

NARRATIVE IN WILDLIFE FILMS: HOW IT SHAPES OUR UNDERSTANDING
OF THE NATURAL WORLD AND
INFLUENCES CONSERVATION CHOICES

by

Praveen Singh

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Ronald Tobias

Approved for the Department of Media and Theater Arts

Joel Jahnke

Approved for the College of Graduate Studies

Bruce McLeod

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Praveen Singh

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ABSTRACT

Storytelling is perhaps mankind's oldest tendencies. Their narratives give meaning to our everyday experiences and help us understand our world. Wildlife and natural history films in telling stories about the nature help define, to some extent, our relationship with it. Following the historical development of the classical narrative model in wildlife and nature films, the paper explores its impact on conservation choices and argues for an alternative approach to narrative in these films in order to change the oppositional relationship that we currently share with the nature.

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, wildlife and nature films¹ have received critical attention from media scholars as well as the wildlife filmmaking community. The works of Bousé and Mitman offer insights into the aesthetic, social, political and economic processes that impact these films. Wildlife filmmakers, on the other hand, have been concerned with the impact, if any, of wildlife films on conservation. Passionate about the natural world, they strongly believe that their films make a positive contribution to conservation of nature and wildlife (Palmer; Webber 2). Limited research and anecdotal evidence suggests that their belief is not entirely misplaced.²

Wildlife and nature films, which are mostly broadcast on television, seek to bring to audiences stories about the natural world. In attempting to do so, they conflate two epistemologically different narratives—the circular narrative of science and the linear literary narrative.³ This fusion of science and entertainment in the mass media has shaped the narratives of present day wildlife and nature films. Since narrative is integral not only to nature and wildlife films, but also is a form that helps us understand our world, this paper proposes to discuss the role of narrative in wildlife and nature films and offer an analysis of its impact on conservation choices.

THE CASE FOR ANALYZING NARRATIVE

Narratives shape our reality (Merchant 3). Recounting events and telling stories are some of mankind's most enduring tendencies, and as old as human language itself. Archeologists and art historians have discerned elements of the narrative even in prehistoric cave paintings (Bousé 19). Narrative form is evident even before Aristotle laid the foundations for describing the narrative—a story with a beginning, middle and an end— in the fifth century's B.C.E. Aesop's Fables. The roots of the centrality of narrative in today's wildlife films can be traced to a combination of the elements of our historical and cultural traditions, literary writings of the early 20th century naturalists and the evolution of wildlife films alongside that of mainstream Hollywood cinema. Myths and fables, like Aesop's Fables and the Panchatantra (folk tales from India), and religious texts such as Mahabharata, Ramayana, and the Bible are all narratives that have held sway on the direction of human culture for millennia. Given the deep historical roots of the narrative in our psyche, it is not surprising that wildlife and nature films, a subsidiary of the expressive, linear form of motion picture, should have evolved from being mere recordings of actual events or tools for scientific research to being a strongly narrative form (Bousé 19-20). Art and entertainment – a culture outside the domain of science, not only appropriated film technology created for scientific research but also defined the terms in which the medium could be used. Thus, the filming of animal behavior blurred the distinctions between art, science and entertainment.

Today, wildlife and nature films, a product of these historical and cultural factors, is produced in a commercially competitive market. Driven by new technologies, changing production and delivery options, co-production, international presales and fragmented audiences in multiple markets, the narrative has become integral to the survival of the business (Bousé 96). Phil Fairclough, former head of UK based Granada Wild acknowledges “that attention to storyline, character and innovative approaches are much more important than simply filming the natural behavior and habitats of animals—the traditional focus of many natural history shows” (Cottle 86). The universality of narrative formulae across cultures further allows these films to be repackaged and exported to audiences across the globe. Implicit in Fairclough’s comment is the subservience of science to storytelling and consequent abandonment of any pretensions of wildlife and nature film narratives to be based on science. As Cottle in referring to Bousé makes the case, “natural history programmes have undergone evolution...the scientific pretensions of earlier forms of wildlife documentary do not really stand up to much scrutiny” (3-4).

