

TECHNOLOGICAL DIVERGENCE AND THE PORTRAYAL OF NATURE IN
OUTDOORS PROGRAMMING

by

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ABSTRACT

The progression of film technology, both its production and distribution, has followed a steady path of greater diversity of distribution channels and lower minimum cost of production. This paper looks at the portrayal of Nature in outdoor programming (hunting and fishing programs) as a way of illustrating what this means for filmmakers. I survey the history of outdoor films and programming in terms of its portrayal of humans and nature following a Dominion model or a Stewardship model. I then analyze two main types of outdoor programming, hunting programs and fly fishing films, and their main channels of distribution and how they have come to diverge in their portrayal of nature. I conclude that the trend towards divergence will continue and that this means filmmakers have the opportunity and possibly the obligation to speak more directly to ever more specific demographics

INTRODUCTION

Over the last 30 years, media technology has facilitated an explosion of content and distribution channels for visual media, including film and video. Long gone is the celluloid monopoly imposed by the high costs of both production and distribution of physical copies for every work and the corresponding high costs of presentation. The expansion from film to television, then cable television, then satellite television and now the Internet, has been complemented by a steady reduction in the cost of acquiring content. It has reached the point that artists are producing, distributing and reaching wide audiences (if perhaps not profiting much) using just their mobile phones.¹ Of the many impacts of this technological revolution, this paper will look at what this diversification of media channels has done to “Outdoor Programming” in America as one example of how this trend is changing how filmmakers communicate with their audiences.

Technological changes have allowed ever smaller and more focused audience niches to develop. I will use the divergence of the portrayal of Nature by outdoor programs into two different branches (Dominion and Stewardship) to illustrate this. I will conclude that this is significant for all filmmakers in that it implies the opportunity and need to speak more directly to specific audiences in a way that they will understand and accept.

¹ Mosoff, Julianne. “The Silicone Screen: Cell Phone Cinema.” [Fameology.net](http://fameology.net). 3 May, 2010. Ed. Mary Quigley. NYU Carter Institute of Journalism. July 2010. <<http://fameology.net/2010/05/03/the-silicone-screen-cell-phone-cinema-as-a-filmmaking-medium/>>

THE DOMINION MODEL AND STEWARDSHIP MODEL

The Dominion Model and the Stewardship Model describe two ways of viewing mankind's historical relationship with the earth. They are both derived initially from the Book of Genesis, both look for ways for humans to regard the world they inhabit, and, more specifically for this paper, how humans interact with nature and wildlife. Terms such as Nature and wild are often subjective. For the purpose of this paper, I will use the term Nature to refer to the entire world in which we, as human animals, live and that upon which we act. This encompasses the human animal as well. The terms wild and wildlife will refer to those environments and beings that have not yet been directly manipulated specifically for human purposes. For example, cattle are not wild but big horn sheep are wild; a city park is not wild but Yellowstone National Park is (mostly) wild. All of them are in Nature.

The origins of the Dominion and Stewardship Models lie in the Bible's first book, Genesis Chapters One, Two, and Three when Adam and then Eve were created and given a role in the Garden of Eden. In the first book of Genesis, the happy couple is instructed on their role:

1:26 And God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness: and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth. 1:27 So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them. 1:28 And God blessed them, and God said unto them, Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it: and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living

thing that moveth upon the earth. 1:29 And God said, Behold, I have given you every herb bearing seed, which is upon the face of all the earth, in which is the fruit of a tree yielding seed; to you it shall be for meat.²

This chapter plainly states that God created man and gave him everything in and on the earth for his sustenance and use. The underlying implication is that this relationship is unidirectional; that mankind has no other responsibility in this other than to fill the earth with progeny. The earth and everything in it is given to man to achieve this goal. Throughout the Christian era, humans have followed this model in their relationship with nature. In fact, it was this separation from animals and Nature by which humanity defined itself for millennia, even predating Christianity³. This separation was codified and confirmed through holy scripture. For millennia, the human population and its technologies remained insignificant enough that extractive and consumptive practices showed little permanent or significant effects on the environment. It was not until the industrial revolution and its exponential expansion of consumption and population growth that the detrimental effects of human dominion began to make themselves obvious⁴.

² King James Version of the Holy Bible (Old and New Testaments).(2011). New World Ebooks. 17 Feb. 2011. Barnes and Noble.com. <
<http://search.barnesandnoble.com/King-James-Version-of-the-Holy-Bible/by-the-request-of-King-James/e/2940012634788/?itm=1&USRI=king+james+version+of+the+holy+bible++old+and+new+testaments>>

³ Berger, John. "Why Look at Animals?" from About Looking. New York: Vintage Books, 1991. 3-28

⁴ Evernden, Neil. *The Social Creation Of Nature*. 1st Ed. Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992. 3. Print.

While there have been select voices over the centuries that have called out against the ravishing of the earth, it has only been with the advent of the conservation movement over the last two centuries that the stewardship model has begun to gain any real ground.

This model is based on Genesis 2:

2:7 And the LORD God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul.
2:8 And the LORD God planted a garden eastward in Eden; and there he put the man whom he had formed. 2:9 And out of the ground made the LORD God to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight, and good for food; the tree of life also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of knowledge of good and evil. 2:10 And a river went out of Eden to water the garden; and from thence it was parted, and became into four heads...2:15 And the LORD God took the man, and put him into the garden of Eden to dress it and to keep it.⁵

This model is bi-directional. Not only is the earth put here for the sustenance of man, but man is created as steward of the earth and given the responsibility to “dress it and keep it.” Humans are not put in a position above Nature but rather one closer to equality. Humans do not stand outside wilderness but firmly within it. One can see the distinct difference between the two models. As the destruction of the environment in which we live was made manifest, this model began to gain a greater following amongst newly minted conservationists. Luminaries such as John Muir who wrote “Through all the wonderful, eventful centuries since Christ's time — and long before that — God has cared for these trees, saved them from drought, disease, avalanches, and a thousand straining, leveling tempests and floods, but he cannot save them from fools — only Uncle

⁵ King James Version of the Holy Bible (Old and New Testaments).

Sam can do that.”⁶ And politicians such as Teddy Roosevelt popularized a nascent conservation movement in North America. President Roosevelt, in his 1907 missive "Arbor Day - A Message to the School-Children of the United States" said

We of an older generation can get along with what we have, though with growing hardship; but in your full manhood and womanhood you will want what nature once so bountifully supplied and man so thoughtlessly destroyed; and because of that want you will reproach us, not for what we have used, but for what we have wasted...So any nation which in its youth lives only for the day, reaps without sowing, and consumes without husbanding, must expect the penalty of the prodigal whose labor could with difficulty find him the bare means of life.⁷

Roosevelt expresses directly this developing sense that humans should follow a path of stewardship, if only for their own good. But it really wasn't until the second half of the 20th century that conservation and stewardship grew to the point of spawning dedicated and significant political parties in the West.

⁶Muir, John. "The American Forests." The Atlantic Monthly. Aug. 1897: 145-.157

⁷ Roosevelt, Theodore. Presidential Broadside. "Arbor Day - A Message to the School-Children of the United States" 15 April, 1907

TECHNOLOGY, MEDIA, AND DIVERGENCE

The progression of technology throughout human history has included forms of visual media. From prehistoric cave paintings to renaissance masters of oil and marble to photography to moving images, visual representation has advanced in the direction of greater technological complexity. However, that which has been represented has consistently reflected the values and mores of the contemporary culture at the time it was represented and that representation has often in turn defined how we see Nature .

Valeriano Bozal, a lecturer at the Ciudad Universitaria in Madrid, has said:

There is perhaps just one common feature, and this is the need felt in every age for reference to and sustained dialogue with nature so as to define it within that dialogue, I would even say to construct It. Indeed, this great diversity of approaches and productions demonstrates if anything that nature is not so much what actually exists, rather our own construct of what exists.⁸

This is to say that humans' representation of Nature actually defines what it is or put another way, how we see nature represented in artistic form is how we see actual nature around us.

