

REFLECTIONS ON *SHOOTING IN THE WILD*

“An Evening with Chris Palmer”

Environmental Film Festival in the Nation’s Capital

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Let me start by telling you a true story about wolves.

In Alaska’s Denali National Park, a film crew is patiently filming the natural behavior of wolves.

The wolf stares straight ahead, standing completely motionless. It lowers its body into a crouch, then charges aggressively forward at full speed. The wolf races towards the center of a meadow where an animal lies on the ground, seemingly asleep. On the far side of the meadow, three other pack members burst into view, sprinting towards the same target.

At the same instant, the four wolves strike their prey. Two grab his head while the others attack the flanks. The victim jumps up and vigorously shakes his body, hurling the wolves from him. Each attacking wolf hits the ground, scrambles to its feet, and flings itself back into the battle. In a moment, all four wolves reattach themselves to their quarry.

Their beleaguered prey, with great effort, again tries to dislodge his attackers. First one wolf, then all four, are thrown off. The wolves pause to see what their prey will do.

He stares back at his assailants, then slowly limps off a few dozen yards, lies down, and goes to sleep. Losing interest in the game, the wolves trot over to see him, curl up, and doze off.

The four attacking wolves are six-week-old pups, and their intended prey was their father, the alpha male of the East Fork Pack in Denali. The pups used him to practice their stalking and attacking techniques. The adult willingly played the victim, but walked off when the game grew too painful.

I’m grateful to my friend and wolf researcher Rick McIntyre for this story from his superb book *A Society of Wolves*. Why does this story matter? It matters because for decades, wildlife filmmakers, especially those sympathetic to ranchers, portrayed wolves as scary and dangerous. The story shows another side to them.

We live in a highly visual culture. Powerful imagery is emotive and moving. What filmmakers do shapes how we think, feel, and behave. At a time when so many people live completely removed from the natural world, film plays a key role in their understanding of nature. Filmmakers carry a significant responsibility.

Last year, as many of you know, I wrote a book called *Shooting in the Wild* which praised wildlife and environmental films for their accomplishments, but also took them to task for not living up to their potential and for spreading misinformation and sensationalism.

Now in its second printing, the book received a lot of praise, with Jane Goodall calling it “a very important and much-needed book.” But *Shooting in the Wild* also received criticism from a few people.

For example, one producer wrote, “I see nothing wrong with working with local wranglers to bring an elusive creature or behavior into accessibility.” That’s a polite and euphemistic way of describing the suffering and pain wranglers inflict on animals to make them do certain things for the camera.

Another critic, who owns a game farm and rents out wolverines and other animals to film crews, wrote: “You have besmirched thousands of people that make natural history filmmaking their career. You are a parasitic bottom-feeder. You are biting the hand that feeds you.”

Another critic was upset because I wrote that some wildlife programs on television deliberately cause violence in order to capture dramatic money shots, and that a few make little attempt to conceal their exploitation, demonization, and harassment of animals.

Let’s set the record straight by looking at few clips.

River Monsters clip

<http://animal.discovery.com/videos/river-monsters-carp-have-panic-attack.html>

In order to get interesting footage of fish leaping out of the water, host Jeremy Wade pilots his boat into an area thick with Asian carp. The fish panic in response to the sound of his boat's motor and are trying to escape the noise.

Two recent books by PhD biologists (*Second Nature* by Dr. Jonathan Balcombe and *Do Fish Feel Pain?* by Dr. Victoria Braithwaite) show that fishing is not as harmless as it appears. Hooking a fish, piercing their gills, keeping them out of water for periods while touching them, is an extremely stressful and painful experience for fish. *River Monsters* on Animal Planet depends for its high ratings on catching big fish in a dramatic way, hooking them, and then exhausting them as they battle for their lives and are slowly subdued. Not all fish survive this terrifying trauma and near suffocation. By referring to the fish as “monsters,” the show demonizes them, rather than encourages their conservation. *River Monsters* is marketed as a

sensational look at vicious killers in fresh water, with the violent fight to subdue them being a key part of the attraction.

Cougar hunting a bear cub clip

http://www.metacafe.com/watch/3537249/cougar_vs_bear_cub_hunt/

This clip is from the Oscar-nominated nature film *The Bear*. It looks genuine and authentic, but in fact it has all been carefully scripted down to the last pant and squeal, and shot with trained and captive animals from game farms. The audience is led to believe the animals are wild and free-roaming, when in fact everything is staged and manipulated.

