

SHOOTING IN THE WILD: EDUCATION, ECOLOGY AND ETHICS IN WILDLIFE FILMMAKING

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When I was 11-years old, I watched the Disney film *White Wilderness*. In one scene, a cute little bear cub loses its footing on a steep snow-covered mountain side and falls faster and faster until it's tumbling down totally out of control. It eventually stops falling after banging hard into rocks. The audience laughs because we assume it is totally natural and authentic and it's funny in a slapstick kind of way, at least at first. In fact, it is totally staged top to bottom, including the use of a man made artificial mountain and captive bear cubs. This was the first time in my life that I realized that not all might be well with wildlife films.

As I make clear in my book *Shooting in the Wild*, wildlife films have the amazing potential to educate viewers about the natural world around them, to inspire them to think in new ways about animals and conservation, and to challenge them into action. But producing wildlife films is not easy. Let's consider a few different scenarios and see what you think the ethical answer is:

First, suppose you're making a film about chimps. You know that violence (or any extreme behavior) fascinates people and that chimps sometimes hunt for prey, such as other primates. You know that viewers will be shocked, even horrified by the bloodthirsty brutality of the chimps, and the ratings will be big. Yet you also know that meat makes up only about two percent of the chimpanzees' diet. Mostly they feed on fruits, leaves, and other plant material. By serving up a series of hunts, your film shows a far more violent picture of chimpanzee nature than is actually the case. It gives a wrong impression. Is the film unethical?

Second, imagine you are a producer and you want a shot of a spider eating a fly. It's obvious you have to stage it because you don't have the money to wait around for weeks for it to happen naturally. But how far will you go with staging? For example, you also want a shot of a boa constrictor eating a monkey. Do you stage that as well? In other words, capture a boa constrictor, capture a monkey, put them in an enclosure and film the resulting predation? It's routine predatory behavior and happens all the time, and your film will promote conservation. Do the ends justify the means? Is it ethical to stage it?

And third, imagine you're in Africa with Jeff Corwin and your goal is for him to find a rare lizard, not seen for 25 years. This is to be the climax of the film. You search for days with no luck, but finally the rare lizard is found, not by Jeff Corwin, but by a local African tracker who barely speaks English. You put the animal back where it was found, and let Jeff "discover" it and act surprised for the camera, thus capturing for your film an emotional highpoint. Is that bit of acting by Jeff Corwin unethical?

Now I want you to look around you and find someone you don't know, and talk with them about your thoughts on those three scenarios. I'll give you one minute to do that.

I'll come back to those three scenarios in a moment and ask some of you what you think.

Let's explore these issues more deeply by looking at few clips. The first is a clip from an IMAX film I produced on wolves when working at the National Wildlife Federation.

Show clip from Wolves

These are captive and controlled wolves rented from a game farm. Game farms are highly stressful places for wild animals where they typically live in small cages. Also in this clip, the den where the mother wolf suckles her newborn pups is artificial. We created it. On the good side of the ledger, wild, free-roaming wolves aren't disturbed or habituated because we used captive animals.

Here's another clip, this time from an IMAX film I produced about whales also when working for Mark Van Putten at the National Wildlife Federation.

Show clip from Whales

Let me give you the back-story to this clip. We had just one day left, the weather was closing in, our budget was exhausted, and we were almost in a state of panic because we hadn't got the shots of whales we wanted. The scene was created solely for the film. It was all set up. Kim's swim wouldn't have happened if our cameras hadn't been there. We used recorded whale sounds to draw whales close in where our IMAX cameras could film them. Topside and underwater shots were captured weeks apart, although we gave the impression in the film that it was all shot at the same time on the same day.

One good thing: We shot from high up on the cliff, so the whales were unaware of us and behaved naturally.

Let me now show you a clip from an IMAX film I produced on bears:

Show clip from Bears

Alaska is famous for grizzly bears and I always tell my film crews to wear tiny bells to warn away bears. I also told them to look out for bear scat, readily recognizable because it contains tiny bells.

Let me tell you some things about that clip I just showed you. *Discuss clip (captive bears, different ecosystem, game farms, getting too close, fraudulent sound)*

In those three clips, we see three ethical issues: audience deception through staging and manipulation, animal harassment and cruelty, and lack of conservation.

Let's talk a little about each one:

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

When I first got into television in my early thirties, I brought home a film I had just completed to show my wife, Gail. She especially liked a close-up scene of a grizzly bear splashing through a stream and asked me how we were able to record the sound of water dripping off the grizzly's paws. I had to admit that my talented sound guy had filled a basin full of water and recorded the thrashings he made with his hands and elbows. He then matched the video of the bear walking in the stream with the sounds he had recorded. Gail was shocked, offended, and outraged and called me "a big fake" and a "big phoney-baloney." I had made a documentary, which led her to expect authenticity, reality, and truth. Instead I delivered fraudulence.

