

BUILDING A PARTNERSHIP BETWEEN NATURE AND HUMAN CULTURE
IN NATURAL HISTORY FILM

by

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. INTRODUCTION.....1

2. THE NECESSITY OF HUMAN PRESENCE
IN NATURAL HISTORY FILMS.....6

3. CONCLUSION.....25

REFERENCES CITED.....29

APPENDIX A: NOTES.....32

GLOSSARY

- Anthropomorphism – attribution of human motivation, characteristics, or behavior to inanimate objects, animals, or natural phenomena. Anthropomorphism may be subjective or objective. Subjective anthropomorphism projects abstract concepts such as human behaviors and attitudes on animals to describe their behaviors or attitudes, while objective anthropomorphism looks at material similarities between humans and animals, as in morphology. An example of subjective anthropomorphism from “On Seal Island” is to describe a male seal as “quite pleased with himself.” An example of objective anthropomorphism from Henry Wood Elliott: Defender of the Fur Seal is to say that a seal’s foreflippers are “dark, bluish-black hands, stretched out with the same bones as a human, fingernails embedded in the middle.”
- Blue chip film – Bousé gives seven “chief tendencies” to describe blue chip wildlife film: (1) the depiction of mega-fauna; (2) visual splendor; (3) dramatic storyline; (4) absence of science; (5) absence of politics; (6) absence of historical reference points; and (7) absence of people (Bousé 14). For clarification, the absence of people refers to the absence of people in the visual sense. As demonstrated in this essay, blue chip films do present nature in a certain way and are therefore embedded with politics and human ideals, negating the complete absence of humans.
- Conservation – the protection, preservation, management, or restoration of wildlife and of natural resources such as forests, soil and water.
- Harvest (fur seal) – refers to the killing of fur seals, mainly for their pelts, which were then made into fur coats.
- Nature – In this paper “nature” and the “natural world” are defined as the “great amorphous mass of otherness that encloaks the planet” unless stated otherwise. Natural resources are therefore raw material resources that are not synthesized by human culture (Definition from Evernden xi).

Objective Anthropomorphism – Objective anthropomorphism looks at material similarities between humans and animals, as in morphology. An example of objective anthropomorphism from Henry Wood Elliott: Defender of the Fur Seal is to say that a seal’s foreflippers are “dark, bluish-black hands, stretched out with the same bones as a human, fingernails embedded in the middle.”

Partnership or partnership ethic – a relationship between two or more entities in which the needs of each member are considered equally. Developed by Carolyn Merchant, a partnership ethic between nature and humans is necessary for the sustainability of both nature and humanity. This is perhaps best represented by a quote from her book, Reinventing Eden:

A new relationship with nature is necessary for the future welfare of both people and the earth on which we live. Environmental history reveals periods throughout time that are fraught with the exploitation of natural resources with little regard to long-term consequences. History teaches that many past interventions have been ecologically shortsighted. Today, we are beginning to consider nature as our partner in bringing the pendulum back into balance. To achieve a new relationship with nature, the past must be understood in terms of the ecological and human histories, as negative outcomes are reassessed (228).

Pelagic sealing – term used to describe sealers killing fur seals at sea from many different kinds of water craft including ships, kayaks and canoes, and using a variety of weapons including spears and guns.

Subjective Anthropomorphism – Subjective anthropomorphism projects abstract concepts such as human behaviors and attitudes on animals to describe their behaviors or attitudes. An example of subjective anthropomorphism from “On Seal Island” is to describe a male seal as “quite pleased with himself.”

ABSTRACT

The term “nature” can be defined in a variety of ways supporting very different views on how humans should interact with the natural world. The “ambiguity” inherent in the definition of nature promotes a variety of different applications for the concept of nature, particularly in relation to natural history films. Many natural history films aim to promote awareness and respect for the natural world. The majority of current nature documentaries, however, seem to define nature as an object and employ techniques that actually perpetuate a harmful dichotomy between nature and human culture. The intent of my thesis film, Henry Wood Elliott: Defender of the Fur Seal, is to break down this dichotomy and promote an alternative definition of nature. The definition that I attempt to portray encompasses both nature and human culture in a partnership, a definition of “nature as everything.” Through subject matter and specific methods of filmmaking, Henry Wood Elliott: Defender of the Fur Seal attempts to increase the connections between wildlife and humans, and natural resources and human use of those resources, to promote sustainability for both nature and human culture.

Past films about the northern fur seal are discussed in terms of the methods and tools employed that encourage and demonstrate the division between nature and culture. A subsequent analysis of Henry Wood Elliott: Defender of the Fur Seal highlights its attempts to build the partnership between the natural world and human context.

INTRODUCTION

On American television, natural history films, or wildlife films as they are sometimes called, make up a genre which includes many different kinds of programs.¹ These range from the spectacular blue chip film² to specials highlighting scientists or filmmakers³. There are also hosted programs, focusing on human-wildlife interaction and often involving the handling of “wild” animals⁴. In recent years, wildlife programs have gone so far as to build mechanical reproductions of animal body parts to illustrate biomechanics. Such techniques have been featured on the Discovery Channel in episodes of Animal Face-off or its series of “Anatomy” shows, including “Anatomy of a Shark Bite” or “Anatomy of a Bear Bite.”⁵

While these different types of wildlife documentary films have had degrees of network success, most current nature documentaries perpetuate a dangerous division between the natural world and the human species. Although this essay does not address the relationship between broadcast content and the forces of the economic marketplace, the focus of my argument is that the content of today’s natural history films fails to present a complementary and essential relationship necessary to sustain both nature and human culture.