Wildlife and nature film narratives on the mass medium of television are metaphors within cultural life, orienting and constraining the ways in which people experience the natural world (Mitman 640). Therefore, critical analysis of these narratives, which are increasingly devoid of any conceptual or empirical grounding in the natural sciences, becomes evident and necessary.

NARRATIVE IN WILDLIFE FILMS – A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

Narrative can be defined as a chain of events in a cause-effect relationship occurring in space and time. David Bordwell uses this definition to analyze the narrative in fiction films. It should not be surprising that the definition works for both wildlife (non-fiction) and fiction films. Both forms of filmmaking have roots in the cultural traditions of mankind: the cinematic genre itself developed in the late 19th century when the most popular forms of entertainment of the time were the novel and theatre, strong adherents to the classical fictional narrative approach—as defined by Aristotle centuries earlier (Bousé 18). Moreover, cinema itself began not just with attempts to bring motion to pictures, but tried to use pictures to reveal and study the motions of animals (Bousé 41). In 1877 in the United States, Eadweard Muybridge produced a photographic sequence using multiple cameras to study a horse's gallop. In 1882, his contemporary, French physiologist, Etienne-Jules Marey, invented the chronophotographic gun to study birds in flight (Mitman 638). Thus was born 'motion pictures' or cinema. Soon, audiences in America and Europe thronged to see "actualités" mainly consisting of people feeding animals. In 1895, in France, the Lumière brothers invented the Cinématographe – a portable motion picture camera. The Lumière brothers, for the first time ever, screened films to a paying audience, thus turning to film into mass entertainment (Nelmes 65). Slowly, but surely, the technology began to be used for artistic purposes, for storytelling. Edwin S. Porter's films; *The Life of an American Fireman* (1902) and *The Great Train Robbery* (1903) were among the first that had begun to tell a story as a series of linked scenes. By the

early 1900s, the use of film technology had moved from education into art and entertainment.

This time period also witnessed two other closely interrelated developments—the rise of the narrative writings focused on the natural world and the emergence of environmental preservation organizations like Sierra Club alongside the federal government’s increasing preoccupation with conserving natural resources. While literary narrative writing icons such as William J. Long, Charles D. Roberts and Ernest Thompson Seton’s stories anthropomorphized animal characters, the writings of Aldo Leopold, John Muir, Henry David Thoreau, John Burroughs, were based on their association with the natural world and called for its preservation. While the developments in naturalist writings and film reflected artistic, educational and recreational concerns of the time they also sowed the seeds for the debate between authentic and fake, science and entertainment, and brought into focus the divisions between high culture and low culture. The emergent debate about ‘nature-faking’ in the stories, found reflection in the developing safari and hunting films in which the naturalist – photographer walked a thin line between capturing authentic images of wild nature and artificially fabricating drama for box-office success.⁴ Though educational and religious leaders saw natural history films as an important venue for reinforcement of science, education, and moral values, they realized that this could only be done if the films could draw in the masses. Thus, in the safari and hunting films of 1910s, nature on screen became a space in which battles of authentic and fake, science and artifice, and nature as savage or innocent began to be played out (Mitman 8-10). Safari and hunting films like *Hunting Big Game in Africa* (1909),

Paul Rainey's African Hunt (1912), even though not always authentic, were endorsed by the rich and famous. Through this support, they gained acceptance among the public, and film became the space for the co-existence of science and entertainment - the inherent tensions between science and storytelling notwithstanding.

Around this time, narrative writers like James Oliver Curwood, who was writing for early feature films, managed to form a bridge between wildlife films and mainstream cinema by using strong animal protagonists and anthropomorphic projections woven into a plot that brought the subjects closer to filmable form. One of the first films based on Curwood's writings was *Baree, Son of Kasaan* (1917). More films based on Curwood's novels like, *Nomads of the North* (1919), and *Wapi the Walrus* (1919), set the stage for the incorporation of narrative form in the filming of animals. Most recently, Curwood's novel *The Grizzly King* (1916) formed the basis for Jean-Jacques Annaud's acclaimed film *The Bear (L'Ours)*, (1988).

