

A CRITIQUE OF THE ENVIRONMENTAL
SAVIOR TROPE IN WILDLIFE FILM

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements of the degree

of

Master of Fine Arts

in

Science and Natural History Filmmaking

MONTANA STATE UNIVERSITY
Bozeman, Montana

April 2010

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April 2010

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ABSTRACT

Throughout the history of wildlife film, a human character is often central to a narrative that promotes environmental stewardship. Diverse iconic figures in conservation such as Theodore Roosevelt, Jacques Cousteau and Jane Goodall have played starring roles in wildlife films in order to communicate their respective views on conservation. The common narrative of these films represents a reoccurring motif, or trope, in wildlife film that has evolved over time and prominently persists today- the trope of the Environmental Savior. This trope is justifiably condemned in its predominant form in mainstream wildlife film for casting a white westerner as environmental savior in a foreign ecosystem. Critics charge this trope propagates underlying ideologies of racism, neo-imperialism and western superiority.

In this essay I will examine the trope of the environmental savior, and more specifically the character within the trope, in order to better understand the overt and implied meanings inherent to this narrative. I will first define the trope of the environmental savior and illustrate its power to persuade an audience. Then I will trace the evolution of the trope's protagonist, from to the white hunter in early wildlife films to the enlightened scientist that persists in contemporary mainstream television. Finally, I will propose forward-looking alternatives for constructing the trope of the environmental savior, based on my experience producing my thesis film, *The Mongolian Marmot*.

INTRODUCTION

Wildlife films have a proven ability to inform the public of human-caused environmental harm (Holbert, Kwak, and Shah 187). Throughout the history of wildlife film, a human character is often central to a narrative that promotes environmental stewardship. Diverse iconic figures in conservation such as Theodore Roosevelt, Jacques Cousteau and Jane Goodall have played starring roles in wildlife films in order to communicate their respective views on conservation. The common narrative of these films represents a reoccurring motif, or trope, in wildlife film that has evolved over time and prominently persists today- the trope of the Environmental Savior.

On the one hand, the trope of the environmental savior is an individual's personal quest to protect the natural environment from anthropogenic destruction, and it can be effective and persuasive in advocating a conservation message to an audience. However, this trope is justifiably condemned in its predominant form in mainstream wildlife film for casting a white westerner as environmental savior in a foreign ecosystem. Critics charge this trope propagates underlying ideologies of racism, neo-imperialism and western superiority (Vivanco 1199; Chris 169).

I pursue a career in wildlife documentary filmmaking primarily out of a personal drive to raise awareness for environmental issues. I know that wildlife films greatly inform my own environmental ethic, and I strive to influence others in the same way. I respect the persuasive power of the trope of the environmental savior. I have exploited its power in the past and I will continue to do so in future productions by choosing to put a human character at the center of my films about the natural world. However, I do not

want the negative ideological subtext that Vivanco and Chris justifiably link to the savior to undermine the environmental messages of my films.

In this essay I will examine the trope of the environmental savior, and more specifically the character within the trope, in order to better understand the overt and implied meanings inherent to this narrative. I will first define the trope of the environmental savior and illustrate its power to persuade an audience. Then I will trace the evolution of the trope's protagonist, from to the white hunter in early wildlife films to the enlightened scientist that persists in contemporary mainstream television. Finally, I will propose forward-looking alternatives for constructing the trope of the environmental savior, based on my experience producing a film about the Mongolian marmot (*Marmota sibirica*).

DEFINING THE TROPE OF THE ENVIRONMENTAL SAVIOR

A trope is a reoccurring storyline or motif in film that conveys a symbolic meaning (Manchel 134). It is often driven by a certain character archetype, such as the "mad scientist" in Hollywood horror movies. Certain tropes are synonymous with a particular genre. For example, the trope of an individual animal on a *quest* is prominent in the classic blue-chip wildlife films that exclude humans from the narrative (Bousé 128). The trope of the environmental savior, on the other hand, is a reoccurring plotline in wildlife films that places a human character at the center of the story. These quest films may feature a species such as orangutans or manatees, but it is a human's fight against the forces that threaten the animal's wellbeing that drives the narrative.

