freeman and Merskin, 2008).

News

The need for profit impacts the structure of news programming and framing of environmental issues. Like other forms of programming, the news is a product, and consumers must be made to watch it for profits to be maintained. Subsequently, the needs of the market outweigh the needs of the environment, even when it is the subject of programs. According to Boykoff (2009), while news media sometimes give voice to the environment, sensationalism or support for exploitation are just as likely as support for protection because media "articulations may take on varied roles over time, from watchdog to lapdog to guard dog" (p. 435).

Initial news reports on environmental controversies are frequently negative and narrowly-focused, as shrinking environmental news budgets and the demands of modern journalism create a need to start with a "news hook" that is often linked to the portrayal of humans in a dramatic struggle with nonhuman nature (Boykoff, 2009, p. 445-446). The resulting stories frequently conflate multiple issues into simplistic explanations that fail to reflect the complexity of problems, thereby skewing public debate about scientific issues (Boykoff, 2009, p. 433). An example of this problem can be seen in news coverage of black bears in New York state. The news relied more on episodic rather than thematic framing, resulting in predominantly negative coverage that characterizes the environmental issue as a personal conflict between bears and humans (Zavestoski et al, 2004 and Siemer et al, 2007).

There is an inherent danger in the way the news media provide information, according to Jacqueline Burgess (1990, p. 155). She suggests that environmental news coverage runs the risk of alienating the public because it can create feelings of helplessness in the face of staggering problems. She argues for new types of research into the inter-textual nature of mass media and its production of environmental knowledge in mainstream society in order to better address environmental challenges.

More productive environmental news coverage is vital, as the news plays a leading role in influencing the public's political consciousness and priorities, setting the agenda for public policy discussions in terms of what issues the public deems most important (McCombs, 2005). While the news doesn't tell people exactly what to think, it tells them what to think *about*; and because of the power of framing, it often tells people *how* to think about it. Robert Entman (1993) acknowledges the power of news framing to identify problems and solutions: "to frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation" (p.52).

The agenda-setting role of the news was illustrated by a study of news coverage in the 1980s that demonstrates the convergence of coverage of several environmental issues: ozone depletion, the greenhouse effect, species extinction, and rainforest destruction (Mazur and Lee, 1993). As coverage of these issues grew, a general agenda-setting effect was witnessed as problems facing the environment were placed firmly on the national political landscape.

Documentaries

While beneficial in many respects, nature documentaries can increasingly be pragmatically conceived as scientific tools to record animals and ecosystems before they become extinct (Horak, 2006, p. 459-460). Cinema and film thus serve as crypts for animals who are "perpetually vanishing" but never die (Lippit, 2000, p. 1). In the words of Akira Lippit (2000), "The cinema developed, indeed embodied, animal traits as a gesture of mourning for the disappearing wildlife. The figure for nature in language, animal, was transformed in cinema to the name for movement in technology, animation" (p. 197). Technology (media and machinery) itself is inspired by animals, just as it comes to replace them – transferring their bodily energy into a virtual life animated in metal and imagery.

Nonetheless, nature documentaries are a contested area for environmentalists. Many feel they productively generate sympathy for environmental causes, while others feel they are more about profit and entertainment (Burgess, 1990, p. 153 and Barbas et al, 2009). In his study of Swedish television, Hillevi Ganetz (2004) argues that nature documentaries contain images and storylines that reinforce traditional gender norms and often focus on incredibly violent images of animals in conflict or hunting/catching prey, as opposed to the idyllic pastoral scenes common in Disney films, reflecting changes in cultural attitudes more accepting toward violence. These problems relate back to the fundamental fact that documentaries are framed, mediated interpretations of nature that reflect narratives dominant within the culture that created them.

Similarly, in analyzing the Discovery Channel, David Pierson (2005) outlines four major themes running through its nature programming: (1) nature and gender, (2) anthropomorphism, (3) nature and social structure/hierarchy, and (4) social conceptions of nature, of which there are three—nature as object of scientific control, nature as threatened, and nature as sacred. Pierson concludes that the Discovery Channel creates some understanding of nature, but ultimately does so through a lens that anthropomorphizes nature, such that it is understood through human characteristics and traits. Nature is seen as having complex, hierarchical social organizations that mirror human families and reinforce existing human social and gender hierarchies.