Subsequent Hollywood features, like *Chang* (1927), *Rango* (1929), and *King Kong* (1933), which incorporated animals as key characters, cemented the bond between the two worlds of wildlife film and mainstream Hollywood. *Rango* in particular, by using all of the cinematic codes of mainstream cinema—continuity editing, sound-effects track, voice-over narration and close-up frames of animal behavior—could be best described as the first successful modern wildlife film because it developed a story centered on an animal protagonist with whom the viewers could emotionally identify. The character of Bimbo, in *Chang*, had already shown how this could be achieved. Thus animal characters from literary writings moved to celluloid in a post-Darwinian world, but often filtered through Victorian

moral sensibilities, and set the stage for what latter was to become the “classic” wildlife film in which nature and wildlife were individualized, personified and experienced at a personal level (Bousé 125). By the time in the 1930’s when wildlife biologists and ethologists like G.K. Noble, Julian Huxley, Konrad Lorenz and Nikko Tinbergen started using film extensively as a tool for scientific research and education, narrative had gained a strong foothold in the wildlife film. Implicit in these developments, as Mitman states lucidly, “ was the inevitability of experiential knowledge, which united scientist and cinematographer, to be left on the editing floor” (61). In the hands of these pioneering biologists and ethologists the camera was able to provide an intimate look into the daily and seasonal lives of animals while providing a wide-angle, panoramic vision of the intricate relationships among life.

The stage was thus set for Walt Disney to exploit the “drama” in nature and conform to changing environmental, moral and family values in post war America (Mitman 58). The showman Disney perfected the art of an animal protagonist-centered wildlife film, creating the template for the classic “blue-chip” model for wildlife films. They included a protagonist (either an individual or a species: e.g. *Dumbo* (1942), or *Tiger*, a BBC special) who either underwent a narrative journey, struggle, exaltation (Frye); or separation, initiation and return (Campbell), echoing the realms of myth and romance where such trials and triumphs have traditionally been the stuff of which historical and fictional heroes are made (Bousé 136). There were variants to the stories around these basic structural elements - the orphan or newborn’s struggle for survival against nature, man, other animals; the parents who have to take care of the family (*Echo Of The Elephants* (1991), *Tigers - Tracking a*

Legend (2002)). Mini-narratives that followed the balance-disturbance-balance cycle— chase and escape, external threat of another species—created the drama, typically set against a spatio-temporal backdrop of changing seasons. Disney’s *True-Life Adventure Series* (1948-1961), exemplified these narratives and the landscapes forming the backdrop for these stories became settings where nature could mediate myth and culture in such a way that human values could be found in animals and the idyllic places they inhabited.

Through the use of cinematic codes to construct these classic narratives— central character(s), ambiguous close-ups, cleverly edited point-of-view shots (objective and subjective views), evocative sound and music—driven overwhelmingly by emotions, nature and animals were sanitized and the screen became a place where naturalizing of human behaviors and values occurred.

The archetypal narrative in the classic “blue chip” model is generally biographical and individualistic, usually excluding humans from the picture. Though Bousé identifies two sub-categories within the classic model: films without humans, such as *True Life Series* and *The Leopard That Changed Its Spots* (1978), and those about animals involved with people as seen in *Lassie Come Home* (1943), *Born Free* (1966), and *Living Free* (1972), the difference between the two categories is negligible. The mere presence of humans in the frame could not bridge the centuries old cultural and historical biases rooted in Christianity, which firmly excluded any possibility of humans as a part of nature. Man either is the conqueror and has dominion over nature or is the savior and guardian of the natural world (Merchant 3-6).

In catering to the 'blue-chip' narrative form, wildlife and nature films have sought to reduce the complexities of the natural world and people's interactions with it into simplified, structured, logical, one-dimensional stories in which events are clearly ordered. They pose no concerted challenges to deeply held values, nor do they seek to uproot beliefs about the way the natural world functions. Dominant hierarchies and viewpoints about both nature and conservation are not only legitimized and reinforced but seem immutable.