Environmental issues like species extinction and global warming can seem depressing for viewers, and as a result, broadcasters avoid these topics in the blue-chip wildlife genre (Cottle 96). If a wildlife film does address human caused environmental destruction, it often avoids a doom-and-gloom storyline by employing the trope of the environmental savior. Instead of casting all of mankind in an antagonizing role, it highlights an individual's efforts to fix the problem. The story plays out as a David-and-Goliath struggle in order to communicate a political message of environmental preservation (Vivanco 1199). The trope is accessible to the audience because it personifies understanding and advocacy on matters outside of the human experience. The recent success of a film outside of the wildlife genre, *An Inconvenient Truth* (2006), exemplifies the power of the environmental savior character.

An Inconvenient Truth puts Al Gore at the center of a film about climate change. Human caused climate change is a contentious and complicated environmental issue on a global scale. However, producer Davis Guggenheim creates a compelling storyline to communicate climate change science and policy by casting Al Gore in the film as the environmental savior. Guggenheim goes further than simply featuring Gore's podium lecture and recognizable voiceover. The film cuts to intimate portraits of the protagonist that establish his personal quest to speak out on this issue and fight the putatively malevolent forces of big business and public apathy. As a result, the film became a commercial, critical, and political success by grossing nearly \$50 million in worldwide box office in 2006 (boxofficemojo.com). It won the Oscar for best documentary feature and it is credited for converting many opponents on the other side of the climate change debate (Donnelly).

Regardless of the accolades for the film, the case of *An Inconvenient Truth* also illustrates the negative consequences that loom when linking an environmental issue to an individual personality. *An Inconvenient Truth* makes Al Gore the face of climate change, and therefore the former vice president's personal actions and political views are linked to this environmental cause. Critics of the film's advocacy message have deflected attention from the climate change debate by attacking Gore's personal hypocrisies on the issue, seizing upon news stories and opinion pieces about the excess of Gore's personal carbon footprint. Climate change skeptics have been able to reduce a debate about the health of the natural environment to a subjective opinion of Al Gore as a man and a politician rather than addressing peer-reviewed scientific papers that warn of

environmental harm due to anthropogenic climate change (Zeller). *An Inconvenient Truth* underscores both the positive and negative consequences that exist when using a human to raise awareness for an environmental cause. While an environmental film driven by a human character can reach a potentially large audience, opposition to the film's environmental message can be reduced to ad hominem attacks against the likeness, actions, and politics of the main character.

In wildlife films that cast a human in a leading role, the environmental savior character is open to criticism at both an individual level (based on the personal actions and beliefs of the lead character) and more broadly at an institutional level. Since attacks on a specific individual vary from film to film depending on the specific individual, I will address the criticisms that apply to the trope of the environmental savior on an institutional level. They are rooted in the trope's precursor, a prominent character in early wildlife film: the white hunter in Africa.

THE ORIGINS OF THE ENVIRONMENTAL SAVIOR

Cynthia Chris observes in Watching Wildlife that while wildlife films present themselves as straightforward and objective narratives centered on animals, they are in fact:

Sites of both purposeful ideological work and unconscious elaborations of beliefs so normalized as common sense—about nature, animals, race, gender, sexuality, economic and political formations, that they may not be recognized (by filmmakers, by television programmers, by scientists, by audiences) as ideological (Chris xix).

One must examine the earliest wildlife films in order to understand the underlying dogmatic texts that persist in their present-day incarnations. Therefore, it is necessary to identify the origins of the trope of the environmental savior in wildlife film in order to understand the ideological values linked to its modern manifestations. The character of environmental savior is born out of the American white hunter films from the early 20th century set in Africa that featured, among others, Theodore Roosevelt, Jesse (“Buffalo”) Jones, Paul Rainey and Martin and Osa Johnson. The films by Roosevelt, Jones, and Rainey asserted heroism and superiority of western culture and the subsequent productions by the Johnsons convey a quest to find a present-day The Garden of Eden.