Modern still and moving images prove no exception. From the beginnings of photography, people have attempted to capture and distribute images of their direct relationships with animals and nature. Still photographers began capturing images of

⁸ Bozal, Valeriano. "Representing or Constructing Nature." The Representation of Nature in Art. Ed. Eladio Fernández-Galiano. Spec. issue of Naturopa No. 93 (2000): 4-5.

animals by killing them in order to keep them still for the required long exposure times. Those of cinematographers paralleled the efforts of photographers closely, as soon as the technology allowed. One of the first sequences of images captured by Muybridge was that of a tiger at the Philadelphia Zoo killing a bison for the camera. The development of actual cinematography (using one camera as opposed to many) led to other films of animals. While many of these early *actualités* focused on simple animal behavior at zoos or menageries, many also focused on animal conflict for entertainment. One of the first publicly projected films was *Mr. Delaware and the Boxing Kangaroo* and other actualities involved animals fighting and or dying such as *Fighting Roosters* (1898), *Terrier vs. Wildcat*(1906), and the infamous *Electrocuting an Elephant*(1903) that Edison used for marketing purposes.⁹ Both the lethal and non-lethal use of animals for film subjects show's the self created disconnect of humans from nature described by Berger in "Why look at Animals". Humans defined themselves by their separation from nature and this allowed them to see animals and nature as an other to be used, exploited and consumed.¹⁰ This is a trend that continues to this day.

One of the first trends in animal films following the popular *actualités* was an "increasing number of chase-oriented hunting films": *Hunting the White Bear* (1903), *Stalking and Shooting Caribou* (1906), *Deer Stalking with a Camera* (1906), *Moose Hunt in New Brunswick* (1906). These films showed the increasing use of formal film styles

⁹ Bouse, Derek. *Wildlife Films*. 1st. Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000. 42-45. Print.

¹⁰ Berger, 3-28

and brought the hunting film to wider and wider audiences but the real advance was yet to come.¹¹

Though early photographers and cinematographers found themselves limited by the technology of image acquisition, this did not hold them back from attempting to capture and popularize the safari, typically the African Safari. These photos and films were extremely popular in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The footage these adventurers most desired, and often the most difficult to capture, involved hunting and killing large--and usually dangerous--animals. Despite the conservation purpose many of these safaris professed, such as Roosevelt's epic African safari, the focus on killing wildlife and dominating nature illustrated the antagonistic, competitive view of wildlife at the time indicative of the Dominion Model. However, the focus on killing was, for this film, conveyed entirely through news reports and dispatches. The technology remained primitive enough that the filmmakers were unable to record Roosevelt actually dispatching any animals, unlike the later films of the Johnsons and others.¹² The popularity of the films demonstrates the pervasiveness of this view. The content of the later films showed little concern for conservation or maintenance of populations of animals, but rather focused and exulted in depicting the killing of large numbers of animals. In due time, this pretense was dropped all together and staging of "safaris" on movie sets and even staging events on location became all too common. The films of Osa and Martin Johnson and Frank Buck displayed a blatant (to modern audiences)

¹¹ Ibid, 46

¹² Mitman, Gregg. *Reel Nature: America's Romance with Wildlife on Film*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999. 7. Print.

devaluation of animal life. Animals and their consumption and exploitation served the entertainment goals of the films. Filmmakers induced animals to charge the camera before being shot for more excitement. Animals were put in cages to fight to the death for gladiatorial displays.¹³ The majority of Western Christian society viewed wildlife, and indeed all non-human animals, as objects to do with as they pleased, whether for consumption, destruction, companionship, entertainment, or for consumption *as* entertainment. Though this was the period of growing concern about human's impacts on the planet, societal norms still viewed animals as objects of use rather than entities in their own right with their own inherent value. Animals lived and died in these films at the whim of humans and movie technology allowed humans to share their exploits as entertainment around the world.

This conceptual approach fit right into the turn of the century concern for the feminization of the American male. Roosevelt and other pioneers of conservation believed that hunting and fishing and battling the outdoors was crucial to building the national character and instilling republican ideals into modern men. They feared that increasing development and urbanization was removing the elements of the frontier that defined the American man.¹⁴ To Roosevelt and others, film was one more way to promote this ideal, to promote man vs. nature combat and the desired masculinization that it ensured.

Documentary filmmaking has almost always been a less expensive endeavor than feature filmmaking, but documentary film has not been truly cheap until fairly recently

¹³ Bouse, 53-56.

¹⁴ Ibid, 15

(see below). At the confluence of the 19th and 20th centuries the ability to travel, shoot and produce a safari film required significant resources. Even with the advent of the portable Akeley camera, the purchase, storage, and processing of film stock restricted entry into the field. Furthermore, the distribution and showing of films required specialized resources and centralized organization to display and market any finished products. Public showings required physical cinemas for venues and marketing campaigns to get ticket buyers in the door. The large up front investment required for a safari film necessitated a large number of paying customers to make the investment feasible. Only skilled marketers and large organizations with access to the specialized venues could reach such a wide audience. The technology allowed for bringing hunting images to a wide public audience but, geographically, the audiences needed to meet the images halfway. They needed to leave their homes and go to a physical space dedicated to showing these films to large groups. They needed to get themselves unto a theater.

This stove-piped theater model persisted for decades. This model meant the producers produced content and fed that content to the theaters. Few other options existed at the time for getting the films in front of viewers. There were several hunting and fishing films made in the 1930s and 1940s that took place in locations other than Africa. Most of these were less than feature length and involved tongue-in-cheek narration and washed their content in a gloss of “museum specimen” collection or in an anthropomorphic binary relationship with good humans defending good animals against the “bad” animals. For instance, in 1935, the independently produced short “The Last Wilderness: A Saga of American Big Game” features famed archer Howard Hill in

footage acquired over several years in the wilds of Wyoming. The introductory text speaks volumes about this type of film. “This picture will probably stand as the final authentic record of the fast diminishing American Big Game. Their last stronghold in rugged Wyoming was invaded over a period of years to secure these films....” The text goes on to proclaim that the mission of the expeditions was to collect museum specimens. Using words such as “invaded” and “rugged” set the film up as one of conflict between the human protagonists and the non-human other of Nature. The pretension to scientific collection also separates the human collectors from that which is collected as well as shows that the collectors assumed the right to take what they needed for their own use. While the lament of the probable loss of these wild places presumes a belief in stewardship, it is really only that: a lament, with no corresponding acknowledgement of any obligation to correct the loss or call to action for others to do the same. The film goes on to feature physical conflicts between animals and portrays them in the typical anthropomorphic roles of good and bad animals. One scene in which an “outlaw” male bear “attacks” a mother with two cubs is obviously staged with two clearly tethered bears induced to fight to the death for the cameras. Howard Hill then rescues” the two cubs and takes them back to camp for pets and comic relief. Humans travel into nature to take what they want from it, whether it be food, specimens, or mere entertainment with no regard for the needs of nature and even in spite of them.¹⁵ Pete Smith of MGM even created a “house style” for their line of shorts, many of which focused on hunting and fishing topics. These series include *Fishing in Paradise* and *Sports Parade* (which

¹⁵ The Last Wilderness / Hunting the Hard Way (Double Feature). Prod. Jerry Fairbanks. Perf. Howard Hill. 1935. DVD. Stoney-Wolf Productions, 2004.

included hunting and fishing with other sports such as football and golf).¹⁶ The lack of feature length pieces in this era goes to show the limited draw these programs provided to the broader cinema audience of the time.

It wasn't until the 1940s and 1950s that technology brought the theater to the viewers with the explosion of television into viewers' homes. Not only did this remove the need for viewers to go to the theater, but it also removed physical restrictions of those finite spaces. In theory, a film's audience could now expand from a maximum of several hundred per showing to potentially reaching every home within range of a television broadcast tower. With the development of affiliate networks, everyone in the country eliminated the need to pay theater employees and purchase film copies as well as a myriad of other operational expenses and complexities. While production and broadcast expenses might be higher, TV reached far more people for the investment. TV simplified the distribution of content. However, the upfront expense was still there and high enough that broadcasters and producers still needed to target as wide an audience as possible in order to make the investment pay off. TV was simple and offered greater variety than the theater distribution model of film, but that variety of programming was still relatively narrow.