NARRATIVE THEMES, ANTHROPOMORPHISM AND CONSERVATION CHOICES

The dominance of the classic wildlife narrative film raises two concerns that merit attention. First, is the age-old, highly contentious issue of anthropomorphism, implicit in which is the ground for debate about fact and fiction, science and emotion. Second is the stalwart refusal to see mankind as a part of nature, firmly placing humans in an oppositional relationship with their surroundings.

Anthropomorphism, or the act of assigning of human feelings, emotions and responses to non-humans, including animals, inanimate objects and spiritual forces, has been a controversial subject both in literary writings as well as in animal and nature studies. Only now, with recent developments in primatology and animal cognition, has it gained acceptance among some scientists.

Wildlife films, through their very construction, use of language and use of cinematic techniques like close up, point-of-view shots and music, cannot escape anthropomorphism. In understanding the use of anthropomorphism in the wildlife film and consequent impact on conservation choices, Frans De Waal's approach serves as a good starting point. De Waal distinguishes two forms of anthropomorphism: animal-centric and anthropocentric. While the latter is "naïve anthropomorphism," or attributing human emotions and feelings to animals based on wishful thinking or insufficient information, the former is a heuristic tool for generating testable ideas (77). According to DeWaal, the anthropocentric perspective serves human purposes to "mock, educate, moralize and entertain," which commonly

leads to the “bambification” of animals and nature. It satisfies a picture cherished by many of a peaceable, cozy, natural paradise (73-74). This kind of anthropomorphism firmly places humans outside the natural world as observers. In John Berger’s words:

...animals are always the observed. The fact that they can observe us has lost all significance. They are the objects of our ever-extending knowledge. What we know about them is an index of our power, and thus an index of what separates us from them. The more we know, the further away they are. (14)

The animal protagonist film, driven by the need for a narrative structure, and focused on telling the story of a single individual at the expense of exploring its connections with the ecosystem, often slips into this kind of anthropomorphism, thus attributing human emotions and intentionality to the animal species in focus.

Anthropocentric decontextualizing of the animal from its ecosystem by an excessive use of phrases like “She is a good mother,” “He is a doting father,” or “It’s what every father wants, his own little gene carriers,” is, in the words of Karla Armbuster, “...the colonizing move of turning what was other into the same with no respect for its difference from us (232).

The anthropomorphism in wildlife films also shows a distinct bias. It is most easy for us to anthropomorphize charismatic fauna like tigers, leopards, bears and whales, or animals with Kindchenschema (baby-appeal)—enlarged eyes and rounded infantile features (which are present in the adults of some species; pandas, for example. One may argue that making an empathetic bond between viewers and these species, using narrative and character-driven wildlife films, leads to increased support in for conservation of these species. However, this emotional bonding with the species often comes at a price. The natural characteristics of the animal are

exaggerated to the point of creating a fictional portrayal. It is equally likely that the conservation of the species is a double-edged sword and may come at the price of other species in the ecosystem. For example, in 1989 Sam Labudde's video footage of the slaughter of dolphins during tuna fishing, coupled with Stanley Minasian's 1990 film on the Discovery Channel, *Where Have All the Dolphins Gone*, successfully helped protect dolphins, resulting in a 95 percent reduction in dolphin kills. However, in 1997, the Clinton Administration under its compliance to the General Agreement on Trade and Tariffs reached an agreement that would permit Latin American fishermen to sale on U.S. Market tuna taken out using purse-seine nets, provided that dolphin kills are limited to five thousand animals per country per year.⁵ Citing concerns about the harm posed to other marine – fauna due to dolphin-safe fishing techniques, the US government, along with conservation organizations like the World Wide Fund for Nature, Greenpeace, Center for Marine Conservation favored the bill as a step toward ecosystem management. The bill finally died in the US Senate. As Mitman quotes a reporter for U.S. News and World Report, 'American consumers may care less about preserving ecosystems than about the plight of creatures as intelligent and appealing as dolphins' (Animal People News; Mitman 179). In a personal discussion, the author, David Quammen, had this to say, "...highly emotional anthropomorphism, aided by narratives we construct around the species, is an 'Opportunity Cost'. It leads to resources of time, money and energy being concentrated on the welfare of a single individual of a single species as opposed to utilizing them for conserving a population or a multitude of species or an ecosystem". While it is not the fault of the animals that they are viewed as

charismatic fauna, it certainly is human nature that makes people place a higher order of importance on the survival of something furry than, say, a fig wasp in a tropical forest, which notwithstanding its size, it is crucial to the regeneration of fig trees.