With the environmental crises facing us, the wildlife filmmaking community should no longer try to justify its films in terms of beauty or network popularity. The films that reach American audiences should not irresponsibly ignore the impact humans have on the natural world. They should no longer support the disconnect to nature⁶ which views us as separate from the natural

world, and which views nature as our dominion, our laboratory to be used for refuge, resources, and empowerment. To allow this dichotomy between nature and humans to continue will lead to environmental disaster (Merchant 228).

A natural history film should focus on nature and history, natural history and human context. Bringing both together in one film reinforces the interconnectedness between nature and culture, or as environmental historian Carolyn Merchant states in Reinventing Eden, builds a “partnership,” which promotes a better understanding and respect for both nature and human life (223). In fact, films that do otherwise, like many of today’s blue chip films, often remove the human from the context of nature and promote a bountiful natural world.⁷ This presentation of nature may lead viewers to feel complacent about conservation (Palmer) or not consider it at all.

My thesis film, Henry Wood Elliott: Defender of the Fur Seal, sets out to demonstrate Merchant’s concept of partnership, a relationship between two entities in which the needs of both entities are considered equally. A co-dependence exists where the success and viability of one depends on the other. In relation to my thesis, this partnership can be explained as mankind’s careful observation of and respect for the natural world while using it for industrial and other purposes. Mindful use of the earth’s resources and careful study of the effects we have on those resources must be incorporated in our approach to nature in order to promote the sustainability of the natural resource, as well as the sustainability of human culture. Merchant argues: "To achieve a relationship with nature the past must be understood in terms of the ecological and human

histories, as negative outcomes are reassessed” (228). Defender of the Fur Seal incorporates both natural history and human history in one “natural history” film⁸. It is a film that provides a historical account of Henry Wood Elliott’s efforts as a scientist and naturalist on the Pribilof Islands and assesses the negative outcomes of the past relationship between humans and fur seals that was not, and may not be today, based on a partnership.

Between 1890 and 1911, Elliott led a controversial campaign to save the northern fur seal from extinction. Between the time of Elliott’s first arrival in 1872 and the passing of the Fur Seal Treaty in 1911, massive harvesting on land and wasteful pelagic sealing at sea had diminished the fur seal herd from a population of over two million to fewer than two hundred thousand animals. My film recounts Elliott’s journey to understand the fur seal while encountering its heaviest slaughter in history. Through Elliott’s story, I attempt to promote awareness and conservation by showing the decimation of the seal population as a result of consumer and industrial demand. I intend to do this by presenting both the wild beauty of the fur seal rookeries and the “harvesting” of the fur seal (clubbing on land and shooting at sea) in a single film, and in my narrative I present conclusions about the interaction between nature and human action. The film ends with a consideration of present day pressures on the northern fur seal, as it is once again in decline even though commercial harvesting ended in 1984 (O’Hara).

Through historical reflection, my film hopes to advance a better understanding of the cultural relationship of humanity to nature. A potential for

conservation moves to the forefront, not through messages of gloom-and-doom, which typically make conservation films less attractive to American television (Palmer), but through the story of Henry Wood Elliott and his heroic efforts to save the northern fur seal from extinction. Through his story, we can experience and understand the powerful impact that our species has on the natural world, and how the choices we make today relate directly to the current decline of the northern fur seal population. We can admire Elliott as a naturalist-turned-activist.

My hope is that once viewers have seen Henry Wood Elliott: Defender of the Fur Seal, they will examine the choices they make by recognizing the inevitable connection between the resources we choose to consume, how we consume them, and the effects that our actions have on the environment. I hope my film will move members of my audience to consider, and potentially change their patterns of consumption.

Films about the Pribilof fur seal, including my own, and the different types of contemporary wildlife documentaries, whether they be blue chip, hosted programs, or films featuring natural scientists, are generally considered to be natural history films. Each film, however, takes advantage of the ambiguity inherent in interpretations of the word “nature” (Evernden), and derives its own definition from the history of the word’s usage. Most of these films do not challenge their audiences to think about the interdependence of the natural world and human lifestyle, and therefore imply a separation between nature and culture. It is necessary to explore how this separation developed, why “nature”

is so ambiguous, and how my thesis film attempts to further the efforts of like-minded thinkers in developing a partnership between people and nature, a partnership that Carolyn Merchant, along with other environmental historians including Neil Evernden, Roderick Frazier Nash and Max Oelschlaeger, argues our culture should embrace.

THE NECESSITY OF HUMAN PRESENCE
IN NATURAL HISTORY FILMS

Nature was once unaffected by the demands of the human species. In the last few centuries, however, technological developments and concurrent attitudes of domination have enabled “humans to threaten nature with deforestation and desertification, chemical pollution, destruction of habitats and species, nuclear fallout, and ozone depletion” (Merchant 225).

Since the seventeenth century, a cultural impetus toward learning and a spirit of empiricism have supported a social context that still persists today, that “humans are more powerful than nature, and the Euroamericans have the tools to dominate, control and manage it” (Merchant 225). The “nature” that is dominated in this sense is what Neil Evernden characterizes in The Social Creation of Nature, as the “great amorphous mass of otherness that enclenches the planet” (xi); that is, everything that is non-human, everything that operates free of human construct and under natural laws. Environmentalists would stress that this entity is the nature that we, as stewards of the planet, need to save by cutting back our natural resource consumption (Evernden 4-6).