Theodore Roosevelt believed in an evolutionary hierarchy of civilization: beginning with the savages and progressing to the civilized. America represented an environment that was successfully conquered and civilized by man, while Africa was nature’s continent, still ruled by the animals and primitive civilization absent from Roosevelt’s homeland (Tobias). Roosevelt did not necessarily deem the former as

superior to the later. Rather, Africa was a place where a successful American man went to recapture a primitive masculinity lost in the routine and amenities of modern civilization. After two terms as president of the United States, Roosevelt teamed with naturalist-filmmaker Cherry Kearton to chronicle his expeditions to the “Dark Continent”. The former president is noble and heroic in his leading role in *Roosevelt in Africa* (1909). This film, along with still photos, lectures, and books, lionized this true-life American hero as he travels to exotic lands, conquers wild beasts, and tames savage cultures, armed with the gun, backed by scientific objectivity and documented in motion picture (Tobias). Despite the fact that *Roosevelt in Africa* was a commercial failure, the casting of this trusted and true-life American hero would firmly establish the nobility, objectivity and authority of the white hunter in a non-western wilderness, an archetype perpetuated by contemporaries such as Jones and Rainey.

While Roosevelt and others demonstrated the white man’s supremacy over nature's creatures in the role of the white hunter; these personalities also personified an emerging “imperialist nostalgia” in American culture: a brand of nostalgia characterized by a yearning to recapture a world unaltered by modern industrialization (Rosaldo 71). During his presidency, Roosevelt established the National Parks system in the U.S. to protect his nation's pristine wilderness from destruction. *Roosevelt in Africa* portrayed this champion of environmental stewardship in foreign lands where only the white man knew what was best for the environment. Kearton and Roosevelt simultaneously portrayed Africa as the "Dark Continent" inhabited by savage civilizations, and a "Bright Continent" that is home to a modern-day Garden of Eden. It is this quest for an

American Garden of Eden set in Africa that drives the narratives of the Martin Johnson's hunting films starring his wife, Osa. The married couple would further establish the environmental savior trope in wildlife filmmaking that persists today.

Other early 20th century wildlife filmmakers, such as Paul Rainey, achieved commercial success in the Africa hunting film subgenre. Rainey's film, *Paul Rainey's African Hunt* (1912), became the highest grossing wildlife film of the decade (Mitman 18), illustrating the popularity of this form of entertainment in a modern emasculated American culture yearning for a connection to a more primitive existence. The films of Kearton and Rainey, however, lacked a cohesive narrative. Rainey's box office success, for example, was due to exotic and violent action sequences (captured by his accomplished cinematographer J.C. Hemment), not the engrossing story (Chris 12). These early hunting films were basic travelogues, comprised of discrete events that were not edited together to create an overarching plotline. They established roots of the character central to the trope of the environmental savior character, but not the narrative.

A decade later, Martin and Osa Johnson brought "story" to the white hunter film. They made adventure films, casting Osa in heroic leading roles on a mission to capture and document specimens from Africa's exotic and pristine environment. They were quests to document material evidence of a surviving Garden of Eden that was absent from the industrialized west, with the support of the prestigious American Museum of Natural History to fund and lend credibility to the Johnson's adventures. The film *Congorilla* (1929) opens with expeditions maps and shots depicting the complicated logistics of the trip as they pursue the elusive wild gorillas. From the outset, Martin Johnson's narration

justifies the noble motivations of the journey, stating that the camera is brought along on the journey in order to document their scientific discoveries. They trek into remote locations, fend off dangerous animals and interact with exotic peoples on the way to finally tracking and capturing adult and juvenile gorillas (a scene that was faked for the camera). After incarcerating the wild beasts, Osa Johnson shifts out of her role as the hunter and into to the role of maternal savior. She cares for the young gorillas that were stripped from their mother, holding them in her arms and treating viewers to unprecedented up-close interactions with wild animals. She becomes a savior to an animal in need, and this motif of an intimate human-animal relationship persists in modern wildlife conservation film (Horak 472)