Elephants are a classic example of how films shape our perceptions of such “gentle giants”, thus affecting conservation efforts in the real world. Gregg Mitman lucidly argues this point in *Pachyderm Personalities*:

Once on the fringes of traditional networks of power within science and conservation, Douglas-Hamilton and Moss have become powerful forces in the world of elephant conservation and research. Their success suggests the manifold ways that media networks have become an instrumental part of doing science. In the case of elephants, the research methods and techniques of ethologists, unlike population ecologists, are calibrated closely with the aesthetics and conventions of fashion photography, television, and film. Trading upon intimacy, individuals, and emotions, scientist-activists like Douglas-Hamilton and Moss have found themselves and the elephants, they live with active participants in and beneficiaries of celebrity. (193)

While there is no doubt that the “Pachyderm Personalities” of Douglas-Hamilton and Cynthia Moss did much to raise the profile for conserving African elephants, and specifically, the elephants of Lake Manyara, their efforts have a profound influence on African elephants inhabiting other regions. As Neil Curry, currently living in Botswana, and producer of Golden Panda Award-winning film, *The Elephant, The Emperor and The Butterfly Tree* writes in an email:

I think anthropomorphism warps the public's view on what nature is really all about by insinuating human characteristics and traits onto creatures that have no such thing—and that does severely affect conservation choices. Elephant culling is a case in point...So far as many animal-rightists are concerned elephants are just like people (and it's a fair bet that view is partly based on lots of anthropomorphic films they've seen...as a matter of fact, I also think they're like people but that's based on direct experience of spending weeks filming them)...the

rightists have mounted vociferous campaigns that have virtually brought an end to elephant culling in many parts of the continent. So, in Botswana for instance, the environment is now being totally trashed by elephants and as soon as there's a severe drought, they'll starve to death in their thousands.

A similar problem arises in parts of Australia where the Koala is endangering its own environment. Jeremy Hogarth, former producer at NHNZ, points out in an email:

There are several places in Australia where they are becoming a problem. One of the possible answers, of course, is relocation - but relocation to where? Because the animals are diet specific they could well starve to death... BUT - when they start to talk about culling...then there is outrage! How could they kill what has become one of Australia's national icons? ...Koalas are perceived to be cute and cuddly, in fact they are quite the opposite...they often have bad tempers and when aroused have to be handled very carefully to avoid getting nasty scratches...Also that it is only certain animals which arouse passions, try and get people excited about small native rodents or frogs and few give a damn.

These examples illustrate that anthropomorphism, to which nature and wildlife films contribute, can make selecting an appropriate conservation strategy extremely difficult in an emotionally charged polemical conservation climate. Animals like pandas, elephants, dolphins, and koalas are some of the more charismatic species that are likely to find airplay on television; hence, one could link the conservation choices we make in relation to these species as influenced by the frequent narratives constructed about them in wildlife films.

In recent years, some award winning films have broken away from the classical approach of a single species, animal character-driven narrative. These films show promise of an alternative to the “blue-chip” narrative and may be referred to as “ecological films.” As opposed to the foregrounding of an individual species or

animal in the classic wildlife film, the “ecological film” places an ecosystem at the centre of the story, using interrelationships between the land, plants, animals, and humans to structure the narrative. Since narratives have a strong hold on mankind, alternative narratives in wildlife and nature films could help forge a new relationship between humans and nature.