Others, however, may say that it is in our nature as humans to use the natural world for its resources, thereby enabling the propagation of our species. Herein lies another definition of nature. This usage of nature is analogous to saying “the nature of things” or “the nature of being.” Here nature is a much grander and more abstract concept. If it is “in our nature” as humans to behave in a certain way, then humans behave naturally; humans are natural; humans are

part of nature. This definition directly contradicts the definition of nature as everything other than what is human.

As Neil Evernden writes: “the social use of nature entails using slightly different versions of it in support of differing social ideals” (xii). He further claims that this problem—the “ambiguity of nature”—allows different individuals—including filmmakers—to use the concept of nature for their own purposes. (1-17). The ambiguity of the term “nature” explains the different kinds of motion pictures⁹ that are encompassed under the umbrella of “natural history” films, each representative of the social context from which it arose.

For my purposes, I will treat Pribilof fur seal films as a subset of natural history films to represent the general trends in natural history filmmaking. This subset is an appropriate subject because it spans the entire period of modern natural history filmmaking—the current period beginning when Walt Disney launched the True-Life Adventures series in 1948 with “On Seal Island,” a story about the northern fur seal’s summer habitation of the Pribilof Islands. The True-Life Adventures series was highly successful and began an era of domestication and treatment of nature as an entertainment medium—the depiction of nature became an entity devoid of humans (Bousé 63). “With its True-Life Adventures, 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” (Mitman 110). The True-Life Adventures thus began a

tradition of wildlife film that is still represented today by blue chip wildlife films (Bousé 63), such as the eight featured episodes of The Blue Planet series.¹⁰

When “On Seal Island” launched the True-Life Adventures series in 1948, the mood in American culture was one of increased post-war commercialism and industrialization. “On Seal Island” as well as other True-Life Adventures episodes, sought to offer a “benevolent and pure” nature, one that “captured the emotional beauty of nature’s grand design . . . and affirmed the importance of America as one nation under God” (Mitman 110). Intimate photography and narrative portrayed the seals in their Eden-like environment, suggesting the Pribilofs as “paradise” in the film.

The escape from the increased pace of capitalist society that Disney offered his audience in “On Seal Island” is what Carolyn Merchant would describe as another attempt to “recover Eden,” an effort which, she states, has encompassed all of Judeo-Christian history since the “Fall of Eden.” To recover, or to return to Eden before the taking of the forbidden fruit, would be a return to nature when it “was an entirely positive presence” (Merchant 18). “On Seal Island” attempts to take the audience to that positive place, an escape from the negativity that lingered from the death and destruction of World War II (Mitman 110).

The escape that “On Seal Island” provided was to a realm devoid of human culture, “an innocent past, a time before nature had been tainted by the corrupting forces of human civilization” (Mitman 114). In relation to today’s environmental crises, Merchant argues that the return to Eden would be to

reincorporate human culture into nature. She calls this a “partnership ethic,” similar to the experience that Eve had with nature before the “Fall of Eden.” As Merchant writes regarding Eve’s portrayal in Mark Twain’s Diaries: “She is interested in everything about her world, but not in destroying it. She interacts with animals and plants as equals.”

Merchant’s partnership ethic is a new way to recover Eden through a sustainable relationship with nature. To achieve this partnership, she offers the model: “Like human partners, the earth and humanity communicate with each other.” And to understand how to better communicate with each other, we must reassess negative events in ecological and human histories (Merchant 228, 246). The partnership requires recognition of a mutual relationship between nature and human culture. In that relationship, the requirements for the survival of all members of the partnership must be treated equally. In natural history film, denying the relationship between nature and culture denies the partnership ethic.

In its quest to “recover Eden,” Disney Studios decided that the “benevolent and pure” nature it wished to define in the True-Life Adventures was without humans, without a partnership. It is tragic that “On Seal Island” adopted this human-less nature in presenting the fur seal’s life history because the northern fur seal had only been studied as a result of its use as a natural resource *by* humans. Sixty-seven years earlier, in 1881, Henry Wood Elliott had published The Seal Islands of Alaska, a monograph about the Pribilof Islands including the first detailed account of the northern fur seal’s life history (Elliott,

Seal-Islands 5). He completed this monograph only because he was appointed to work on the Pribilofs Islands as an Assistant Treasury Agent for the United States government. As a government agent, his official job was to monitor the fur seal harvest (Morris 16), a harvest that slaughtered tens of thousands of bachelor seals annually to make fur coats out of their pelts (Busch 110).

The foundation for the human understanding of the northern fur seal's life history, and therefore the foundation for the information presented in "On Seal Island," was intertwined with a history of commercial use. This history began with Russian harvesting over a century before Elliott set foot on the Pribilof Islands (Scheffer 1-7). But for the purposes of "On Seal Island," "the interwoven histories of humans and animals on the Pribilof Islands would have undermined the fantasy of pure nature that Disney sought to portray" (Mitman 114).

"On Seal Island" begins:

This is one of a series of True-Life Adventures presenting strange facts about the world we live in. These films are photographed in their natural settings and are completely authentic, unstaged and unrehearsed.

Ironically, immediately following the opening animation that establishes the location of the Pribilof Islands, the narrator announces, "The stage is set." The film's narration continues to use the metaphor of a theatrical performance in telling its story of the fur seal's life history.