The new technology that made early TV possible also made mobile broadcasting difficult and expensive. Consequently, almost all programs took place in the studio. This limitation meant that hunting and fishing programs of the era generally consisted of

¹⁶ Ward, Richard. "Extra Added Attractions: the short subjects of MGM, Warner Brothers and Universal." *Media History* 9.3 (2003): 221-244. *Academic Search Complete*. EBSCO. Web. 22 Aug. 2010

panelists answering viewer questions and discussing various aspects of hunting and fishing from the controlled environment of an indoor set. Two examples of this are *The Hunting and Fishing Club* (1949-50)¹⁷ on the Dumont Network and *Hunting and Fishing* on WDBO-TV (now WKMG-TV) in central Florida that “was ‘the’ program for the latest gossip on who was catching what using what bait, and where the deer, hog, or turkey hunting was best.”¹⁸

These shows illustrate that a niche market existed for hunting and fishing content but that market did not justify the large investment necessary for in-the-field productions. However, broadcasters did find a way around this by re-purposing old film stocks as hunting and fishing programs. In the mid 1950s, Osa Johnson repurposed much of the footage from the films she created with her husband, Martin, into a series of half hour episodes entitled *Osa Johnson’s Big Game Hunt*. “*Big Game Hunt* recombined footage, edited at a rapid clip and emphasizing action scenes from the Johnson’s films of the 1920s and 30s” (Chris, 52-53). The fact that the content from the 1930s still held an audiences attention also implies that viewers’ perception of nature had yet to swing over to the side of stewardship.

In fact, Disney’s True Life Adventures, a groundbreaking series of shorts and then full-length films, contributed the most to defining nature for an increasingly urbanized nation recovering from the trauma of World War II. Though they rarely featured hunting

¹⁷ ” Sports for All (TV Series 1949–1950) ‘Fishing and Hunting Club’ (original title).” [Imdb.com](http://www.imdb.com). The Internet Movie Database. 22 Aug. 2010. <<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0320006/>>

¹⁸ ”The History of WKMG-TV.” Clickorlando.com. 2005. Internet Broadcasting Systems and Local6.com. 26 July. 2010. <<http://www.clickorlando.com/station/71239/detail.html>>

or fishing, or even humans for that matter, Disney codified nature in the movie going public's mind as a place of fantasy and entertainment. Nature became not just a place of escape, but a place forced to entertain viewers. It became a mass marketable product. "Walt Disney Studios succeeded in capturing and monopolizing a mass market for nature on the big screen throughout the 1950s, thereby expanding the packaging of nature as entertainment in postwar American society."¹⁹

Using existing footage and converting it for broadcast on TV also freed hunting and fishing shows from the studio. Much as wildlife programming moved into using location film with narration and eventually synch sound, the smaller and proven technology of 16mm film allowed hunting and fishing programs to move into the field beyond re-purposed footage. The larger audience to infrastructure ratio of TV also allowed this model to be profitable. However, it really wasn't until the 1960s that hunting and fishing programming began to take hold on network and affiliate television. The invention of the portable Nagra sound recording equipment in 1951 allowed for synch sound with small portable 16mm cameras. By the early 1960s, television news stations were making large orders²⁰. This same portable technology allowed natural history programs such as *Wild Kingdom* and outdoor programs such as *The American Sportsman* to expand their content to field locations.²¹ *The American Sportsman* began in 1965 after a positive viewer response to a fly fishing episode of ABC's Wide World of Sports series that took place in Argentina. At its peak, *The American Sportsman* featured

¹⁹ Mitman, 110.

²⁰ "History." Nagraaudio.com. Nagra Kudelski Group. Feb. 18, 2011
<<http://www.nagraaudio.com/pro/pages/informationHistory.php>>

²¹ Bouse, 70.

weekly episodes focused on outdoors programming with host Curt Gowdy hunting and fishing with film and sports celebrities. In later years, additional outdoor adventure sports were added. The series ran for two decades and focused on hunting and fishing trips with American celebrities. Shot on location in 16mm film (and eventually pioneering the use of shortwave microphones) “the series was so popular that it ran for 20 years, making it at the time the second longest running major-network program, behind only *Gunsmoke*.²² Despite its popularity and its origination in an era coincident with a period of growth for the environmental movement in the US, *American Sportsman* episodes are surprisingly devoid of a stewardship perspective. Indeed, almost all of the onscreen discussion centers around weights and measures and the ‘fight’ with only an occasional mention in narrator Curt Gowdy’s narration track of the natural splendor in which the participants are making their sport. This is drowned out by portrayal of chasing hippos and crocodiles for the camera at, for example, Lake Turkana), switching to more technically advanced tackle to catch more fish (Klamath River), or throwing their dead catch back into the river to film eagles (Okavango Delta). In each case, the portrayed assumption is that wildlife is present to entertain the anglers. The relationship and human responsibility ends there.²³

²² Landen, Hal. “Curt Gowdy.” [Videouniversity.com](http://www.videouniversity.com/articles/curt-gowdy). 2009. Oak Tree Press. 7 July <2010. <http://www.videouniversity.com/articles/curt-gowdy>>; Dorsey, Chris. "America's sportsman ... spanning the globe. (Editor's Note)." *Sports Afield* Feb. 2002: 7. *General OneFile*. Web. 22 Aug. 2010

²³ Due to legal issues (see comment #4 on videouniversity.com article), full episodes of *American Sportsman* are not available. ABC Sports did make some brief sections of selected episodes available on VHS. It is from the Fresh Water Fishing compilation tape that I have extrapolated my conclusions.

Cable television and its attendant variety of programming choices are often assumed to have evolved from broadcast television in the relatively recent past. Cable actually

originated in the United States almost simultaneously [as broadcast television] in Arkansas, Oregon and Pennsylvania in 1948 to enhance poor reception of over-the-air television signals in mountainous or geographically remote areas. ‘Community antennas’ were erected on mountaintops or other high points, and homes were connected to the antenna towers to receive the broadcast signals....In the late 1950s, cable operators began to take advantage of their ability to pick up broadcast signals from hundreds of miles away. Access to these ‘distant signals’ began to change the focus of cable’s role from one of transmitting local broadcast signals to one of *providing new programming choices* (emphasis mine).”²⁴

The cable industry has expanded on this model and now brings programming from all over the world into people’s homes with hundreds of channels, eventually expanding into satellite service, which reached more viewers in general and especially those in less urban areas²⁵. Viewer options became exponentially more granular (more and smaller niches) and so did the options for producers. Whereas the broadcast dominated model provided a single channel through which to communicate with viewers, cable allowed a multitude of channels. Network broadcasters needed to reach as broad an audience as possible with their content because they only had 24 viewable hours on their channel (less if you subtract time allocated to affiliates) and they needed to advertise to as many eyeballs as possible in that time. Cable providers could focus selectively on smaller subsets of the audience because they had 24 hours multiplied by the number of channels

²⁴ ”History of Cable Television.” [NCTA.com](http://www.ncta.com). National Cable & Television Association. 26 July 2010. <<http://www.ncta.com/About/About/HistoryofCableTelevision.aspx>>

²⁵ I am including Satellite Television because, for the purposes of this paper, they really only differ in means of delivery but provide essentially the same service.

they could carry. Broadcasters (note the “broad” in that word) necessarily had to give up certain viewers who fell outside of their general net. This allowed specialty cable channels to target these viewers as well as the viewers that were tuning into the broadcast networks’ programming because they lacked greater selection. Cable made this specialization possible. Niche channels could focus on cooking shows, home remodeling, feature movies, cartoons, comedy, documentary, nature or just about anything else because they had an economical way to get that content to the viewers. With their specialized content, they could steal viewers away from the big broadcast networks. Instead of watching football on Sunday in the winter, an Anglophile could watch question time with the Prime Minister in Great Britain. Instead of watching the news at 7 PM, a child could watch cartoons. Instead of watching soap operas in the middle of the day, a grad student could choose to watch a documentary about Picasso. The permutations could extend on and on but one constant overarched them all: viewer choice. The change was significant for the producers as well. Instead of targeting broad demographic groups like white middle-aged men between certain ages, they could target narrower niches: Anglophiles, children, or people interested in art history. They could not only target them, but could have confidence that they would actually reach them. Producers could also be confident they would reach more of the total audience at any one time because they were more likely to offer content that different viewers might find interesting.