The “ecological film” is certainly not new. In 1937, the film *River*, produced by Pare Lorentz for the US Farm Security Administration, depicted the interconnectedness of humans and nature. As opposed to earlier wildlife and nature films that valued individual species for their entertainment value, *River* focused on the ecosystem rather than its isolated parts. To quote Mitman, “the interrelationships of the earth’s living resources came into focus only when the close-up spectacle of animal life receded” (100-101). Though, *River* was commercially distributed by Paramount, and with the coming of Disney’s nature and wildlife films, these “ecological” films faded from the television screen. Today, these kinds of films are largely produced by conservation organizations and have little or no mass distribution.

However, in recent years, there have been examples of “ecological films” that have not only transcended naïve anthropomorphism as well as the debate over emotions in animals but also have been broadcast on television. These films tell strong emotional stories, firmly grounding humans and animals in the ecosystem, and are backed with a solid understanding of the interrelationships – an understanding garnered through cultural studies, personal involvement or animal behavior studies. A few noteworthy examples of this narrative style are *The Great Dance* (2000),

Mzima: Haunt of the Riverhorse (2001), and *My Halcyon River* (2004). These films draw the viewer into the story not only by the strength of their narrative construction and emotional storytelling, but they also speak to the viewer of the creators' passion for the subject.

The ecological, place-driven films may also anthropomorphize, but there is a distinction of a metaphorical kind that is rooted in the complex interconnectivity between the animals and plants in an ecosystem. A recent film, which is a good example of this approach and which Frans De Waal would call “animal-centric anthropomorphism” is, *The Elephant, The Emperor and The Butterfly Tree* (2004). While highly anthropomorphic in its use of language, the narrative reveals how the emperor moth, the emperor caterpillar, the ants living in the Mopani tree, and the elephant are essential to each other's survival in the African landscape. The film goes a step further than others typical of its genre by incorporating humans as central to the story. The narrative explains the interdependence of the species in the ecosystem from the perspective of individual species. This approach places it firmly in animal-centric anthropomorphism in which anthropomorphism is a means and not an end in itself. Furthermore, the producers made a very conscious choice of a narrator—to find a voice that would represent the voice of the local people. The voice of the narrator, who hails from the same region, intimately connects viewers to the native people and enables them to view the world through their understanding of the ecosystem (Neil Curry).

The film is also a brilliant example of how science and storytelling can be combined. The science of natural history forms the bedrock for the film, but the film

in itself, in its narrative is not scientific. It tells a good story. Even though it follows the classical narrative, it has twists and turns at every step, and in the end, leaves the audience with an emotional connection to the cyclical nature of life. In doing so, it clearly creates empathy for this delicate ecosystem where just one break in the web of life, to use the cliché, would forever breakdown the cycle of life.

IN CONTEXT – THESIS FILM: “INDIAN LEOPARDS - THE KILLING FIELDS”

My thesis film, *Indian Leopards – The Killing Fields* is a conventional broadcast length (52 minute) film that follows three stories: a researcher studying leopard ecology in the forests of Central India; the forest department in the state of Maharashtra trying to manage leopard–human conflict in agricultural fields of Junnar, not far from the city of Mumbai; and a hunter in Garhwal in Uttaranchal State in northern India whom the forest department calls in to kill leopards declared “man-eaters.” I felt I needed to interweave these three stories both to keep audiences engaged as well as to provide a comprehensive picture of leopards in India, including the challenges facing their protection and conservation. The film also includes myself as a protagonist following these stories. Furthermore, this structure of interweaving the stories evolved out of necessity, as none of the three stories that I followed really had closure: the wildlife researcher could not trap a leopard during the period of my filming; the hunter in Garhwal repeatedly had to go back to a village to kill suspected “man-eating” leopards; the forest department and researchers studying the leopard-human conflict in Maharashtra had not, till the filming finished, reached any firm conclusions as to the reason of the conflict. Interweaving the stories enabled me to use cinematic conventions to keep audiences involved in the unfolding dramas of each story. Traditional storytelling narrative demands a closure. The stories in the film are based on science and conservation, both of which lack closure. Science narratives are circular and conservation is an ongoing social process lacking definite

endings. As a filmmaker, I was faced with the tough task of conflating these stories with a different narrative, into a traditional storytelling narrative that is more widely accepted, especially on broadcast television.