Seal Island, theatre for the spectacle, stands ready and waiting for the players to make their annual appearance, for every summer the fur seal return to these barren shores, that they may bear where they were born . . . The month is May, and the play will soon begin.

"Staged and rehearsed": it's as if the seals are putting on a show for our benefit.

Subjective anthropomorphism is constant throughout “On Seal Island.” For instance the narrator describes a territorial male seal, or “beachmaster,” as “well pleased with himself,” or in plural they are “big burly fellows.” As female seals arrive on the islands to breed with the males, they are welcomed with a rendition of “Here Comes the Bride.” Once in the territories of an aggressive male, “some fickle female manages to elude the watchful eye of her lord and master.” The birds that sit up on the surrounding cliffs—“in the gallery”—move in to “watch the show,” and Mr. and Mrs. Kittiwake are busy with “summer housekeeping.”

“On Seal Island” director James Algar, who had worked on animated features with Disney Studios, became one of the most prolific directors of True-Life Adventures. Algar had directed Bambi and was a strong proponent of using music in the True-Life Adventures, a technique “borrowed from animated cartoons.” He used music to establish “themes” to portray the personality of animal characters. Algar believed that anthropomorphism allowed the “audience to identify with the creatures” (Mitman 119-120). “The animals are, as it were, human beings dressed up; they speak and think like human beings, and are created with the specific intention of providing didactic comment on human actions and attitudes” (Keith 88).

For many years, conservationists backed Disney strongly, believing that “The True-Life Adventures series made wilderness available to the public without any threat of despoiling natural areas that environmentalists prized and wished to preserve from the onslaught of mass tourism and recreation.”

However, when Disney's success allowed him to propose a \$35 million dollar ski resort in northern California requiring a new road through Sequoia National Park, it became apparent to the environmentalists that his focus was on commercial profit, and the exploitation of nature was his means to that end (Mitman 124).

In the end, the True-Life Adventures series and "On Seal Island" domesticated nature. The American public was its spectator. "In recreating a vision of America's wilderness, Disney's True-Life Adventures opened a new frontier for exploration and conquest" (Mitman 130). "On Seal Island" perpetuated the humanist concept of nature that has persisted since the Renaissance, a concept that treats "nature as object," an object that lies within the domain of human control (Evernden 57-71, 100-102). During the era of humanist Renaissance thinking, a definitive distinction was formed between human culture and nature. Nature was only understood through human reason, not through experiences with nature. By alienating the human from nature in both picture and words (through anthropomorphism and contrived narrative), "On Seal Island" perpetuates that division. "By making animals into spectacle, rather than beings we engage with in work and play, nature films and other recreations of nature reinforce this dichotomy of humans and nature" (Mitman 206).

Disney released "On Seal Island" theatrically in 1948 and won an Academy Award for best short subject (Mitman 109). The continued success of the True-Life Adventures paved the way for the northern fur seal, and the vast world of nature, to be tapped for entertainment in the television market as well.

During the 1950s, 60s, and 70s, television moved into the American household including nature programming that was hosted by people venturing into the new frontier of nature that Disney had introduced. Marlin Perkins in Zooparade and Wild Kingdom, Jacques Cousteau in The Undersea World of Jacques Cousteau, and Jane Goodall in “Miss Jane Goodall and the Wild Chimpanzees,” became household names (Bousé 70-72).

In the same tradition, “Seals of Pribilof” was produced in 1983, as part of the series Wild Kingdom: New Animal World. Bill Burrud took the role of educator and host in this film, introducing the audience to the Pribilof Islands and the fur seal at the top of the show. He narrates the piece and gives a quiz at the end. Burrud Productions used many of the same tactics as Disney Studios and has largely the same impact. For instance, “Seals of Pribilof” uses anthropomorphism throughout the film creating an “invented” narrative just as “On Seal Island” did: “The strongest bulls have earned a prime position on the rookery. To put it more bluntly, it gives them an ideal spot to ‘watch the girls go by.’” This latter phrase continues to contribute to inaccuracies in the portrayal of the fur seal’s life history.

“Seals of Pribilof” does, however, deviate from “On Seal Island” in its treatment of humans. Humans are still absent for the majority of the film, but Bill Burrud, as host and narrator, introduces scientists into the film and we see them on a beach packed with seals. The scientists are trying to estimate the size of the herd and they shoot blanks from a revolver to startle the animals. Burrud narrates: “Long bamboo poles are used to ward them off. [BLAST] Guns are no

longer used to kill these animals, but rather to arouse them for a head count.”

Today, these methods for obtaining population counts have been abandoned for more effective and less intrusive alternatives, but the fact that this film featured this counting method is a case of humans exerting reckless control over the domain of nature.

To the credit of “Seals of Pribilof,” it does appear to be the first non-news special that mentions the “harvesting” of Pribilof fur seals by humans. However, this mention is only in a few short lines of narration using such euphemisms as “for commercial purposes” to describe the reasons for the slaughter of these animals. No images of the fur seal harvest (clubbing on land, shooting and spearing in the ocean) appear in the film, and therefore the impact of this concept on the audience is minimal. There is a short mention of the past population fluctuations caused by the fur seal harvest that brought the northern fur seal to the brink of extinction, but the reference is again minimal and indirect, stating “man’s ignorance and greed” as the reason, not specifically the demand for luxurious fur coats.