Cable channels generally provide content based on a theme or interest, e.g., the aforementioned shows featuring cooking, home remodeling, feature movies, cartoons,

comedy, documentary, nature, etc. Viewers could now essentially self-segregate based on interest and producers could target them based on that interest. As cable/satellite has expanded almost to the point of ubiquity in western households, (and seeing explosive growth globally), the number of channels has grown. Previously themed channels have subdivided into more and more specific foci. For instance, the Discovery Channel, which originally focused on non-fiction science and natural history content has become the Discovery Networks with a multitude of channels covering general science and natural history (Discovery Channel), animals (Animal Planet), health (Discovery Fit & Health), military (Military Channel), TLC, Discovery Español, Investigative Discovery and nine other specific channels.²⁶ ESPN, a sports channel, split into ESPN, ESPN2 (originally meant for edgier and less popular sports), ESPN Classic (rebroadcast of famous games and sporting events), and ESPNNU (which is the newest of the channels and focuses on college athletics)²⁷. Other channels such as A&E and even C-Span have followed suit. This narrowing focus also created opportunities for smaller even more targeted channels. Many of these niche channels are owned by the Big 4 (CBS, NBC, ABC, Fox) or large cable carriers such as Cox, Warner, or Comcast and are not actually independent competing channels. The key point is that cable distribution has allowed companies large and small to exploit narrower and narrower niches.²⁸ Most importantly for this topic,

²⁶ “Our Sites.” [Dsc.Discovery.com](http://dsc.discovery.com/). 2011. Discovery Communications, LLC. 2 Feb 2011. <<http://dsc.discovery.com/>>

²⁷ “Primary Business Entities.” [Espnmediazone3.com](http://espnmediazone3.com). 2010. ESPN. 3 Oct 2010. <<http://espnmediazone3.com/wpmu/>>

²⁸ Aymar, Jean Christian. “Do the Broadcast vs. Cable Debates Matter Anymore.” Splicetoday.com. 15 Sep. 2010. Splice Today, LLC. 3 Oct 2010.

sports programming branched into channels specifically created and dedicated to hunting and fishing programming. For some time, ESPN and occasionally other cable networks such as Spike (formerly The Nashville Network, then The National Network) which markets itself as the network for men would provide a few hours of outdoor programming on the weekends or in off peak hours²⁹. This followed the tradition of the network broadcasters (such as ABC's *American Sportsman* mentioned earlier).

Cable achieved its early customers in rural areas, so it is no surprise that as the industry exploded into homes in the 1980s with new and varied channels, the outdoor programming niche should be filled quickly. Rural viewers are more likely to take part in hunting and fishing activities than urban viewers. Two channels stood out early and have evolved in different directions: The Outdoor Channel and the Outdoor Life Network (now Versus).

The Outdoor Channel originated in the 1980s from the wellspring of infomercials, in this case for Gold Prospectors' Association of America (GPAA).

GPAA began buying infomercial time on broadcast stations in the mid-1980s for its gold prospecting show. The infomercials sold GPAA memberships. As the price of infomercial time increased, GPAA purchased an hour of cheaper satellite time. It began acquiring related outdoors programming on a barter basis and eventually filled a 24-hour channel... The Outdoor Channel was the first national television network

<<http://www.splicetoday.com/moving-pictures/do-the-broadcast-vs-cable-debates-matter-anymore>>

²⁹ I will use the term “outdoor programming” to denote programs with hunting or fishing content.

devoted primarily to traditional outdoor activities, including hunting, fishing, shooting sports, rodeo, and recreational gold prospecting.”³⁰

The channel grew substantially with the expansion of cable. Originally a small startup with just 15 employees, it grew almost exponentially. ” Nielsen estimated that Outdoor Channel had approximately 31.4 million cable and satellite subscribers for October 2009.”³¹ The channel boasts almost 150 shows produced in-house or by third- party producers focused mainly on hunting and fishing, but also a few shows on topics such as self-defense and off-roading. It still produces several shows focusing on gold prospecting.

The Eve to Outdoor Channel’s Adam was the Outdoor Life Network or OLN, as it was popularly known. Though its content and target audience overlapped with the Outdoor Channel, OLN originated through a partnership of cable powerhouses: Cox Communications, Comcast Corporation, Continental Cablevision and Times Mirror Cable Television. With corporate backing, OLN started with a potential audience³² of 12 million subscriber homes. The corporate origins manifested their influence from the very start with the channel’s launch billed as the first “first 24-hour advertiser network

³⁰ “Global Outdoors, Inc.” *International Directory of Company Histories*, Vol. 49. St. James Press, 2003. Fundinguniverse.com. Funding Universe. 3 Oct. 2010. <<http://www.fundinguniverse.com/company-histories/Global-Outdoors-Inc-Company-History.html>>

³¹ “Outdoor Channel Broadens Distribution Through Move to Digital Classic in Comcast Utah Markets.” *PRNewswire.com*. 19 Oct 2009. *PR News Wire United Business Media*. 3 Oct. 2010. <<http://www.prnewswire.com/news-releases/outdoor-channel-broadens-distribution-through-move-to-digital-classic-in-comcast-utah-markets-64725387.html>>

³² “Potential audience” refers to the number of people or households who have access to the channel usually because it is carried by their provider.

devoted exclusively to outdoor recreation, conservation, wilderness and adventure.”

While hunting and fishing shows were the backbone of the channel, it also strived to fill niches in other outdoor activities such as white water and alpine sports.³³ This broader brush is reminiscent of the network over-the-air broadcaster model and led OLN to quickly depart from mere outdoor programming in favor of the wider audiences of NHL hockey, extreme sports, the Tour de France, and even football. The retro-model proved successful, however, and Comcast, enabled by its aggressive acquisition of many of its competitors, eventually bought the channel outright and renamed it Versus in reference to its new focus on competitive sports programming. Currently, the channel devotes most of its daytime and weekend programming to outdoors programs with most of its shows pertaining to hunting and fishing. The new focus and the clout of Comcast allow Versus to reach 75 million subscriber homes.³⁴

Despite the dominance of the first two channels that relied on outdoors programming, or perhaps because of it, several new cable channels dedicated to hunting and fishing have sprung up, including one channel specifically for fishing. The Pursuit Channel was launched in 2008 and now reaches a potential audience of 25 million

³³ "Cox Communications, ComCast Corp., Continental Cablevision and Times Mirror team up for new 24-hour cable television network; Outdoor Life Network offers exciting original programming devoted to the outdoor enthusiast." bNet. Businesse Wire, December 18, 1995;

<http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m0EIN/is_1995_Dec_18/ai_17907590/>

³⁴ Farrel, Mike. "DirectTV Could Drop Versus" Multichannel.com. 20 Aug. 2009. Multi Channel News. 9 Oct. 2010. <http://www.multichannel.com/article/328143-DirecTV_Could_Drop_Versus.php>

homes.³⁵ The Sportsman Channel was founded in 2003 and reaches approximately 27 million homes.³⁶ The World Fishing Network, the only cable channel dedicated solely to fishing, started in 2005 in Canada. It entered the U.S. market in 2007 and now reaches over 20 million households in North America.³⁷ Other channels focusing on “men’s programming” also carry select outdoor programming combined with muscle cars and blooper reels, but “men’s programming” is separately targetable content. Advertisers are now beginning to chase “red state programming,” which is spurring new programming and expanding potential viewership³⁸. This target audience may also account for the theme and tone set in the majority of these channels’ programming.