Worse still, the film is full of scientific errors. I showed it to three internationally renowned wildlife biologists and they told me that first, cougars don't hunt that way; second, an adult male bear would never act as a protector of another bear; and third, bears never stand on their hind legs to express aggression.

Now I want to show you the trailer for a film, which I admire:

Trailer from *The Last Lions*

<http://movies.nationalgeographic.com/movies/last-lions/>

Dereck and Beverly Joubert, whom I feature in my book as heroes of the wildlife filmmaking industry, teamed up with National Geographic and made a theatrical documentary called *The Last Lions*. All the footage was shot without interfering with the lions' natural behavior. Another virtue of the film is that it is integrally tied to NatGeo's Big Cats Conservation Initiative. All profits from the film go to saving lions. Fifty years ago there were as many as 450,000 lions in Africa. Today there are as few as 20,000.

These clips remind us that there are three basic ethical issues: audience deception, lack of conservation, and animal harassment. Let's talk a little about each one:

First, are audiences deceived and misled? When does legitimate filmmaking artifice become unacceptable deception? I'm thinking here of fake sounds, the use of CGI to manipulate images, and captive animals from game farms that appear free-roaming.

Let's look at just one of these: game farms. Most people, including most TV executives at networks, don't know that on game farms, captive wild animals are constrained or held in abusive ways. While researching my book, TV host and naturalist Casey Anderson told me, "I saw some of the most awful things you can imagine when I worked at game farms, including euthanizing animals with gunshot, staging conflict that resulted in death, goading animals to make them snarl for the camera, and starving animals to get them to perform better. It is truly a dark, shady world."

The second ethical issue is about conservation. Is conservation advanced by these films? Without wildlife films, people would have little knowledge of wildlife, but whether such

programs actually promote conservation is still open to debate. Too many films fail to mention conservation, and some even imply an anti-conservation message by demonizing animals and encouraging us to fear and hate them.

Filmmakers have a responsibility to promote conservation because it is the morally right thing for them to do, especially since they exploit the resource to earn a living. Besides, filmmakers have a vested interest in conservation. It's impossible to make wildlife films when animals have gone extinct.

And the third ethical issue is about wild animals being badgered and distressed during filming. Unfortunately, animal harassment and cruelty have been pervasive in wildlife filming for decades. This harassment can take the form of everything from simply getting too close and disturbing animals, to deliberate goading and violence. Disturbing wild animals for the sake of entertainment and ratings is common.

Recently I learned of a filmmaker who uses GPS technology to track and film his subjects more easily. For example, he darted a hyena with a tranquilizer gun and then slit open its skin to implant a GPS transmitter.

Another example is Bear Grylls. In *Man v. Nature*, he forcibly removes a rattlesnake from beneath a shrub and smashes its head in with a rock. We see him biting the heads off live fish. In another program, we see him thrashing around in a stream and finally coming up with a three and a half foot monitor lizard which he has by the tail. He points out the lizard's sharp claws and then proceeds to swing the lizard hard by the tail and whip it against a tree to kill it. He then gets out his knife and plunges it into its neck. This wanton violence for the sake of ratings is unethical.

In another program, viewers see Bear Grylls gleefully killing bats with a homemade club. He throws a flame in a cave to "smoke out the bats," swatting them to the ground, and then stomping on them. Not only is killing bats wrong, and illegal in some places, but bats are an important part of a healthy ecosystem.

Bear Grylls was outed for staying in a hotel rather than, as he claimed, roughing it in the wild—but that's another ethical issue. Here is a typical clip from *Man v. Nature*:

Bear Grylls clip: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZwRO54B8AFs>

Since the 1970s, scientists like Dr. Marc Bekoff have made amazing discoveries about animal's emotions. Thirty years ago it was scientific heresy to ascribe such emotions as delight, boredom, or joy to an animal. But Dr. Jonathan Balcombe in his new book *Second Nature* writes that there is more thought and feeling in animals than humans have ever imagined. Those of you who have dogs already know that. Balcombe writes, "Animals are conscious beings with feelings, yet our treatment of them remains medieval. Our humanity lags behind our emerging knowledge of animals' sentience."

As we continue to discover that animals have emotions, we must reassess our relationship to them and realize that we must stop treating animals so brutally. Two centuries ago, the slave trade was booming. In the past century, the suffrage movement led to women's voting rights, the Civil Right movement boosted equal rights to black Americans, and Apartheid was dismantled in South Africa. Since I was born in 1947, legalized racism, homophobia, and subordination of women have all been greatly reduced in America. Change can happen. The next great social advance for humankind will be the establishment of basic freedoms for sentient animals. Wildlife films have a leadership role to play in this new way of thinking.