“Seals of Pribilof” fails to represent the history of how humans and fur seals have interacted with each other because it lacks image coverage and direct narrative. The film ends by promoting the conservation of the fur seal, but with no reference to the mismanagement that almost wiped out this species. Past fur seal declines that put the species’ future in danger are the direct result of the kind of relationship humans had with the northern fur seal. Understanding that relationship now and in the future is necessary for both species to live together in

partnership. Instead, this film continues to define fur seals and nature in general as a commodity for human consumption and enjoyment.

Additionally, the focus on the fur seal life history in “Seals of Pribilof” would never suggest that the Pribilof fur seal population had fallen by half since “On Seal Island” was made¹¹ (Anglis 20). An extended NBC news piece, Man’s Thumb on Nature’s Balance hosted by Jack Perkins did however present this harsh reality. In 1971, NBC news offered an opposing view of nature from that in “On Seal Island” and “Seals of Pribilof.” NBC’s portrayal was of a nature that included humans and fur seals and it acknowledged a relationship between the two. The film’s narration represents the relationship in this way: “Once men have intervened in nature, they must continue to intervene. Once they have assumed dominion, there is no giving it back.”

Man’s Thumb on Nature’s Balance recognizes a decline in the fur seal population that began in the 1960s, and justifies the fur seal harvest as a means to protect the species from extinction. Man’s Thumb argues that because the land harvest on Pribilof Islands is exclusive and controlled to harvest only non-breeding bachelor males, to stop it would be detrimental. A cessation of the land harvest on the Pribilof Islands would breach the Fur Seal Treaty established in 1911 and would allow for the re-opening of fur seal harvesting to any nation that wished to harvest them. Man’s Thumb states that harvesting by other countries, as in the days before the last major decline in the late 1800s and early 1900s, would result in pelagic sealing, a method of sealing that made no distinctions in terms of age and sex, and was extremely wasteful. During the era of heavy

pelagic sealing, pelagic sealers retrieved fewer than one out of every five seals shot (Elliott, "Condition" 378).

As a result of the view that some controlled harvesting on land should continue, Man's Thumb on Nature's Balance acknowledges that humans have the power to change the environment in detrimental ways very quickly. Man's Thumb establishes the necessary relationship between humans and the fur seal to allow the survival of the species, but also to allow the Aleut people to continue to depend on the land harvest for their income and sustenance. This natural history program succeeds in fusing the natural history of the seal with the history of human contact. Man's Thumb on Nature's Balance portrays a partnership between man and nature based on co-dependence.

Man's Thumb states, "Once men have intervened in nature, they must continue to intervene." It's only because we acknowledge ourselves as an intervention that we require ourselves to continue to intervene. However, definitions that were prominent earlier in human history define nature as "everything." This view of nature may have originated from the ancient Greek concept of "physis," which eventually came to mean "everything" (Evernden 20). If nature is everything, then humans cannot be considered an intervention in nature. As Man's Thumb implies, we are part of nature and therefore our decisions about the future direction of our species include consideration of the natural world. As illustrated by this subset of Pribilof fur seal films before 1985, the "ambiguity of nature" allows for very different messages in natural history films.

As part of Marty Stouffer's Wild America series, the episode "Living with Wildlife" followed Man's Thumb on Nature's Balance in the early 1980s. "Living with Wildlife" does not focus on the Pribilof fur seals, but it does devote a section to it. It includes a bit of fur seal life history and talks about the reduction of the herd in the early 1900s, but says in its narration: "Today, the kill is strictly regulated." "Living with Wildlife" builds a co-dependence between humans and wildlife. "We," the film states, "must understand the relationships between, plants, animals, and humans; the intricate web of the food chain, the delicate balance between predator and prey." But then in reference to the fur seal harvest, Stouffer apparently believes, "as long as we manage the fur seal wisely, it will be able to continue renewing itself." The end-focus, which is similar to Man's Thumb on Nature's Balance, is on human management of the natural world, but not necessarily on the management of human action (consumer demand), which is required for a partnership to succeed.

In regard to management, science seems to provide the answers for proper eco-management. The three Pribilof fur seal films made for broadcast in the last fifteen years include: "Mystery of the Million Seals" (1990) from BBC's Survivors series, "Fur Seal of the Pribilof Islands" (1990) from NHK's The Global Family series, and the Italian produced Pribilof Islands: Galapagos of the North (2000). All three films bring the fur seal decline to the forefront of their narratives, and all present science as the tool to investigate the problem and guide its management. Each film also mentions the fur seal harvest, but the focus of these films is on science, and how science and scientists are figuring out

and researching the effects of different potential causes for the fur seal decline—commercial fishing, debris entanglement, increased industry and climate change among others. Images of commercial fishing illustrate how the extraction of the fur seal's food source could have an adverse effect on the seals' survival rates. Seals entangled in nets and with plastic bands wrapped around their necks startle the viewer, but none of these programs show individuals, like those in the audience, connected to or taking any responsibility for any of these possible causes for the fur seal decline. There are no shots, for instance, of a recreational boater dumping garbage over the side of his or her private vessel, garbage that could some day entangle a seal.

Instead, the focus is on science, and the science to understand the fur seal becomes the "star" of the show. The scientists, such as Roger Gentry in "Mystery of the Million Seals," could be construed as detectives, trying to solve the riddle of the fur seal decline. In Galapagos of the North, scientists are "heroes," chasing fur seal pups and shaving their heads to obtain population estimates. They use a proven scientific method for estimating population, a "mark-recapture" study, but this method is extremely intrusive on the animals, and the filmmakers make no attempt to hide or minimize that. The camera crew chases the little pups to obtain tight camera shots illustrating the scientist's point-of-view. This whole scene is scored to up-beat music masking the stressful impact this study and the filming has on the seals. There is little sentiment in these films, little connection between the human and animal subject. Instead the scientists are objective information gatherers and the film is anthropocentric. Nature is an objective

entity to be studied through observation and description: to comprehend nature is to witness it.