Cable/satellite providers still have limited variety when compared to two new emerging distribution channels for video content , despite their emerging ability to provide diverse and focused content and even recent advances in on-demand content and Digital Video Recorders that allow viewers to easily record and store content and even skip commercials, The first of these developing distribution channels is the direct to DVD market in which (usually) independent producers film, edit, produce and author

³⁵ Personal Contact with Maegan Faulk, Pursuit Channel’s Social Media and Web Coordinator.

³⁶ “About the Sportsman Channel”. Thesportsmanchannel.com. The Sportsmans Channel, Inc. 9 Oct. 2010. <http://www.thesportsmanchannel.com/utility/abouttsc/overview/index.php>; Barrett, Larry. “DirectTV Picks Up Sportsman Channel.” Multichannel.com. 15 Jan. 2009. Multi Channel News. 9 Oct. 2010. <http://www.multichannel.com/article/162203-DirecTV_Picks_Up_Sportsman_Channel.php?rssid=20059>

³⁷ “About Us.” Worldfishingnetwork.com. World Fishing Network. 9 July 2010. <<http://www.wfn.tv/about/>>

³⁸ Piazza, Jo. “Hunting, Fishing and 'Danger Job' Shows Expanding on Cable TV.” FoxNews.com. 16 Aug. 2010. Fox News Network, LLC. 9, Oct. 2010. <http://www.foxnews.com/entertainment/2010/08/16/hunting-fishing-shows-taking-cable-tv/>

niche market DVDs. This got its start with independent fiction filmmakers and has found an outlet in non-fiction niche markets including outdoor programs and others. The second outlet, the Internet, potentially dwarfs the direct to DVD reach but suffers from other shortcomings. Whereas DVDs are generally long format and are sold per disc, the Internet is still maturing and focuses on free and very short format “clips.” The use of both outlets has been made possible with the development of low cost equipment and software that allows filmmakers to have a studio in their home. Creative filmmakers can shoot, edit, produce, and distribute an HD “film” for less than \$5000 including the cost of equipment, software, marketing and distribution. While the quality may suffer, a skillful filmmaker can make a small profit with costs at these depths and even lower. And on the higher end, for less than the cost of an old Avid setup, a filmmaker can shoot a theater worthy feature film.

These developments are significant because it makes focusing on even smaller niches a potentially viable business alternative. More importantly, it makes feeding these markets feasible for basic hobbyists who don’t expect or depend on making a profit. The quintessential example of this is the explosion of YouTube and its billions of video clips, mostly less than ten minutes in length and mostly unwatchable to a serious filmmaker. While this astronomical number seems impressive at first glance, the process of finding quality content using the Youtube site directly without going through a third party aggregator often takes longer than the length of the actual films one finds. Furthermore, until recently, computer speeds and bandwidth limitations have meant that image quality

suffered significantly³⁹. This does not limit the reach of the content, however. A simple search for “Deer Hunting” on YouTube results in videos with 2-3 million views. The YouTube approach mimics, to a certain degree, the broadcasters approach from 40 years ago in that it seeks as broad an audience as possible. But because it is not limited to a single “channel” to reach all of its viewers it seeks its audience by supplying incomprehensible amounts of variety. Other online sites are more focused on a specific niche. For instance, Hook.tv is a website that hosts a variety of fly fishing oriented content, mostly user-generated, much like YouTube. It acts as the filter or delineator of content much as a cable channel does. The hunting equivalent is Huntvids.com. Other sites, such as sportsmanstube.com, act as aggregators of videos hosted by YouTube. These sites say to the viewer, “Find videos on the topics of the outdoors, whether they are for hunting, fishing, or both, on this site.”

Much of the content on these sites is “user generated” meaning users of the site upload content they created themselves. While this is a very economical system for the site owner who gets free content, it is also a benefit to the content producer who finds a concentration of viewers without having to invest in technical infrastructure and marketing. Unlike the producer/theater model of the early 20th century, a site owner can take the content into the homes of many individuals rather than those individuals coming to the content being shown in a central location (a theater). Furthermore, these sites can provide innumerable choices to each individual user at any given time so, while the

³⁹ This is changing rapidly. YouTube now offers a 4k option for videos and other sites such as Vimeo have better algorithms for compressing and decompressing the videos. Increasing computer processor speeds and bandwidth are also helping improve image quality.

theater television models required many viewers to watch a single film a time specified by the host, site owners can provide a one to one ratio of films to viewers, and as YouTube proves, the number of films is limited by contributors and the number of viewers is limited to the number of people with access to the internet.

These sites also differ from theaters and TV in that they collect content from a huge and diverse number of producers. The low cost of production mentioned previously allows anyone with a device capable of collecting images and an internet connection to become a content producer, and most of them have. Again, YouTube with its billions of clips proves this point. As the flood of content has exploded, the need for quality control has led to aggregators who select based on thematic content and quality. Many of the large user generated sites such as YouTube and Vimeo have created the ability to create channels in which users can group videos of their choice in this way. Other site owners select and embed videos from third party sites like YouTube or Vimeo into their own sites.

Not all content falls into the thirty second shaky-cam clip category. Many skilled filmmakers enabled by the plummeting cost of production and myriad lanes of distribution are posting content online as well and many post it exclusively online. Now independent producers and established production companies, cable channels, and even feature film studios post video online as a form of marketing. Producers give away content in the form of trailers, teasers, and overviews by posting them on their own sites or on aggregator sites in order to generate sales of a longer format product, a product that may be in another medium such as at a theater, DVD, television, or pay per view

download or streaming content. It is both this need and the ability to filter that will further facilitate more and more refined niches and consequently more and more refined voices.

METHODOLOGY AND A TALE OF TWO MODELS

The distribution channels have split into thousands of smaller streams, some unfocused and others highly focused, but what of the content of the films reaching viewers, specifically in regards to outdoor programs? Neither fishing nor hunting programs can be categorized on one side of the Dominion/Stewardship divide absolutely. There are exceptions in both camps. On the hunting film side, the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation produces a program that discusses stewardship issues and Ducks Unlimited does the same for waterfowl. A few other smaller conservation groups also put out content on cable networks. On the fly fishing side, the shows on the cable channels tend to be more traditional in their view of nature and surely many of the online short films promoted via sites like that of Drake Magazine (www.drakemag.com) and others can fall well within the dominion model in their use of hard rock music and focus on conquering the fish. And one of the early successes in the direct to DVD market, *Trout Bum Diaries*, seems to straddle the line between dominion and stewardship. But, a survey of the dominant delivery channels of programming will show a general dichotomous relationship between hunting and fishing programs.

In my research, I looked at the dominant delivery media for hunting and fishing shows and they differ significantly. One reaches viewers primarily through cable channels and the other through web video and direct to DVD markets. While there is a number of hunting video websites on the internet, they consist mainly of short unedited clips uploaded without payment and not individually indicative of a genre-view of nature

or are clips culled from programs distributed through cable television channels. Taken as a whole, I believe they quite clearly show a specific viewpoint of the consumer but are not of sufficient production effort to really make a valid argument about the genre. There are also a large number of hunting DVDs in the market, but these consist overwhelmingly of compilations of episodes from programs aired on one of the cable networks mentioned above or are how-to style videos, such as how to call predators or how to dress and butcher a deer. On the cable channels catering to outdoor programming however, there are a plethora of programs that focus on hunting. While this content is often then repurposed for DVD sales and internet marketing, the dominant supply and consumption of the content flows through cable television. Consequently, I looked primarily at these cable programs and their overall view of Nature.