Also criticizing documentaries is Jan-Christopher Horak (2006), who notes that the increase in animal programming on television is taking place during a time of dramatic species extinction. Yet rather than producing a desire to protect wilderness, animal shows primarily serve to create a desire to

consume more images of nature, as viewers identify with anthropomorphized animal depictions. Governmental/ political solutions to environmental problems are notably absent from the majority of programs in favor of personal solutions, such as a kind-hearted individual rescuing a stranded animal. For example, the Animal Planet network has altered its programming to focus on human-centered interventions into the environment (Umstead, 2009). Its highest-rated program, *Whale Wars*, follows the Sea Shepherd activists on their attempts to stop whale hunting. It has been argued that a whale-centered show would be preferred to the anthropocentric focus this program uses in primarily chronicling the exploits of human activists against hunters (Besel and Besel, 2010).

Another thought-provoking critique of the animal documentary is provided by Brett Mills (2010) who argues quite persuasively that the documentary itself is an inherently anthropocentric instrument that denies NHAs the same right to privacy that many people, particularly in the West, cherish. Nature documentaries pride themselves on enabling audiences to experience nature without harming it, yet nobody questions if it is harmful to film NHAs engaging in their most intimate actions. “To look at an animal—and to decide that humans have a right to look at animals because animals don’t have a right to privacy—is an act of empowerment, reinforcing the moral hierarchy which legitimizes the act in the first place” (p. 199). Mills’ argument creates a troubling double-bind for environmentalists and documentarians because even if nature documentaries did result in a desire to protect the environment, they do so from an anthropocentric perspective that legitimizes human superiority and justifies management practices that are rooted in surveillance and an assumption of inequality.

An Ecologically Sensitive Media

Despite the power of mass media, audiences maintain the agency to interpret media messages in a variety of ways: as dominant readings reinforcing the status quo, as negotiated readings partially transformed by personal meaning-making, or as oppositional readings. Oppositional readings reject the dominant perspective, and for Stuart Hall (1980), this represents a moment where political alternatives are formed. It is through challenging dominant discursive formations and the creation of oppositional meanings that changes can be made in media systems and representation of the nonhuman world. With hope for addressing the crises facing our planet, in this section we suggest potential solutions for producers of entertainment programming, news, and activist campaigns.

One issue that affects both entertainment and news programming is the increasing portrayal of human-caused violence. Human-to-human violence on television can produce what Gerbner calls a “mean world syndrome” where heavy-viewers think society is a more violent and mean place than it is, which can cause fear, mistrust, and a desire for authoritative security measures (Earp, 2010). Human violence toward NHAs is also prevalent across all media platforms, especially in the form of ubiquitous messages supporting meat-eating and hunting/fishing (consider dining and outdoor sections of the news, advertisements for meat and hunting equipment, and a plethora of hunting and cooking shows). This normalizes the unnecessary killing and death of NHAs, cheapening their lives and status in human society. While killing certain NHAs is legal and therefore understandably reflected in the media, responsible media practitioners may see it as their duty to counteract the speciesist bias by actively questioning the killing and use of NHAs for food or sport and providing contradictory, non-violent representations (Freeman, 2009).

Film and Television

While many fictional movies have illustrated an apocalyptic future due to war or environmental devastation, it may be more useful for storytellers to use their imagination to help viewers envision a less speciesist future world governed by ecological principles that enforce sustainability, including a smaller human population. Movies can show us what that world would look like, how it would be structured, and explain the path to get there.

Fictional films are also noted for their ability to destroy human/nature dualisms through the portrayal of romantic relationships between humans and nonhumans. Gothic romance, science fiction and horror are powerful genres because they allow the articulation of a “zoocentric perspective” (Swan, 1999, and Creed, 2006). Werewolf and vampire films and epics such as King Kong all demonstrate the themes of human evolution and destroy the lines that have been drawn between humans and nonhumans.