This attitude represents the empirical mode of realist thinking that arose in England and Holland in the post-Renaissance period and which largely prevails today when humans interact with nature (Evernden 77-78). With quotes from Galapagos of the North such as “Without ongoing studies, we cannot hope to solve the puzzle of the Bering Sea,” nature becomes the human laboratory. Nature is an entity to study and regulate with appropriate management protocols. Instead of studying *ourselves*, these films study nature within the domain of human control. They continue to support the dualism of nature and culture.

Environmental historian Roderick Nash suggests an opposing view: we should contain civilization instead of containing wilderness and in this new order, “People would not be masters or ‘stewards’ or even ‘eco-managers’ but, following Aldo Leopold, plain members and fellow citizens of the community of life” (Nash 384). Natural history filmmaker Chris Palmer agrees, suggesting that as members of this community of life, filmmakers should make films that focus on individuals who interact intimately and passionately with the natural world. In other words, films should not focus on objective scientists, but on “real authentic grass-roots activists . . . who have been seared by their experiences.” I’d argue that other types of activists, such as scientists and environmentalists, are also worthy subjects. As long as they are not portrayed solely as “eco-managers” or “stewards,” but instead as individuals who undergo a

transformation as a result of being “seared by their experiences” with nature. Their passion must be central to the film’s narrative. These kinds of stories create bonds with audience members, and therefore encourage a bond between humans and nature (Palmer).

Although The Galapagos of the North promotes the dualism of nature and human culture in a general sense, it does have specific moments that attempt to forge a partnership relationship with nature. Direct quotes from the narration illustrate the filmmaker’s efforts best:

Bigger is better in today’s world, and with modern technology the quantity of fish captured is larger and faster than ever. The much-needed short-term profits [for humans] are on a collision course with long-term sustainability.

In reference to the increased industrialization on the Pribilof Islands, the narrative continues, “As the Pribilofs move from subsistence to a global economy, they will never be so remote or wild again. Anything new comes at a price, and this is a high one that can’t be paid by nature alone.”

In Henry Wood Elliott: Defender of the Fur Seal, I attempt to pick up where Galapagos of the North and Man’s Thumb on Nature’s Balance leave off in their calls for a partnership. The commercial fur seal harvest on the Pribilof Islands terminated in 1984, so Man’s Thumb on Nature’s Balance is now outdated. I intend to help build an updated version of the human relationship with the Pribilof fur seal.

Nature as defined by Defender of the Fur Seal is a return, like Man’s Thumb, to the ancient Greek understanding of “nature as everything” (Evernden

19-20). Inherent in that definition is the notion that humans are part of nature, and therefore cannot be excluded from it. As Disney made use of nature as entertainment with “On Seal Island,” I try to as well because films can only succeed—especially in American markets—if they are both educational and entertaining. However, I avoid anthropomorphism, at least in a subjective sense. Instead of enforcing a subjective narrative of human behaviors and clichés on the fur seal to help the human audience “identify” with nature, I show the similarity between humans and seals in morphology—through objective anthropomorphism. This tool reinforces the fact that human body plans are analogous to other vertebrates and by association humans too are members of the natural world. The reference to Elliott describing the seal’s foreflippers “as dark bluish-black hands, stretched out with the same bones as a human, fingernails embedded in the middle” is an example of this effort.

Throughout my thesis film’s story, Elliott discovers that the fur seal harvest has been operating for over a hundred years with no definitive knowledge of the fur seal’s life history. The film never condemns the idea of harvesting fur seals as a natural resource but through Elliott’s astonishment at the lack of knowledge about this resource, it tries to encourage industry to properly research the resource it depends upon. We must thoroughly understand the resource and its vulnerability so that we can operate industry most efficiently to sustain the extractor and the extracted.

By including images of women wearing fashionable fur coats, I attempt to definitively establish—with imagery—a relationship between industrial

demands and consumer demands for fur seal pelts. With the exception of Man's Thumb on Nature's Balance, no previous fur seal film has done this. The point I attempt to present to my audience is this: when I buy a fur coat, I support an industry that kills wild animals. Only through understanding the consequences of their actions can individuals understand the impact their individual choices have on natural resources.

Not only do I show the connection between consumer and industrial demand through images of fur coats, but I chronicle the worst decline in the history of the Pribilof fur seal population, and therefore in the history of the human harvesting of the fur seal for its fur (Scheffer 1-20). I show this decline as the result of increased consumer demand after the United States purchased the Alaskan territory from Russia and when the fur business gained a larger international market. As the consumer demand grew and prices increased, so did the greed of individuals to make short-term profits—hence the advent of pelagic sealing. In both words and imagery, I portray the catastrophic fur seal decline through an emotional account of Elliott describing what he saw in his 1890 return to the Pribilof Islands. This account is not through an objective scientist's eyes, investigating the problem from the realm of science, but through Elliott's eyes as a naturalist—making observations relative to his personal experience. In Defender of the Fur Seal, Elliott is “seared” by the experience of witnessing the sealing industry's decimation of the fur seal population. As a result, Elliott transforms from a naturalist into an activist.