Critics praised the Johnsons for making both entertaining and enlightening films. One critic wrote, "The Johnson formula is irresistible: mount an elaborate safari, improvise various situations as you go along and film them on the spot" (Bousé 50). A *New York Times* feature article about the couple published in 1929 titled, "New Adam and Eve Among the Gentle Wild Beasts," by Hellen Bullit Lowry lauded their modern-day quest for the Garden of Eden. Lowry writes that the Johnson's are on a scientific quest to illustrate that, "It is the white man that makes the wild animal wild. Otherwise he is a gentle, amenable, broad-mined beast who minds his own business and lets you go about yours." Lowry observed a significant shift in the wildlife film narrative. The featured animals are no longer wild beasts to be hunted in the white man's quest to connect with the internal primitive man. Rather, they signify a land "where nature is adjusted and God is in His Heaven" (Lowry).

By today's standards of political correctness, however, the Johnsons' treatment of the native people and animals in their films is blatantly racist.

Documentary film historian Erik Barnouw condemns attitudes and ethics that the Johnsons portray on the screen:

Unabashed condescension and amusement marked [the Johnsons'] attitude toward natives... [Martin] Johnson's narration speaks of 'funny little savages', 'happiest little savages on earth'... To catch two baby gorillas, seven huge trees are chopped down, isolating the gorillas in a tree in the middle, then it is chopped down (Barnouw 50).

Barnouw's harsh criticism is justified, but he fails to dig deeper than readily apparent offenses on the surface and denounce the culture driving the film's ethnocentric narrative. Like Roosevelt, Rainey and others before them, the Johnsons define forces of good and evil in the story. They choose who plays the role of protagonist and the antagonist in the film, and they determine what needs saving and how it should be saved. While a modern audiences will scoff at antiquated racial views and environmental practices exhibited in these early white hunter films, they may not recognize that the narrative persists in the modern environmental wildlife film.

THE MODERN WESTERN ENVIRONMENTAL SAVIOR TROPE

The dominance of the white hunter narrative in wildlife film was diminished by the late 1920's and replaced by anthropomorphic animal films, expelling humans from the story altogether. But thirty years after Roosevelt and the Johnsons made their mark on the genre, their legacy would be resurrected, not by an American wielding a gun, but rather by a Frenchman armed with the tools of modern western science,

Jacques-Ives Cousteau sustained a long, successful and lucrative filmmaking career chronicling his crew aboard the *Calypso* as they set sail to explore and save the underwater ocean environment. Like the Johnsons, Cousteau stated that the purpose of documenting his expeditions was purely scientific, therefore downplaying the entertainment value of his films. But it was because of alluring narrative that Cousteau would firmly establish the trope of the environmental savior in wildlife filmmaking. Critics and audiences alike rewarded Cousteau's autobiographical narratives. His first film, *The Silent Sea* (1954), won both the Cannes Film Festival's Palm d'Or and the Oscar for best documentary, and the formula would continue to attract viewers to commercial broadcast television twenty years later on his ABC series, *The Undersea World of Jacques Cousteau* (1966-67).

Cousteau's popularity established a new wildlife adventure plotline and the formula caught on in mainstream broadcast television. David Attenborough from the United Kingdom and Marlin Perkins from the United States achieved success and notoriety in the 1960's making environmental television shows like Cousteau's, inserting themselves as the protagonist and shifting the focus from the oceans to terrestrial plants

and animals. Chris notes the parallels between this new breed of environmental savior and the white hunter films from a previous era:

[They] remade the genre once again as a masculine adventure saga reminiscent of expedition films of the 1910's and '20's in its predilection for action and the exotic. The filmmaker/hosts, the new auteurs of the genre, always white, always American or European, and regularly male, sought out animals (and occasionally indigenous peoples of the lands they filmed) as objects of the camera's gaze rather than quarry of the gun (Chris 46).