I consciously avoided anthropomorphism through the scripting process. For example, one night, I set out a remote infrared video camera trap at one of the wildlife biologist's four cages. The next day we found leopard tracks going right past the cage and the leopard had not taken the bait. Unfortunately, the camera did not self-trigger and we had no visual record of the event.

If there had been visual evidence showing the leopard looking at the cage and walking past, what could we have concluded? Would it make sense to assume that the leopard walked past because it was "not hungry"? Or, that the "cunning" leopard avoided the cage? Or, maybe that the leopard "didn't like" goats? Once we attribute an intentional motive like cunning, it is but a small leap to attribute the killing of humans to a deliberate, well-planned motive on the part of leopards, or to other animals in similar situations. This example explains, to some degree, the subtle nature of anthropomorphism and the dangers fraught by imposing our interpretation of events onto the animal mind.

One of the stories set in the Bori forest in Central India featured the wildlife biologist, Advaita Edgaonkar, along with "Tangamani," a leopard so named by Mr. Edgaonkar. During scripting, there was some pressure from an executive producer who joined the project in an effort to take the film to a broadcaster, to turn Tangamani into the leopard responsible for taking people's livestock, even though the leopards taking the livestock were actually in Junnar in Maharashtra. He argued that it would

help the narrative by having a common thread across the stories, namely, the character of Tangamani. He also argued that it hardly mattered to an international audience where Junnar or Bori were. This stance was unethical to me, even though an argument could be made for the portrayal since Tangamani, in a sense, was representative of the species and she did, on occasion, kill villager's livestock in the Bori forest. Moreover, leopards certainly kill livestock in other parts of the country. In short, I found myself defending Tangamani because she could not be linked to another environment while she lived in the Bori forest. In one sense, I was being anthropomorphic by giving her a distinct personality, but it was rooted more in her environment than in any "unique" behavior.

The final script reflected my concern, but did make an ambiguous connection to Tangamani possibly causing villagers a problem in order to provide some unity to the narrative. In the film, as Mr. Edgaonkar investigates a kill and we set up camera traps, the script reads, "Perhaps images from his (Praveen's) cameras can help Mr. Edgaonkar, because in his mind questions linger about Tangamani and her cub. Are they still alive? And are they the animals causing problems for the villagers?" Tangamani did, as I mentioned earlier, cause some problems for villagers in Bori.

In addition, I tried to do show the connection that the people living in the Bori forest have with their environment. At the same time, I tried to avoid romanticizing their relationship with the forest. In one of the sequences, I am seen showing footage (obtained from a remote video camera trap) of a tiger at a buffalo kill to a villager. The villager had never seen a tiger in the wild and watched the video of the tiger eating his buffalo with quiet amazement. I asked him after this how he felt about

losing his buffalo, and he didn't really have a reaction. One could, quite easily in such a situation, make statements in the script that would romanticize the villager's connection with the forest, of him living in harmony with tigers, though the reality could be that he just doesn't have an option to settle elsewhere, even if he may want to. The problem with romanticizing situations like this one is that it oversimplifies human's relationship to their environment into dualisms—either it is harmonious or antagonistic. As a filmmaker, I did not want to pass judgment on his presence in the forest. I wanted to let the audience have their own interpretation of his connection with that environment.

Throughout the post-production process, the most challenging task was to try to give viewers an understanding of the complexity of leopard-human conflict in each of the stories as well as the importance of the wildlife biologist's research for leopard conservation. Feedback on the film from an experienced supervising producer at National Geographic indicated that it lacked a coherent narrative structure, making it difficult to follow the storyline. However, I think the success of the film lies in the non-linear structuring of the narrative. The stories did not have a final closure – something that traditional narrative demands. The stories are also linked since the wildlife biologist's research has implications for leopard-human conflict management across the country. The non-linear structuring allowed for exploring the complexities of the issue in a manner that kept audiences engaged. I could cut between sequences of the three stories to create suspense and drama, to alter pace and rhythm, and contrast the different forces affecting the fate of the leopard. To cite an example, the non-linear structure of the narrative allowed me to juxtapose the shots of a captive

leopard jumping to freedom with shots of a dead leopard that the hunter had killed, though the events occurred in a different time and space. It was a dramatic and emotional moment in the film. This approach to the structure also allowed for overcoming, partially, some of the limitation posed by the lack of closure in the individual stories.