In contrast, there are several episodic fishing programs on these networks (including an entire cable channel dedicated solely to fishing content--WFN) but these programs are both a muter testament to the norm and rather dated in format and medium. They tend to focus on how-to style content and have a more sedate and traditional format. In contrast, the direct to DVD and direct to web market for fly fishing films has surged forward and broken ground for independent producers and content consumers over the last five to six years. These films tend towards a more documentary style as opposed to the host led, narrator driven style of most cable hunting and fishing programs. The imagery looks less like news footage and consists more of composed, locked off shots and I was unable to find similar examples with hunting content. This relatively brief period of existence of these films is of sufficient duration to constitute a trend yet recent

enough to be at the leading edge of the market. These films vary in length from five minutes to hour-long documentaries to traveling versions of film festivals that have yet to be paralleled in the hunting world. A few of these films have subsequently found broadcast slots on WFN, but their primary distribution channel and market is through online and direct to DVD channels.

For broadcast hunting shows, it is most illustrative to walk through two hours of cable programming on a typical afternoon. While this methodology may seem less than comprehensive, I am using it only for purposes of example because it is so typical. As mentioned above, there are a few exceptions to what I will discuss but they are few and far between. By and large, the thematic content and its treatment remain consistent throughout the various cable hunting programs. The programs I discuss are typical, if less glaring, examples of the hunting programs' view of Nature. The first program appeared on the Versus network at noon. "Bass Pro Shop's 100% Reel Hunting" followed the host's efforts to bag a large whitetail buck in Wisconsin. The program focuses on the size of the deer's racks, the efforts at selecting an individual animal, the difficulty of filming the kill shot, and finally a bit on managing the property for large-antlered bucks, on which the hunt takes place. The last two elements are quite common themes in deer hunting programs where "stewards" of the land manage the property for a single attribute of a single species so that hunters may come and harvest that species for personal enjoyment. The host and crew go to great lengths to preserve and distribute that kill to the viewers at home to the extent that they will pass up a shot if it can't be captured on camera. In these programs, the only value laden object in the ecosystem is the one buck

whose harvest is worthy only if his antlers meet a size criteria and only then if it can be filmed successfully. Much like National Parks, the bucks on the property are “For the benefit and enjoyment of the people.” Unlike National Parks, it is neither the wilderness nor the animal’s wildness that is valued (indeed, due to the management practices being extolled, that very wildness is suspect). Rather, an individual animal of an individual species is valued for a single attribute. That individual is dominated from production to consumption. There is little to no mention of the general value of Nature, nor of taking part in a natural act or natural experience.

The following program on Versus obviously targets a younger, edgier audience that is used to a visual style and tone often attributed to MTV, with quick cuts, blasé bravado, and physical humor. “Gun It With Benny Spies” is in its first season and seemingly attempts to merge skater video with a traditional hunting show like “100% Real Hunting.” The tone of the program adheres even more closely to the Dominion Model. This particular episode consisted of two parts: A goose / pheasant hunt and bison hunt, one in South Dakota and the other in North Dakota. In the first half of the episode Benny and the crew pursue Canada geese in a snowy cornfield. The primary challenge of the hunt is hiding the camera crew in a way that will allow them to capture footage without alarming the geese. After a few brief iterations of geese flaring away from the decoys and repositioning the cameras, Benny declares, “I don’t know what’s wrong. I just want to shoot something.” So they switch over to pheasant hunting. Instead of following dogs, as is tradition, they use a driven hunt in which beaters walk down a wind break of shrubs and trees driving the birds to the shooters at the end of the

row. The shooters then attempt to shoot the birds that flush as they reach the end of their cover. After a steady fusillade of shotgun blasts and an indeterminate but legally questionable number of downed birds, Benny is satisfied that they “put the hurtin’ on ‘em” and they return to the goose field to “put the hurt on some honkers.” They bag two geese and Benny announces, “All right! We shot something!” While there is no mention whether the farm on which they are hunting is managed for pheasants or migratory birds, the fact that they deem the hunt as being worthwhile only if captured on camera (along with the emphasis on shooting “something” and “putting the hurt on ‘em”) clearly devalues the animals and environment in which they are hunting. It places those animals and environments on the level of playthings or products for consumption. There is no intrinsic value placed on them and there is no thought or mention of a responsibility to take care of them. They are there to be dominated and the insistence of capturing the domination on camera allows the viewers at home to also dominate them by proxy.

The second half of the program also shows this Dominion perspective at work, though in a different manner. In this section, Benny travels to a ranch that raises bison so that he can shoot his first “buffalo,” a term used consistently through the entire episode. The term “buffalo” is often misapplied to the American Bison, a distinct species not directly related to true buffalo. While the “buffalo” being pursued may prove truculent and mildly dangerous, their confinement to fenced rangeland, their artificial feeding regimen, and their primary use as livestock, clearly belie any claim to wildness. Nevertheless, the animals are portrayed as dangerous by their mere proximity and the hunter’s act as courageous and one of personal endangerment by getting within rifle

range. This portrayal heightens the tension of the one-on-one contest (combat?) and therefore makes the eventual act of domination,(the “harvest”) that more real and that more noteworthy for the hunter and, perhaps, their viewers as well. While slightly more rigorous than shooting a cow in a feedlot, there is absolutely no value placed on wildness in this half of the episode.

On the Outdoor Channel, the programming is remarkably similar. The first program viewed is “Beyond the Hunt,” a misleading title because the program depicts little but the hunt. This program differs slightly in that the host is female. Men host the vast majority of these programs. However, the female “Eve” is not immune from espousing the dominion model. The entire program consists of hunting, interviews about the hunt, and traveling to a hunting location. The hunters pursue whitetail deer with black powder, rifles, and archery. One of the sponsors of the program is apparently Rage Slipcam Broadheads (steel arrow heads) which leads to aggressive exclamations like “pour some Rage in the cage on some bucks” meaning shoot an arrow into a buck’s rib cage. Several different hunts take place, including a black powder hunt where the hunters debate whether the bullet struck the animal. After thorough review by the hunters and crew, the smoke from the powder obscures the “money shot” and no carcass is found. Again, the camera’s ability to capture the kill shot is a key focal point. Even though they never find a carcass, they look to the camera footage for final arbitration. The hunters now find themselves in a position similar to the viewers at home. They must derive their hunting pleasure through the eye of the camera. They have no sense of waste, or loss, or regret over the fact that if they wounded the animal, they never found it. The animal only

has value if it dies for the camera and, by extension, for the viewers. Its caloric value, its place in the ecosystem, and its value as a majestic creature remain unnoticed, or at least unmentioned, because those things have no place in the Dominion model.

The final program in this survey is “Knight and Hale’s Ultimate Hunting” in which the host engages in a black powder black bear hunt in Western Montana. The challenge for this episode is that the host has just four days for a hunt that would normally take six. The first night they stalk a large black bear that spooks when it smells them before they are in position. They then find another bear that they get a shot at, but miss. This leads to an unusual quote for these programs: “Hunting is not always about the kill.” This might imply a greater appreciation of the animal or the wilderness in which it and the hunter find themselves, but in context, it refers to the excitement of getting so close to a wild and potentially dangerous animal and the anticipation of winning the contest. To give the program credit, it also likely refers to the hard work of stalking and finding the bear in the wild. They put far less stress on the technology they use for the actual hunting and more on the excitement of the hunting itself. It is a far more natural hunt than shown in the previous programs, though they, too, stress the need to find an animal before it becomes too dark to film. In the end they return to a location where they saw a bear on the first day and manage to harvest that bear while the light remains. The value of wild prey in this program depends on the challenge it provides the hunter. A missed opportunity means that the opponent is that much more worthy but only because the challenge is increased.

The hunting videos discussed above are just a sampling of dozens of others. Some of these shows are over-the-top hard rock-themed kill fests while others are more respectful and appreciative of the wild world, but they all consistently value the single species and generally specific attributes of specific animals. The only mention of management or stewardship generally entails management for a specific species with the aim of enhancing the trophy experience. Occasionally, they will mention a management agency or conservation group, but only briefly. Surprisingly, these shows often acknowledge the camera and its dominance of the process. The hunt serves the camera master because it is the camera that provides the proof of the dominance established by the hunters.