The narrative shifted from civilizing the non-western environment to restoring it to a primitive and pristine state. However, the power structure remained unchanged: it is still the white (mostly male) westerner making the “enlightened” decision. He is the environmental savior, backed by the logic and reason of western science and therefore is justified when proclaiming how the resources should be managed, regardless of what the wants and needs of the indigenous population.

The representation of native peoples to the foreign ecosystems featured in these films also changed. The portrayal of local cultures was no longer that of an uncivilized society worthy of western host's ridicule. Instead, the environmental savior praises them as noble and part of, rather than separate from, the natural environment (Foale and Macintyre 6). This evolution subdues the overt racism noted by Barnouw in the Johnson films, but it also paints an overly simplistic, and in many ways equally condescending, portrait of complex multifaceted cultures (Vivicano 1199).

Cousteau, along with contemporaries such as David Attenborough and Marlin Perkins, established the trope for the modern environmental savior; and after 1970, the year of the first Earth Day, this new trope was employed numerous times, echoing an

increasing awareness of the endangered environment (Horvak 467). A contemporary National Geographic Television production, *Africa's Wild Eden* (2004) illustrates the enduring legacy of the trope of the environmental savior. The show professes an altruistic and modern-day conservation message that promotes protecting pristine habitat in non-western ecosystems. However, it still features white westerner asserting authority over a foreign ecosystem. This film demonstrates both the staying power of the trope of the environmental savior and how little the motif has changed since the earliest wildlife films.

Africa's Wild Eden is about two Americans who work for the prestigious *National Geographic Society* on a mission to protect pristine ecosystems in the West African country of Gabon. From the outset, this film is clearly a descendent of the early white hunter films. The opening lines of the script make it clear that the work of these two white American men is critical for the survival of this foreign ecosystem. *Africa's Wild Eden* narrator states:

Gabon's Loango National Park is a mystical, unspoiled place where the deep, dark jungle meets the sparkling ocean, and Wildlife Conservation Society biologist and National Geographic Conservation Fellow J. Michael Fay and National Geographic photographer Michael "Nick" Nichols are on a mission to safeguard the future of this modern-day Eden.

The overt and repetitive use of the term "Eden", both in the film's title and narration, clearly demonstrates that the white environmental saviors of this modern film uphold the viewpoints of their predecessors. The unveiled references to a primitive and sacred Eden are rooted in the dualism that Kearton and Roosevelt brought to the mainstream nearly a

century earlier to justify the role of the ruling class in creating and maintaining the physical and conceptual boundaries between nature and non-nature (Cronon 75).

Africa's Wild Eden casts Michael Fay and Michael "Nick" Nichols, armed with their official National Geographic Society credentials, as authority figures charged with assessing and protecting the ecological integrity of the coastal jungles of Gabon. In the first act of the film, we follow the main characters on their earlier trips to this foreign environment. Both Nichols and Fay are clearly emotional and intellectually inspired by their new surroundings, which are significant because of their lack of human habitation. These environmental saviors are well cast, as the viewer is immediately drawn into the film's character driven and action-packed narrative. *Africa's Wild Eden* presents both characters to the audience as modern day heroes. Mike Fay, the lead character, employs modern science to determine the ecosystem's worth while "Nick" Nichols captures images that document this lost "Eden."

Mike Fay is a biologist funded by the Wildlife Conservation Society who is credited for "discovering" this pristine wilderness on his previous "mega-transect" across West Africa. The archive footage of a younger and shirtless Mike Fay trudging through the jungle on his original expedition is notable because he is surrounded by what appear to be native Gabonese loaded with heavy backpacks and clearing the way with machetes. However, the film treats these individuals just like extras in narrative film. The script is void of references to their names or nationality, and they never speak on camera or in the voice over narration. From the outset, it is clear that the viewer is meant to connect with Fay's story, not with the indigenous people who surround him.