The leopard-human conflict in India continues and is likely to remain a problem. The conflict does not have a closure and the film reflects this lack of closure. The film, in being open-ended, lacks the closure of traditional narrative but it enables the viewer to comprehend the reasons for this and come to terms with the reality of the leopard-human conflict in India. Vidya Athreya, the wildlife biologist who was contracted by the forest department to research the leopard-human conflict in Junnar said that “This is the most balanced film on the leopard-human conflict.” After a screening of the film, Cliff Montagne of the Bio Regions Program at Montana State University said, “I am particularly impressed with how you presented the joint needs of the villagers and the leopards, bringing out the conservation/human dilemma faced in many habitats.”

A point to be noted here – while the scientists’ found the film well-balanced and had no problem following the stories; a broadcast executive did not have the same opinion. Their oppositional views encapsulate the dilemma between the needs of science and the demands of storytelling. Ironically, the film has aired on National Geographic Channel across the world and demonstrates not only its commercial success, but proves that science and stories can indeed co-exist on television.⁶

CONCLUSION

As a wildlife filmmaker, I think it is possible to maintain the complexity of the links between people, nature and wildlife and still make films that tell emotionally compelling stories. Conservation biologists now recognize that conservation cannot be effective unless people are part of the process and have a direct stake in it (Sarkar). This shift in conservation that had, until recently, advocated for the exclusion of humans from wild landscapes, ignoring any historical, cultural, or economic ties of people to nature, is perceptible. Combining this changing conservation ethic and the natural sciences with centuries old Aristotelian canonical modes of artistic proof could form the cornerstones for creating “ecological films.” The delicate balancing of the Aristotelian codes for persuasion – ethos (good characters), pathos (an appeal to emotions) and logos (advancing good reason) – could help transcend naïve anthropomorphism and shape conservation paradigms in nature and wildlife films. For the wildlife filmmaker, the challenge lies in this balancing act.

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APPENDIX A

NOTES

NOTES

¹ Wildlife and nature films in the paper refer to films appearing on broadcast television and having as its focus the natural world, including landscapes, plants and animals. This does not include programs on television that deal with domestic pets. For e.g. shows like *Animal Cops* on *Animal Planet*.

² Some examples of wildlife and nature films that have impacted on conservation include the following: a) Sam LaBudde's video footage on slaughter of dolphins during tuna fishing together with Stanley Minasian's 1991 film, *Where Have All the Dolphins Gone?* These together led to one of the largest consumer boycott campaigns and resulted in a reduction of 95 percent in dolphin kills. b) Mike Pandey's film, *Shores of Silence* (1999) led to the whale shark being included in the Wildlife Protect Act of India and also led to a CITES listing for the species. c) Vicente Fox, the President of Mexico after watching the IMAX film, *Ocean Oasis* called for the islands in the Sea of Cortes and their surrounding waters to be elevated to the status of biosphere reserve, thus according it a higher protection status.

³ Ronald Tobias. (Personal discussion) Science narratives have a beginning, middle but no end as opposed to classical literary narrative with a beginning, middle and an end.

⁴ John Burroughs response to works of Seton and Roberts calling it sham natural history.

⁵ This agreement was called the Panama Agreement.

⁶ For a broadcaster the true indicator of success is audience ratings. I do not have access to that information but it would be worthwhile to know if the film fared well as per the broadcasters ratings standards. The film was edited to 47 minutes, down from its original

duration of 52 minutes to meet the channel's needs. However, the structure remained the same more or less. The title was made more sensational and changed to *Killer Leopards*.