In our IMAX film on whales, we show a humpback whale being freed from entangling fishing ropes. Biologists have noted how sometimes a freed whale will thank the divers who cut him or her free. Expressing gratitude indicates something profound. It shows the animal values his life and attaches a value to freedom. These animals deserve better than cruelty, violence, and exploitation.

What underlies so many of these ethical lapses—audience deception, lack of conservation, animal harassment—is the desire by commercial broadcasters to make money and get high ratings. Ratings and sensational footage are closely linked. I recently saw a TV host kissing a wild hyena on its mouth.

Broadcasting is not about delivering programs to an audience, but about delivering demographically-desirable audiences to advertisers. Networks like Animal Planet are so desperate to appeal to the demographic of young men that they will do almost anything to achieve that goal, even if it involves animal cruelty and violence.

Here is a typical blurb for an Animal Planet program: “Pit a human being against a predator whose jaws, claws and brute strength can kill in an instant, and the outcome is going to be bad for the human.” Sensationalism sells. Animals are exploited and audiences misled while education and conservation are marginalized.

Lest you think ethical decisions are always easy, they are not. Consider these three scenarios:

First, suppose you are in the field filming komodo dragons. You've heard that a komodo dragon was seen swimming out to sea to feed on an unfortunate goat that had fallen off a local boat and was drowning. It's the first time a komodo dragon has been seen swimming and hunting at sea and it would be a professional triumph to reproduce the behavior for the camera. Getting this sequence for your film would bring you a great deal of prestige, help your career, and help pay to send your child to an expensive school like AU. Are you willing to put live bait—a goat—in the water to help you get the shot? If you do, would you tell the audience or keep it a secret? **CALL ON AUDIENCE MEMBER.** In my view, it would be cruel and unacceptable to do that, but if you did, you should be transparent and tell the audience what you did.

Second, although the cameraman captured the sequence using a polecam—a camera on the end of a pole, and so the cameraman doesn't need to be in the water—to add jeopardy to the “making-of” piece at the end of the film, you as the editor have been asked to cut together shots

of the komodo dragon swimming with shots of the cameraman filming underwater—to add a sense of danger to the sequence. The shots of the underwater cameraman were actually filmed in another location with no komodo dragons in the water, so the sequence you are being asked to cut is untruthful. Is this type of deceit acceptable? CALL ON AUDIENCE MEMBER. In my view, that type of deceit is unacceptable because it is a lie.

Or third, suppose you're filming tigers hunting an antelope. You come across a young antelope that is lying quietly in the grass having been abandoned by its mother. It's the final afternoon of the shoot, your budget is exhausted, the weather is closing in, you have totally failed so far to obtain any money shots, and you are very worried about your job. You also know that there is a tiger only 500 meters away. Is it ethical for you to herd the young antelope towards the tiger knowing that without its mother, it will die anyway? CALL ON AUDIENCE MEMBER. In my view, this is unacceptable because you can't be a 100 percent certain that the mother has abandoned its calf, and even if it has, it is an act of unacceptable cruelty.

I'll take some questions, and then I'll finish up with brief final thoughts.

Q&A

Earlier this evening, I told you the story about the East Fork wolf pack in Denali. For decades, wildlife films portrayed wolves as evil and as dangerous to livestock. Our official government policy was to shoot, club, poison and trap them.

But wolves are playful and learn how to survive and thrive through play, developing their strength, agility, and coordination. Our films must reflect this truth.

Wolf packs are models of efficiency and sharing. They know how to work as a team.

Wolves put the education, protection, and mentoring of their young first.

Wolves assume their full share of responsibility for the welfare of the pups and realize that the young are their future.

Wolves cooperate, collaborate, and work in harmony.

Wolves have unrelenting perseverance, and respond to an unsuccessful hunt by simply trying again and again until they succeed.

The American Indian, unlike the white man, respected and revered the wolf for his intelligence, his family, his cleverness, and his hunting abilities. Our films must reflect all these truths.

Let me end by giving you the wolf credo by Del Goetz:

Respect the elders
Teach the young

Cooperate with the pack

Play when you can
Hunt when you must
Rest in-between

Share your affections
Voice your feelings
Leave your mark

I have dedicated my book *Shooting in the Wild* to wildlife filmmakers who are determined to make films that matter and I commend everyone here tonight for supporting conservation. All of you will leave your mark on this world.

Thanks for coming this evening.