A second group of indigenous people then appears in the archival footage of Fay's mega-transect; a group of poachers camping in the jungle. They are the film's antagonists, and they scatter as a carefully-framed shot depicts Fay approaching the makeshift poaching camp all by himself. The shot of one white male defeating a pack of nameless and faceless indigenous peoples plays like a scene from the feature film *Rambo: First Blood Part II* (1985). Just like John Rambo single-handedly conquering the Viet Cong on their own turf, Fay's foreboding presence appears to send the native poachers running in fear. The scene ends with Fay documenting the carcasses of poached wildlife as the narrator states that 'Mike chose to send a clear and forceful message' in the form of his native guides (who reappear after Fay sent the poachers running) lighting the entire poaching camp ablaze. Less than seven minutes into the film, *Africa's Wild Eden* draws the lines between good and evil and it is clear that Mike Fay is a force for good. As for the Gabonese natives, those who align themselves with Fay are on the good guys, while those individuals who flee are evil. The film credits Fay's successful "mega-transect" along with Nichol's photography as key factors in the formation of thirteen national parks in Gabon that protect these ecosystems.

For the remainder of the film, Fay and Nichols return to Gabon to protect the wilderness that they have been credited with creating. The voice over narration says that 'Mike will need all the help he can get,' as if this is his own personal wilderness to patrol and protect. The subsequent scenes show Fay and Nichols overseeing a group of anonymous Gabonese going through a military-like training to become park guides and rangers. The heroes then risk death when sedating and tagging jungle elephants for

research. Finally, Mike takes to the sky in a small plane to patrol the shoreline for illegal commercial fishing while Nick captures never-before-seen photos of surfing hippos. The final narration in *Africa's Wild Eden* makes it clear that this dynamic duo has succeeded in their mission:

It's been a fifteen-year trip, from the rainforest of Congo to the shores of Loango. A extraordinary collaboration between scientist and photographer that's not only shown the world some of Africa's last remaining wilderness, but also made it possible for these places and the animals that live here to survive. In the end it's a friendship based on a shared passion for keeping wild places, wild.

While I would not presume that Mike Fay and "Nick Nichols condone the elitism and racism of the early wildlife films that featured Roosevelt or the Johnsons, it is clear the characterization of their likeness and personae in *Africa's Wild Eden* is rooted in the longstanding trope of the environmental savior. Personally, I applaud the conservation work of both the film's main characters and I agree that they deserve some of the credit for the designation of this national park that is still protected eight years later. However, I feel that the film depicting their work does a disservice to the overall mission of long-term protection of these foreign ecosystems by alienating the indigenous culture. So when I made my own film about a wildlife issue outside of my native environment, I tried to employ the narrative strengths of the environmental savior trope while avoiding the eco-imperialistic tendencies that persist in wildlife filmmaking.

THE MONGOLIAN MARMOT: AN ALTERNATIVE

When I produced a film about the cultural and ecological significance of the marmots in Mongolia, I set out to make a wildlife film that challenges the genre's status quo. I chose to make a species-based film with a conservation message that addresses my criticism of the environmental savior trope. Perhaps the easiest way to achieve this would have been to make an environmental film devoid of humans and set in my own proverbial backyard. However, I want continue to make wildlife films that feature people who feel strongly about protecting the environment all over the world, and I acknowledge the narrative power of casting these individuals in the role of the protagonist. So rather than retreating from the trope of the environmental savior, I chose to tackle it head-on in my film, *The Mongolian Marmot* (2008).

The marmot is not a typical species at center of attention of a wildlife film. The genre tends to feature charismatic mega-fauna, such as bears or sharks, as the focus of the narrative and only include the smaller and lower-order species in terms of how they relates to the sensationalized top predator (Mitman). Upon researching the ecology of the marmots of Mongolia (*Marmota sibirica*), I immediately realized that I would not be able to make a classic life-cycle blue-chip wildlife film on my modest budget. The marmot is a burrow-dwelling mammal that lives in social colonies and subsists on a vegetarian diet. They are a key prey species for raptors and carnivorous land mammals such as wolves (Townsend 1). If I were to make a blue-chip film about this species, I would require multiple remote cameras placed in a habituated colony of marmots in order to capture the social interactions among individuals and interspecies conflict. With only twenty days in

the country and a fixed-lens entry level HD camera, I needed to take an alternative approach if I wanted to create a compelling narrative. I chose to focus on the cultural importance and population decline of the marmot in Mongolia, two approaches to the species tied directly to the people of Mongolia.