Whether in film or television programs, viewers learn from what they witness in media and often identify with favorite characters (Bandura, 1994), therefore, we believe producers should incorporate environmentally-responsible themes and have main protagonist characters model sustainable behaviors and attitudes daily. As a matter of course, characters could be less materialistic, less consumption-oriented, less wasteful, more civic-minded, and respectful and nonviolent toward fellow animals, such as eating a plant-based diet. Parents could be shown adopting children or giving birth to only one or two.

When NHAs are the main “characters” in film and television documentaries, viewers’ desires to relate to characters creates a disproportionate emphasis on social animals who are charismatic, cute, exciting, or beautiful (according to human cultural standards). Therefore, NHA programming tends to privilege mammals and birds at the expense of fish, amphibians, reptiles, and invertebrates, even though the latter categories comprise the vast majority of the species on Earth – such as worms, insects, and plankton who are ecologically valuable and individuals in their own right. For a positive example of a documentary representing the diversity of life, the BBC’s *Planet Earth* series’ episode on jungles features leaf frogs and bullet ants in addition to elephants, monkeys, and birds of paradise.

Yet *Planet Earth*’s behind-the-scenes peek at the videographer’s struggle to be the first person to capture the bird of paradise’s mating ritual demonstrates Mills’ (2010) conundrum about cameras invading NHA privacy and human’s sense of entitlement in witnessing the intimate details of NHA life. Here utilitarian pragmatism and idealism collide in terms of short and long-term solutions to save species, as on a practical level, humans believe they come to know and respect NHAs by learning about them. Yet, philosophically, documentaries may be inadvertently perpetuating the human/animal dualism by treating other animals as unwitting actors and objects of curiosity.

A major question remains; can consuming animals in documentaries keep people from consuming their actual habitats, thus saving their lives? This addresses Horak’s (2006) and Lippit’s (2000) concerns in wondering how to keep documentaries from being mere historical records or virtual habitats for animals going extinct. If there is hope for change, it lies in a re-orientation of documentaries toward an emphasis on the role of the individual acting within a community: both human and nonhuman. The key is an emphasis on the way that personal action functions within larger institutional and organizational approaches as well as the biotic community where the individual lives.

In addition to promoting animal rescue, documentaries could focus more holistically on promoting social change, human self-critique, and personal responsibility in terms of living sustainably. Shows on green living in both urban and rural settings are warranted in terms of showcasing human cultures that are embracing ecological principles. Related nonfiction programming could connect production and consumption, showing how products and services are made, going all the way back to the source – the “natural resources” impacted or used (the deforestation, pollution, killing or displacing of NHAs, etc.).

Media narratives need to place humans in an inter-connected web to avoid a dichotomous “us and them” perspective. If people begin to appreciate their own animality, this should foster further respect for fellow animals as persons/individuals. It only perpetuates the nature/culture and human/animal dualisms if documentaries characterize “the wild” as dangerous, harsh, unethical, and inhuman while implicitly privileging so-called “developed” human society as humane, civilized culture. This denies humans’ place in nature, the wild justice of social animal cultures, and the rational

sustainability of natural systems (Bekoff and Pierce, 2009 and Freeman, 2010b). When nature programs frequently emphasize dramatic predator-prey chase and attack scenes for purposes of heightening the action for viewers, it can perpetuate the stereotype of nature as primarily “red in tooth in claw” – a brutal aggression implying an innately-violent animalistic nature that civilized humans seek to repress.

It would be beneficial to originate a TV network that represents a nonspeciesist, biocentric perspective in its documentaries, news, public affairs, drama, comedy, and lifestyle programming – linked to the web for free viewing. Channels such as Discovery, Planet Green, Animal Planet, and National Geographic Wild are often too conservative and anthropocentric. Additionally, to supplement fine series such as PBS’s *Nature*, public broadcasting should integrate a biocentric perspective across the spectrum of its kids and adult programming (as it has a mandate to be educational and socially-responsible), including starting a weekly prime-time show dedicated to critical environmental issues such as mass extinction and climate change.