How is this different than fishing programs? Fishing programs focus on capturing animals rather than killing them, but it is for entertainment as well. Anglers also promote management for particular species so that they can enjoy their sport. Anglers certainly value size and specific attributes of specific species. They certainly speak with bravado and the occasional whoop of victory over their prey. And while they tend to pat themselves on the back because they promote catch-and-release, perhaps that is just because they can. However, as I will point out, the content and focus of fly fishing films differs greatly in how they handle the greater wild world and in how they value and appreciate that world.

At this point, it is tempting to look at the cultural backgrounds of the viewers of hunting films and compare them to those of fishing films. While they likely overlap a bit, there is probably distinct cultural, economic, and geographic difference between the two

groups. This would beg the question, “Does the content follow the viewer or does the viewer follow the content?” In the end, I don’t think the question is relative to my core thesis which that, regardless of what drives the themes of the content, the advent of technology and decreased cost of production has allowed that content to flow more freely and in ever narrower niches to feed ever more specific audiences. The technology has enabled a more specific voice regardless of who motivates that voice or even of what is being said.

As mentioned above, the direct to DVD channel serves as the primary outlet for the newest generation of fly fishing films. The Internet and “film festivals” have provided outlets for fully finished and edited short format films. Unlike the primarily unedited hunting clips found on the web, a large proportion of fishing shorts are fully produced and, therefore, useful for analyzing the view of nature espoused in the content. Several on-line and off-line film “festivals” have sprung up to both encourage and distribute these short pieces. The most well known of these was started by Drake Magazine, a progressive, stylized fly fishing magazine, that started its competitive festival as a way to attract patrons at an annual industry convention in Denver. It merely consisted of displaying the ten best submissions (as determined by the owner) of five minutes or less that dealt with fly fishing. The “official selections” were then posted on the web for everyone to see. The production quality of these pieces varies but has increased over time as the cache of the festival has increased. The films that make the final selection overwhelming follow the format of a documentary short and/or music video. In the past several years, other film “festivals” have arisen on both corporate web

sites, such as the Winston Rod Company, and in various locations such as Great Falls, MT and Sun Valley, ID. The original Drake festival has itself transformed into a nationally traveling film tour, analogous to the travelling version of the Banff Mountain Film Festival, featuring fly fishing content and traveling to over 80 cities in 2011.⁴⁰

It is likely that the popularity of these short fly fishing documentaries was sparked by the release of a 20 minute direct to DVD film by Felt Soul Media called *The Hatch*.⁴¹ *The Hatch* got a lot of attention by using an expository documentary style to tell a fly fishing oriented story. Previous films typically followed a host-driven quasi-how-to style that followed one or two anglers as they fished a piece of water while having a laconic discussion about their day. While ostensibly about conserving a section of the Black Canyon on Gunnison River in Colorado, the film also ably depicted what draws and excites many young anglers: remote natural locations and large hungry fish. The film spoke to many anglers who would describe themselves or wished they could be described as “Trout Bums”. Much like ski bums, trout bums sacrifice wealth and security for the opportunity to pursue a sport they love and freedom from responsibility. The film included sit-down interviews as well as the action of fishing for large rainbow trout. Unlike most hunting programs, the cinematography was artistic and of high quality. The content reaches beyond the mere catching of fish. It explains an entire wild place and natural event with a tone of appreciation not just for the event but for the animals themselves and for the act of fishing rather than just catching. In contrast to the quotes

⁴⁰ [The Fly Fishing Film Tour. WebEye Group, LLC, 10 Oct. 2010.](http://www.flyfishingfilmtour.com/)
<<http://www.flyfishingfilmtour.com/>>

⁴¹ *The Hatch*. Dir. Travis Rummel and Ben Knight. Felt Soul Media, 2005. DVD, 2005.

on hunting programs, you hear comments such as, “I’ve fished around the world and there is NO more powerful place.” (Note the focus on place rather than animal). Additionally, “It’ll continue to be pristine as long as we provide it with its lifeblood.” The film finishes with addressing the shortage of water in the west and the importance of conservation-- not just in terms of the size of the fish to be caught, but in terms of the health of an entire ecosystem. Humans have the responsibility to take care of the system as a whole. Furthermore, there is no consideration of fish and place merely as a target for consumption. The fish and people are given equal weight and equal value.

The follow up film to *The Hatch* was a seven-minute short called *Running Down the Man*. This film looked at fishing for large rooster fish on remote beaches of Mexico. The anglers are shown to do other than fish, drink and drive dune buggies. This film sets up a man vs. fish contest in some ways, but the real contest is between the angler and himself. Furthermore, the fish are given equal value with the anglers. As one angler states, “The roosters are the Elizabeth Hurley of fish. They are soo hot. But at the same time they are very distinguished and they command respect.” And another says, “And then all of a sudden you are connected to this fish which is just positively regal and powerful...and you have to will it back to you.” In the end, the film is not just about winning a contest with a fish but also about celebrating the fish and the experience. The fish is never treated as an object but as a peer.⁴²

These two films allowed Felt Soul to make their most recent and most ambitious film. Although more of a documentary than a fishing film, it targets anglers and

⁴² *Running Down the Man*. Dir. Travis Rummel and Ben Knight. Felt Soul Media, 2005. DVD, 2006.

specifically fly fisherman. *Red Gold* looks at the potential environmental catastrophe posed by a proposed mine in Alaska. This documentary focuses not just on the fish, but also on the threat to livelihoods and cultures of human residents of the area. I will discuss later how this may be the most important film in my argument.

Running Down the Man and *The Hatch* also inspired another group of filmmakers to pursue the trout bum mystique. *Trout Bum Diaries* lit a fire in the fly fishing community. The production quality is much more akin to that of one of the hunting shows and in some ways is a step backwards in that the anglers strive to land large fish accompanied by a high octane musical score. The value seems to lie in the dominion of these fish, but the draw of the film is more in the adventure that these trout bums get to live. They value the opportunity to live free from obligation and civilization, and in a way that is not expressly consumptive. The opening narration states, “For those who seek truth and meaning in life and dread the normality of a nine-to-five existence, who know the rich value of wild trout over a weekly paycheck, it is sometimes necessary to travel to the uttermost parts of the earth....” Those who wish to pursue the Jungian ideal of eschewing the technological society to re-find their humanity in nature must leave that society and seek their goal in remote and wild places. While catching the large fish is the reward, the real value lies in experiencing what the earth has to throw at them and living a life free from quiet desperation. Much like *The Hatch*, the main value of *Trout Bum Diaries* may be the inspiration and prod that it created for other filmmakers and anglers to go out and make a new kind of film. This film was widely distributed and led to

several other “volumes” where they explored other remote and hardy locales such as Iceland and Mongolia and the rugged wild parts of New Zealand.

Other direct to DVD films followed these. Jaimie Howard produced a series of films on fly fishing for tarpon: *Chasing Silver*, *Location X*, and *Andy's Return*. Several of these films have since been broadcast on ESPN channels. A Bozeman, Montana production company filmed an expedition to film steelhead taking dry flies in Canada in *Raising the Ghost*. And a beautiful film from New Zealand, *Once in a Blue Moon*, explores the cyclical “mouse year” when an overabundance of mice in the Southern Alps of New Zealand enables mammoth brown trout to take the hungry rodents as they cross rivers and lakes in search of new food sources. All of these films seek, in varying degrees, to convey the excitement of catching large fish, but also in the process, to convey the wonder and beauty of wild places, the uniqueness of experiencing and taking part in a natural process. Humans are portrayed more as partners in the process than masters, as being subject to the same chaos of the world as their prey. When exciting events take place outside the view of the camera or the conditions become challenging, the anglers continue to fish and relate for camera the value they themselves gathered from the experience at a later date. It is the environment, the prey and the angler that dominate the process, not the camera.