From a cultural standpoint, marmots in Mongolia are a traditional food source for the nomadic herders. The Mongolians have a traditional method of hunting marmots that involves wearing a white costume and waving a yak's tail in one hand, and they cook the meat by stuffing the body cavity with hot rocks in traditional preparation called Bodog. However, the small mammals can transfer the bubonic plague via the fleas that live in their fur coat, so the Mongolians are acutely aware that this species that they rely on for subsistence can also cause sickness and/or death.

The marmot is also significant to the Mongolian economy. The marmot fur trade exceeds 1.2-million skins on average since the late 1800s (Townsend 1). The fall of the communist regime that governed Mongolia for nearly eight decades resulted in unregulated hunting practices and by the 1990s the marmot populations experienced dramatic declines that threatened the health of the high steppe grassland ecosystems in Mongolia (Reading, Llagvasuren and Tseveenmyadag 59). I knew this storyline could be a vehicle to tell a modern day conservation story about the Mongolian marmot, all I needed were the characters that would drive the narrative.

During the development and preproduction of the film my co-producer, Jo Young, and I made the conscious decision to tell the story exclusively through the words and depiction of the Mongolian people. We wanted to do everything we could to avoid

branding the production with an eco-imperialistic subtext. However, without a budget to pay an entire Mongolian crew to produce, shoot and edit, we conceded that ultimately it would be impossible for me to make a film about the Mongolian marmot from a purely authentic indigenous perspective. Therefore, the challenge we faced was to cast Mongolian characters and voices that collectively would create a compelling and indigenous environmental savior narrative.

One of the first contacts we made when researching the topic was with an American biologist, Sue Townsend, who was researching the effects of declining marmot population on Mongolia's eastern steppe in a study funded by the Wildlife Conservation Society. Sue was knowledgeable about all aspects of marmots in Mongolia, from their cultural significance to their ecology. If we were setting out to make a broadcast film for Discovery Channel or National Geographic, she would have been the perfect character to cast in the leading role as the environmental savior. She is articulate, English speaking and passionate about the marmots. We knew that passing on Sue as a key character in the film would be much more work for us in terms of translation needs and additional research to find compelling characters. Nonetheless, we stuck to our initiative and managed to create a diverse collage of authentic Mongolian voices that told the story of the Mongolian marmot in style that I feel ultimately made for a stronger film by establishing and maintaining an authentic indigenous voice throughout.

As noted, films that feature the environmental savior trope often paint a simplistic and primitive picture of the indigenous culture by contrasting the white scientist armed with knowledge with the noble savage living off the land. Mongolia, like most countries

in the world, is a melting pot of both traditional and modern lifestyles. Nomadic herders living in small family groups are juxtaposed with scientists and professionals in the densely populated capital of Ulaanbaatar. We knew that we would never find a single individual to represent this diverse culture, so instead we cast characters that would more accurately represent the diversity of the country: from university trained biologists to traditional nomadic herders.

The film begins with a day-in-the-life scene that follows a nomadic family tending to its herd in the Mongolian countryside. This family sets the tone for the film in regards to our attempt to paint an accurate portrait of contemporary Mongolia rather than a romanticized cliché of the primitive noble savage. On one hand, the family subsists off their sheep, yaks, horses and goats that they raise for wool, milk, and meat. However, a massive satellite dish and modern motorcycle conspicuously sit out in front of their traditional yurts. The camera captures a society in flux, as three generations work together to survive. As the patriarch of the family, Soldier, recalls hunting marmots using traditional methods, his son in law, Batchca, leaves on his motorcycle to hunt with a modern rifle. Following the successful hunt, Soldier, Batchca, and Batchca's three-year-old daughter cook a traditional Bodog, but with the aid of a modern blowtorch for heating the rocks and cooking the outer skin. We had the option of setting up these scenes so they would not include modern amenities such as the motorcycle and the blowtorch, but it would have undermined our goal to portray a contemporary conservation issue with honesty. At the end of the film, we return to Soldier as he reflects on the declining marmot populations in Mongolia and expresses his support for