As Elliott led the charge for the protection of the fur seal under the Fur Seal Treaty of 1911, it is clear that humans were extracting resources without any thought to the effects on the resource itself. The irresponsible over-exploitation and subsequent loss of seals during the harvesting illustrates that balance is necessary for sustainable natural resource management. This balance required is part of a partnership ethic, in which “people and nature are equally important to each other” (223).

I also attempt to touch briefly on the present day fur seal decline as having the potential to jeopardize the legacy of Henry Wood Elliott, who worked so hard to protect the northern fur seal. Although my treatment of the decline is fairly superficial and without much focus on consumer demand,¹² Defender of the Fur Seal does convey to the audience that the human impact on the fur seal has not necessarily been remedied once and for all by the efforts of one great conservationist, Henry Wood Elliott. I attempt to do this in two ways. First, I mention direct human-borne impacts including increased contaminants from industrial waste compounds in seal blubber and mother’s milk, which can compromise a seal’s immune system, and marine debris that entangle seals and eventually strangle them. Secondly, I geographically connect the commercial fishing efforts of today with the extremely detrimental pelagic sealing efforts of the past. As the pelagic sealing efforts were the “straw that broke the camel’s back” in reference to the crash of the fur seal population at the turn of the 20th century, so too is commercial fishing putting pressure on the fur seals in these same waters now. In the late 1800s and early 1900s, pelagic sealers killed the

seals directly, while today increased commercial fishing in the Bering Sea increases competition for the fur seal's food, which could indirectly cause fur seals to starve to death.

As a result of my effort to present the fur seal decline, an underlying analogy in my film is this: Just as choosing to buy fur coats leads to the killing of wild populations of seals, so choosing to eat fish supports commercial fishing efforts that potentially compete with, and potentially diminish, populations of marine mammals, such as fur seals. The same applies to supporting industries that release harmful chemicals or marine debris into our environment. Marine debris does have an impact on the fur seal population, and even if commercial fishing and pollution have nothing to do with the decline of the fur seal, it is critical to expose these connections. As Roderick Nash writes, "We need to learn how to live responsibly in the larger neighborhood called the ecosystem, and the first requirement is to respect our neighbors' lives" (386). We can only respect our neighbors' lives with an understanding of our relationship to them through history, through our present experience, and through what we can reasonably anticipate experiencing in the future.

By bringing together ecological history and human history, as Carolyn Merchant suggests, we can learn from our mistakes and understand our human relationship with nature (228). Natural history films, as Defender of the Fur Seal and other films have shown, can be entertaining while attempting to promote a viable partnership between culture and nature. Our profession must work toward this goal to affect attitudes toward conservation.

CONCLUSION

“The reality is that as the twenty-first century begins, civilized humans are no longer thinking or acting like part of nature” (Nash 386). Many natural history films, such as those that make up The Blue Planet series, continue to encourage a separation between human culture and nature. When The Blue Planet series aired on the Discovery Channel in 2002, it aired with eight one-hour blue chip episodes.¹⁰ These programs show nothing that is human-related and by implication, deny any sort of trouble relative to human resource extraction and exploitation of the world’s oceans. Gregg Mitman sums up the effect of such an approach in his criticism of blue chip films: “to erase the so-called artifice—humans and our constructions—is to deny any presence in the natural world” (208).

Today, many viewers believe that natural history documentaries are absolute fact. A 1996 editorial in The Denver Post stated, “Films that depict otherwise do a disservice to the animals and negate the very point of making wildlife documentaries, which is to help humans appreciate the natural world” (6B). The problem with the way The Blue Planet series was marketed and aired by the Discovery Channel is that it concealed the truth. “‘Deep Trouble’: a compelling exploration of Man’s impact on the oceans” is an additional program included on the DVD boxed-set, but never aired on American television. “Deep Trouble” is the only episode in the boxed-set that acknowledges the relationship that exists between human culture and nature, a relationship involving human extraction of natural resources from the oceans. “Deep Trouble” shows

commercial fishing and notes which fish stocks have been depleted by international consumer and industrial demand. In response, the film offers solutions for the audience. The film educates the audience and encourages consumers to eat species of fish that are harvested in a sustainable manner. However, this program has never been broadcast to the American audience. The question is why?

Chris Palmer states that broadcasters simply don't buy environmental, or conservation, films. "Environmental films tend to be gloom-and-doom and make people feel guilty, and even discourage them." Therefore, very few people end up watching conservation films, and those that do are often already conservationists. It seems that conservation films "preach to the choir." The films that do make it onto network television are of the blue-chip variety—timeless and full of bounty. "These films can give a false sense of security, a false sense of endless bounty."

What Chris Palmer suggests is that we not create discouraging environmental films that often focus on scientists who are simply studying a particular species that is in danger, but instead create a story based on people who have "been transformed by their conservation experiences." A narrative involving a character-arc in which the subject goes through an "inner change," Palmer argues, will give wildlife and conservation films emotional impact and make them more successful.

I have attempted to do what Palmer describes through the story of Henry Wood Elliott and his efforts to save a species from extinction. Elliott went

through a significant change as a result of his 1872 and 1890 visits to the Pribilof Islands, during the latter of which he reported that only one-tenth of the seals that he saw in 1872 remained (Elliott, "Condition" 318). The devastation called him to action and he saved a species.