News

As part of their propensity for episodic frames, American news media do not focus much on nature and environmentalism unless there is a catastrophic episode like an oil spill. Non event-oriented catastrophes that are ongoing and chronic (such as species extinction, climate change, or factory farm pollution) are harder to fit into narrative news story formats that value drama, timeliness, and visual spectacle. Unfortunately, episodic frames create incomplete understandings (Siemer et al, 2007). News stories that are thematic rather than episodic in nature are important at the beginning of a controversy, as they tend to emphasize solutions while providing a broader context for understanding issues in a way that is public rather than personal.

We contend that if the environment was made a regular news beat like politics, sports, or business, then issues such as mass extinction could be covered thematically as a daily crisis. This dedicated environmental beat should view ecological issues as more than just scientific, as they are also socio-psychological, ethical, and political. A new less human-biased perspective is called for that is more biocentric and values the interests of the other living beings regardless of their usefulness or charm to humans.

One way this can be achieved is for journalists to view NHAs as a legitimate news source whose perspective and interests deserve a voice in stories that affect their lives (Freeman, Bekoff and Bexell, 2011). When voices are absent, those beings appear as if they do not matter, reinforcing a speciesist privileging of human interests. As part of journalism’s commitment to truth and justice, they should represent other animals accurately and fairly, discussing them as individuals on their own terms, and avoiding discussing them primarily in terms of human-centered utilitarian calculations. This would mean journalists should avoid stereotyping certain species as “natural” pests, threats, game, or tools for humans (for food, research, skins, entertainment, etc.) (Freeman, 2009).

As human spokespeople for NHA interests, environmental and animal activists deserve to have their perspectives respectfully incorporated into news instead of being marginalized as radicals in favor of more “reasonable” government or industry sources. One way for this to develop is at the university level, where incorporation of environmental classes into journalism curriculum would provide a foundation for lasting changes in the attitudes and practices of professionals in the industry.

CONCLUSION

Activists understandably rely on media exposure as their main tool for raising awareness and leveraging power against governments and exploitative industries. As an example, one of the last scenes in the Academy award-winning documentary *The Cove* shows activist Ric O’Barry standing in the crowded, neon-lit commercial heart of downtown Tokyo wearing a DVD screen on his chest to showcase undercover footage of the dolphin slaughter in Taiji, Japan. While emphasizing the media’s importance,

this scene also reveals the marginalization of pro-animal discourse competing for attention amongst a clutter of images in a commercially-dominated public sphere (Freeman and Tulloch, 2011). So while the media have the *potential* to be a major force in preventing ecological collapse (as Jared Diamond asserts), we acknowledge the need to demand a paradigm shift in mainstream media values that currently put profit, consumerism, and amusement before the long-term planning, problem-solving, and re-assessment of core values that will be required to save life on Earth.

We call upon citizens to monitor and reward ecologically-responsible media by supporting media watchdog groups such as Dawnwatch (for animals) and media awards presented by the Environmental Media Association and the Humane Society of the U.S. (The Genesis Awards). Citizens should write to media producers to express praise or criticisms, and financially support media that stand up for animals and nature. Because commercially-funded programming has less financial incentive to produce ecologically-responsible messages, citizens must also use and support public, non-commercial, and non-profit media, including emerging non-profit journalism organizations that may require donations to produce investigative reports. Local citizens should take advantage of public access channels, community radio, web sites/blogs, and social media as ways to start producing their own public affairs or advocacy programming or airing documentaries that commercial media tend not to show. In crafting messages, ecologically-minded citizens, scientists, and activists should present the hard facts while also openly speaking to their ideals and moral vision (without watering it down). The challenge to speaking candidly is to do so in strategic ways that still resonate culturally with target audiences who may be speciesist or environmentally-unsavvy (Freeman, 2010a and Lakoff, 2004).

This chapter demonstrates that society is bombarded with images and ideas about nature in both fiction and non-fiction media platforms. These networks must recognize the shared collective burden we have as humans inextricably linked to the ecosystem where we live. It is the connection we have as individuals both to our human community as well as to our ecological bioregion that is often lost in modern media. To avoid simply consuming nature, we must view ourselves as more than media consumers (or as consumers in general) but as media reformers, media producers, and engaged ecological citizens. This chapter highlights both the strengths and weaknesses in modern media formats and conventions with the belief that change is possible to prevent ecological collapse but must begin now.

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