efforts to limit hunting and preserve these animals. It may seem like a contradiction to depict a man who earlier was cooking the animal and now supports its protection, but this portrayal represents the nuanced views that Mongolians share on this conservation issue. Managing and protecting a species of cultural, economic, and ecological importance is not a black and white issue, and we made sure that our film did not portray it as such.

The film continues with a series of portraits of characters who, like Soldier and Batchca, depend on the marmot as a resource yet want to make sure the animal is protected. We profile scientists in the field researching marmot ecology, businessmen from Ulaanbaatar, and even a professional marmot hunter, all of whom exhibit a sincere emotional connection to this species. Instead of pitting primitive vs. modern or scientist vs. hunter, the film treats each of the diverse perspectives with respect. For example, we did not feel it was our right as guests in a foreign country to portray the marmot hunter as the film's antagonist. While we do show him tanning his many pelts and preparing a large pot of marmot stew we also allow him to express his views against digging up entire marmot families while they hibernate underground during the winter months. On the other hand, the scientists who are sounding the alarm to protect the species based on their research also acknowledge that they or members of their family hunt marmots. This diverse collage of authentic Mongolian voices results in a grassroots conservation message. The white westerner proclaiming that the Mongolian people are mismanaging their wildlife is absent from the film, allowing the people who have coexisted with this species for centuries to serve as the experts on the matter.

CONCLUSION

The modern environmental movement wouldn't be what it is today were it not for film. The rise of documentary film and photography in the 20th century played a critical role in galvanizing concern for environmental conservation (Dunaway xvii); and due to the prevalence of visual media in modern societies around the world, environmental film will continue to play a vital role in disseminating conservation messages.

I am critical of the trope of the environmental savior in this essay. However, I am also unashamed to call myself an environmentalist, and as a filmmaker I strive to advocate environmental stewardship in my work. I don't want to see the trope of the environmental savior go away, because without it I believe many viewers would not engage in environmental programming. Instead, I am urging filmmakers who choose to employ this trope to reject the tendency to cast white westerners in the leading role in films about foreign ecosystems.

In today's short attention-span multimedia environment, it is necessary to use a 'hook' that engages a potential viewer. In contemporary wildlife filmmaking, the hook is often a larger-than-life presenter/performer at the center of the narrative, such as the late 'Crocodile Hunter' Steve Erwin performing dangerous feats with wild and/or captive animals (Kilborn 1). Such presenters are easily (and often rightfully) criticized for their over-the-top on-camera demeanor and antics, but they also draw a new generation of viewers to wildlife and environmental programming (Palmer). This allure cannot be denied in an industry in which producers are competing with the Internet, video games and ratings juggernauts like Fox's *American Idol* for viewership. If a presenter like

Erwin can successfully compete against these rival discourses, it is difficult for me to argue against his presence in wildlife films. I want as many viewers as possible to elect to watch wildlife programming with an environmental message. In some cases, that means employing a personality that can successfully compete against television personalities across genres, such as *American Idol* judge Simon Cowell.

It would be naïve of me, or any other environmental filmmaker who wants to consistently reach a large audience, to ignore the economic realities of commercial distribution in film, television or new media. A compelling character at the center of any story, both in fiction and non-fiction, can be a very effective strategy to draw in viewers. The trope of the environmental savior can, and should, be a narrative tool that environmental filmmakers use to draw all demographics to their films. However, the filmmaker should be keenly aware of the subtext conveyed by the ‘savior’s’ race, gender and nationality and how those innate characteristics inform both the overt and underlying political message of the film. Wildlife films have the power to aid in the recovery and stewardship of the natural environment. However if this powerful visual discourse is not employed with careful consideration it can inadvertently setback the movement that it aims to benefit.

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