Henry Wood Elliott: Defender of the Fur Seal also attempts to build the bridge between human culture and nature that is not portrayed in blue chip films and sensationalist nature films like Discovery Channel's "Anatomy of a Shark Bite," the latter of which responds to a belief that American audiences "want their natural history shaken, super-sized, blood-soaked." "Anatomy of a Shark Bite" showcased more than 300 shark bites on humans mixed with shots of a mechanical shark head to illustrate the power and mechanics of a shark's bite (Hand). Just as Disney Studios utilized nature as a medium for entertainment, so have blue chip films and sensational wildlife films kept nature as an entity alienated from human culture. These films promote no partnership between humans and the natural world.

As Neil Evernden writes, "The so-called environmental crisis demands not the inventing of solutions, but the re-creation of the things themselves" (123). In Henry Wood Elliott: Defender of the Fur Seal, I attempt to re-define "nature" as it is typically used in natural history film. I define nature to be omnipresent, with the human species being one small but powerful (and potentially dangerous) part of that presence. As in the ancient Greek understanding, for me, nature is everything. Using that definition I try to promote Carolyn Merchant's partnership ethic, an ethic "based on the idea that people are helpers, partners,

and colleagues and that people and nature are equally important to each other” (223).

As the environmental crisis becomes more obvious every day, I hope that American television broadcasters will be more willing to address it. Although it is not within the scope of this essay to address questions of economics and the basis upon which broadcasters make decisions about what to broadcast (and what not to broadcast), I hope that natural history filmmakers will include stronger conservation messages in their films and recognize the tactic of incorporating human history into natural history to do it. Combining human and natural history into one film with an appealing narrative not only encourages the much-needed partnership for a sustainable relationship between human society and nature, but embedded within tales of human history, conservation films may also become more desirable to broadcasters. Films that promote a partnership ethic between nature and culture allow humans to assume their rightful place, willingly, in respectful co-existence with the rest of our world.

A human being is part of the whole, called by us “Universe,” a part limited in time and space. He experiences himself, his thoughts and feelings as something separated from the rest—a kind of optical delusion of his consciousness.

This delusion is a kind of prison for us, restricting us to our personal desires and to affection for a few persons nearest to us. Our task must be to free ourselves from this prison by widening our circle of compassion to embrace all living creatures and the whole of nature in its beauty.

—Albert Einstein, 1950 (Eves 60)

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APPENDIX A

NOTES

1 On American television, natural history films differ from science films, which often include some aspects natural history unrelated to wildlife (Tobias), like the natural history of a volcano like Mt. St Helens.

2 For example, “Land of the Falling Lakes” from PBS Nature and The Blue Planet series on the Discovery Channel.

3 For example, National Geographic’s In Search for the Jaguar and Silent Roar: Searching for the Snow Leopard.

4 For example, The Crocodile Hunter on Animal Planet or National Geographic’s Explorer.

5 The Animal Face-off series on the Discovery Channel squares two animals off against each other to determine which animal would prevail in a “face-off.” Such episodes include “Croc vs. Great White” or “Lion vs. Tiger.” The audience can decide on the winner of each “face-off” based on quantifications of “power, strength and prowess,” which are determined through an analysis of mechanical models of each animal based on its morphology. Similar tactics are used in other programs featuring animal anatomy such as “Anatomy of a Shark Bite” or “Anatomy of a Bear Bite.”

6 In this paper “nature” and the “natural world” are defined as the “great amorphous mass of otherness that encloaks the planet” unless stated otherwise. Natural resources are therefore raw material resources that are not synthesized by human culture (Definition from Evernden xi).

7 For clarification, the absence of people refers to the absence of people in the visual sense. As demonstrated in this essay, blue chip films do present nature in a certain way and are therefore embedded with politics and human ideals, negating the complete absence of humans.

8 Henry Wood Elliott: Defender of the Fur Seal incorporates human history and natural history but is not complete. The film omits the history of the Aleut people’s involvement in the fur seal industry, which is a complex story in itself. It is also a critical story in exploring the proposed partnership between human culture and nature. My thesis film was made for NOAA (National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration) and at NOAA we are concurrently working on a one-hour documentary about the Aleut people and the history of the Pribilof Islands. Therefore, as these films will be packaged together at NOAA, the choice was made to keep Defender of the Fur Seal focused on Elliott.

9 The “different kinds of motion pictures” referred to here speaks to the different styles of producing natural history films, as mentioned in the introduction: “these range from the spectacular blue chip film¹ to specials highlighting scientists or filmmakers². There are also hosted programs, focusing on human-wildlife interaction and often involving the handling of ‘wild’ animals³. In recent years, wildlife programs have gone so far as to reconstruct wildlife as machine⁴” (1).

10 When I refer to the eight featured episodes of The Blue Planet series, I refer to the eight episodes that were aired on Discovery Channel in 2002. These include: “Ocean World;” “Frozen Seas;” “Open Ocean;” “The Deep;” Seasonal Seas;” “Coral Seas;” “Tidal Seas;” and “Coasts.” On the DVD boxed-set for The Blue Planet, which includes all eight episodes, there is also a ninth documentary called “Deep Trouble,” which is referred to elsewhere in this essay.

11 In fact, “Seals of Pribilof,” made in 1983, claimed the population was close to two million animals, when in fact, the Fur Seal Conservation Plan published in 1993, states the population was about 877,000 in 1983.

12 Since this film was a film made for NOAA, there was a directed decision to focus the story on Elliott, which minimized the treatment of the current fur seal decline in Henry Wood Elliott: Defender of the Fur Seal.