Or consider 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. When I was researching my book, I talked to TV host and naturalist Casey Anderson. He told me, "I saw some of the most awful things you can imagine when I worked at game farms, including euthanizing animals with gun shot, 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."

Audiences are also deceived when animals are demonized, giving viewers a misleading impression of the animals' true nature. Examples of programs that do this are *Shark Week*, *Untamed and Uncut*, and *Predators at War*. *Untamed and Uncut* on Animal Planet is dedicated to showing the most horrifying, gruesome animal attacks on humans. The program causes people to fear and hate wildlife.

Second, are wild animals harassed and treated badly during filming, and does it matter? 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.

When I was a teenager growing up in England, *Life Magazine* carried a prize-winning sequence of photographs showing a leopard hunting a baboon. It was dramatic and thrilling. The final picture showed the leopard crushing the baboon's skull in its jaws. Later it was shown to be all staged with a captive leopard and a captive and terrified baboon.

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 feet 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—yet another example of deceiving the audience.

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 callously. 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.

Peter Wege echoes this thought in his book. On page 175, he writes, “How wrong we are to think the Earth was made just for us, regardless of the damage we are doing to other forms of life in the process.”

And third, what about conservation, one of Peter Wege’s major concerns? Is conservation advanced by these films? Do they matter? Without wildlife films, people would have little knowledge of wildlife, but whether such programs actually promote conservation is still an open question. Did *The Cove* help protect dolphins in Taiji, Japan? Did *Food Inc.* lead viewers to change their eating habits? Has *The End of the Line* led to any reduction yet in over-fishing in our oceans? The people who watch these films tend to be card-carrying environmentalists.

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.

Too many films fail to mention conservation, and some, such as *Shark Week*, even imply an anti-conservation message by encouraging us to fear and hate wildlife.

What underlies so many of the ethical issues we’ve discussed is the desire by broadcasters to make money and to get high ratings. In other words, greed and economics. Ratings, profits, and sensational footage are closely linked.

Broadcasting is not about delivering programs to an audience, but about delivering demographically-desirable audiences to advertisers. For example, Animal Planet is so desperate to appeal to the demographic of young men that it 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.

Peter Wege touches on this issue on page 158 of his most recent book. He writes, “The competition among advertisers for the consumer’s attention has led to an increase in ads using sex, violence, and pure shock.” This is the same pressure in wildlife filmmaking. The competition for ratings is fierce. If you want to stay on the air, you have to get high ratings. Recently I saw a TV host kissing a wild hyena on its mouth.

I have, through the lens of wildlife films, focused this afternoon on Peter Wege’s six Es: Ethics, Ecology, Economics, Environment, Education, and Empathy. All six Es are about people’s ability to understand the relationship between our planet and human life. Peter teaches us in his book, as well as through his life, that the six Es lead to wisdom, compassion, and love.

Before taking questions, let me quickly go back to those three scenarios I outlined earlier to see what you think, and to give you my answers.

First, the film about chimps hunting for meat giving a misleading impression: *Ask Audience*. In my view, this may not be unethical, but it bothers me, so I'd say don't make the film only about the hunts. The film has to be more balanced even though the ratings might suffer.

Second, the staging of the boa constrictor hunting and killing a monkey: *Ask Audience*. I'd say don't do this. It's cruel and unacceptable. But you might pay a price in lower ratings.

And third, pretending Jeff Corwin found a rare lizard when in fact it was found by a local African tracker hired by the producer: *Ask Audience*. I'd say we shouldn't lie to audiences. Jeff Corwin should interview the tracker about his find even though the film may now have a reduced emotional impact and lower ratings.

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

Q&A

I want to read you a short extract from my book. (*Read butter story*).

Earlier in this lecture, I showed you a clip from my IMAX film on wolves. For decades, as you all know, wolves were seen as evil, as well as dangerous to livestock, so ranchers and the federal government shot, clubbed, poisoned and trapped them.

But, as you all know, wolves are playful and learn how to survive and thrive through play, developing their strength, agility, and coordination.

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 respected and revered the wolf for his intelligence, his family, his cleverness, and his hunting abilities.

To remind you how much wisdom there is in the natural world, let me give you the wolf credo by Del Goetz, which could also be Peter Wege's credo:

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 commend everyone here tonight for supporting conservation. All of you will leave your mark on this world, as Peter Wege has done so gloriously.

Thank you.