It is this equality that distinguishes these films from their counterparts in the hunting film genre. The hunting programs serve as a continuation or extension of the same values as the safari films of the first part of the 20th century. They have by and large maintained the traditionally held Dominion Model and in many cases swing to a

more potent and extreme view of nature than ever before. A prime example of this is the Michigan based former rock star Ted Nugent who, in addition to his conservative activism, also hosts a television show entitled “Spirit of the Wild” aired on the Outdoor Channel and has penned best selling books such as Kill It and Grill It and God, Guns, and Rock ‘N’ Roll.⁴³ In Mr. Nugent’s programs and those of his ilk nature serves humans and human endeavors. Conquering that which is wild is the destiny of humanity. Hunting in these programs is not generally portrayed as a way to reconnect with Nature but rather as a way to establish dominance over it. Humans are defining their humanity by separating themselves from the animals in the most permanent fashion possible, by not just killing them, but in many instances scientifically raising them for that moment of consumption. On the contrary, the new breed of fly fishing films has diverged on a path that seems to focus on the direct engagement with the wildness in the world. Nature is there to be enjoyed and often consumed as the traditional view goes, but it is set on a footing of equality with the human participant. They espouse a Leopoldian view in which wildness itself is valued for its very wildness. In his book A Sand County Almanac, author, naturalist, and professor Aldo Leopold believed that wildness and wild things are there to be experienced rather than conquered and in fact had an inherent right to exist undisturbed.⁴⁴ Anglers still dominate their prey as any predator does, but the prey is generally a side note to the journey and the process. Whereas the hunting film shows the

⁴³ Prato, Greg. “Ted Nugent Biography”. AllMusic.com. Rovi Corporation. 6 March 2011. < <http://www.allmusic.com/artist/ted-nugent-p5047/biography>>.

⁴⁴ Leopold, Aldo: *A Sand County Almanac, and Sketches Here and There*, 1948, Oxford University Press, New York, 1987, pg. 204.

triumph of the hunter, the fishing films show the internal fulfillment of the angler derived by taking part in the adventure.

The divergence between hunting and fishing programs really comes down to fly fishing programs splitting away from the more traditional viewpoint of the hunting program. Given that hunting shows' dominant distribution model is still reliant on traditional cable networks, it is no surprise that the view of nature expressed in these shows remains the traditional dominion view. The constraints of economics as well as the inertia of established organizations within an industry likely prohibit rapid or radical experimentation. These shows still need to attract as large an audience as possible to justify advertising rates. It is no surprise then that some of these shows, such as those by Ted Nugent, push this dominion view to the extreme as a way of experimenting within the tradition. On the other hand, fly fishing makes up a very small proportion of outdoor programming on cable channels. The producers of these films have less access to this form of distribution but they do now have access to low cost means of production as well as alternative, low cost means of distribution. This has allowed producers of fly fishing films the environment in which they can experiment rapidly and radically. This has allowed and even led fly fishing films to place more emphasis on conservation and stewardship in their films and to portray their human protagonists in a more equitable relationship with their natural and wild surroundings.

CONCLUSION

This divergence in how films portray nature only became possible with the increased number of potential distribution channels as well as the reduced cost of production. The low cost of production allowed “trout bums” to produce feature length films on fly fishing and afford to not only distribute the films themselves but do so in a way in which an audience could readily access them. Although the audience was too small to attract a large corporate broadcaster, the audience was hungry enough to support small, seat of the pants producers who could reach that audience with low cost DVDs and through the Internet. This has allowed a new voice to enter the industry, a specialized one that can speak for a smaller more distinct audience and in a way that differs from the broader brush of traditional media channels.

Of course, this transition is only accelerating. While hunting programs may rely almost exclusively on cable and satellite distribution for now, the trend seems to be towards the demise of this model. Increasingly, viewers are eschewing the high cost of cable and satellite subscriptions for the low cost or even free option of video delivered via the internet.⁴⁵ Websites such as Hulu.com aggregate streaming versions of movies, cable channel programs, and broadcast network shows for free (with forced viewing of commercials). Networks and cable channels host their own shows as well. Amazon.com and Apple’s iTunes Store sell a la cart movies and TV shows to keep or rent. Netflix and

⁴⁵ Pogue, David. “Cable TV in Search of Mobility.” Nytimes.com. 2 March, 2011. The New York Times Company. 6 March, 2011.
<http://www.nytimes.com/2011/03/03/technology/personaltech/03pogue.html?_r=1>

others now have a streaming only option for movies. These strategies may sound the death knell not just of broadcast, cable, and satellite providers (in terms of non-internet based content) but also of hard copies such as DVDs and Blu-Ray discs. Bricks and mortar DVD rental chains such as Blockbuster and Hollywood video have already gone into bankruptcy and Netflix is shifting more effort towards its streaming services. The beauty of this is that any one with enough know-how or a few thousand dollars can become a content provider and invent a new business model. Concepts like Chris Anderson's The Long Tail and Kevin Kelly's 1000 True Fans imply that dependence on large production budgets and organizations may also be soon fading. The Long Tail is the idea that having a lot of products that sell a little is as good as having a few products that sell a lot.⁴⁶ This is the model on which Amazon.com is based and it depends on the internet. The 1000 True Fans idea also depends on the internet but postulates that an individual artist or producer who sells directly to clients as opposed to through a middleman needs only one thousand true fans who are willing to spend fifty dollars or more a year.⁴⁷ This is actually doable when facilitated by the reach of the internet. We are seeing this now. In addition to his cable show, Ted Nugent also has a subscriber only video content section on his website (Tednugent.com). My own site, TheWeeklyFly.com, focuses on the fly tying niche and sells both DVDs, a la cart HD downloads, and a subscription option for HD video content. As hunting shows focus more on the internet as a distribution channel and less on cable, we are likely to see more

⁴⁶ Anderson, Chris. "About Chris Anderson." Longtail.com. The Long Tail. 6 March, 2011. < http://www.longtail.com/the_long_tail/about.html>.

⁴⁷ Kelly, Kevin. "1000 True Fans". 4 March, 2008. Kk.org. 6 March, 2011. < http://www.kk.org/thetechnium/archives/2008/03/1000_true_fans.php>.

experimentation not just in the portrayal of nature but in all aspects of filmic voice. The likes of Ted Nugent will be liberated to push the envelope even further towards a dominion model at the same time that anglers and other push their content more towards stewardship. This offers new opportunities and obligations.

As mentioned above, the film by Felt Soul Media, *Red Gold*, may be the most valuable example to examine. The film details the threats of a proposed mine, the Pebble Mine, in a watershed that supports a massive number of salmon and other fauna. The film itself is a straightforward documentary, but it draws on the filmmakers' experience in talking to anglers. Funded by the conservation organization Trout Unlimited and many corporations that market to fly fishing enthusiasts, the film was able to not just talk to but also to mobilize a large community of anglers to oppose the proposed mine and to add their voices to the discussion. The icon depicting a red circle with a line through the words "Pebble Mine" is now a common logo on many fly fishing websites of individuals, conservation organizations, and companies. Felt Soul Media applied their skill in speaking the language of anglers to their film for two reasons: because they knew the language and because the audience understood it, a situation only made possible because the media channels had diverged and specialized to focus on ever narrower niches.

This is the major significance of this trend towards smaller viewer niches. While outdoor programming represents a tiny fraction of content produced and a tiny fraction of potential viewership that now includes anyone with a cell phone, the trend towards narrower niches spans all genres and cultures. Because the new media channels have allowed filmmakers to speak to specific audiences about specific subjects in specific

terms, these filmmakers will now be able to speak differently to different groups and indeed, viewers may require them to do so. As groups self-select channels that show content in a way they most understand and most agree with, filmmakers will need to be able to speak the filmic language that these groups understand. While general documentary topics will still garner wide audiences, smaller niche filmmakers will likely be able to better reach and motivate specific groups of viewers if they know the visual and structural expectations of these self-aggregated groups. Those filmmakers that recognize that they are speaking to a specific niche and take pains to speak in terms that niche understands will have a much greater impact, a much greater voice within that niche than those who follow a more traditional path of targeting as broad an audience as they can.

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