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# Communication in Defense of Nonhuman Animals during an Extinction and Climate Crisis

Edited by

Carrie P. Freeman and Núria Almiron

Printed Edition of the Special Issue Published in *Journalism and Media*

# **Communication in Defense of Nonhuman Animals during an Extinction and Climate Crisis**



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Editors

**Carrie P. Freeman**

**Núria Almiron**

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## About the Editors

### Carrie P. Freeman

Carrie P. Freeman, PhD, is Professor of Communication at Georgia State University in Atlanta where she researches and teaches environmental communication, critical animal and media studies, and media ethics. Her award-winning books *The Human Animal Earthling Identity* and *Framing Farming* provide advocacy communication strategies for activists. With Dr. Debra Merskin, she co-authored *AnimalsandMedia.org* to provide style guides for media makers interested in respectful and inclusive representations of nonhuman animals. For over a decade, she has hosted an eco and animal protection radio show and podcast “In Tune to Nature” on Radio Free Georgia, and she has volunteered as a grassroots activist for animal rights groups in three states since the 1990s.

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Editorial

# Editors' Introduction to the Special Issue "Communication in Defense of Nonhuman Animals during an Extinction and Climate Crisis"

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When honored with the opportunity to edit our first Special Issue in a media journal, we knew that we would concentrate on the subdiscipline of "critical animal and media studies" (CAMS). This is a term we coined with Matthew Cole (Almiron et al. [2015] 2016) in order to express the convergence of perspectives between critical media studies and critical animal studies, in the name of promoting interspecies justice and anti-speciesist discourse through transformative media. Additionally, in thinking of what type of communication topic might be most valuable and urgent for the focus of this Special Issue, we quickly honed in on the need for communication to protect fellow animals in nature ("wildlife") who are struggling to live with us in the Anthropocene, where the collective action of our species has created a crisis for all living beings, particularly with anthropogenic climate change and the sixth mass extinction of species. In putting out the call for papers, it was akin to a plea for help in raising the alarm for communicators and media professionals, in order to propose a pathway for transforming our discourse on nonhuman animals and facing our urgent obligations to protect them as inherently valuable individuals.

The scholars who responded to our call (from our home countries of Spain and the USA) propose solutions for media-makers and animal advocates to inspire protection of free-living species such as sharks, coyotes, parakeets, fishes, and octopuses, while showing concern for the human animal species as well. To begin, Iri Cermak directs entertainment and documentary film producers in how to defend one of the most maligned animal species, great white sharks, by ceasing the exploitation of people's fears of them as "maneaters" via "pseudoscientific narratives" and instead inspiring respect for sharks, protecting them from human attacks and the fishing industry (ab)use (Cermak 2021). Claudia Alonso-Recarte explores the popularity of the *Tiger King* docuseries during pandemic lockdowns and how its focus on anthropocentric drama does a disservice to conservation efforts to protect big cats, while critiquing the injustices they face in captivity (Alonso-Recarte 2022). Sean Quartz expands the notion of critical animal and media studies with creative cultural studies to rhetorically explore how the main octopus featured in the documentary *My Octopus Teacher* helps us become more-than-human and embrace coexistence and animal flourishing (Quartz 2022). Foregrounding a decolonial ethic within critical animal studies, David Rooney, critiques the documentary *Racing Extinction* to suggest more equitable representation of both Western and Eastern killing of marine life in commercial fishing practices, to demonstrate our ethical obligations toward all sea animals (such as fishes), not just charismatic mammalian species (Rooney 2022). Switching from media discourse to political discourse, Debra Merskin seeks to understand and transcend the urban-rural divide present in arguments for and against banning coyote-killing contests in Oregon, in order to help animal advocates to provide more persuasive and understanding rationales for offering alternatives to killing contests that will resonate with rural participants who have historically celebrated these mass hunting events (Merskin 2022). Finally, Laura

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Fernández, Jose A. Moreno, and Alejandro Suárez-Domínguez examine the press representation of monk parakeets in Madrid in six Spanish newspapers and find a dominant frame of extermination as a management tactic to eradicate the monk parakeet populations in Madrid, while non-lethal population management tactics are much less represented (Fernández et al. 2022).

Overall, all the articles in this Special Issue show how fruitful a CAMS analysis is to unveil the power relations and psychological rationalizations behind free-living animal (ab)use, and to do so in a way that inspires media and communication practitioners to be more effective in disentangling and dismantling the root causes of violence against nonhuman animals. Included are the very relevant impacts on humans as well, since reducing violence towards other animals involves reducing violence in general. In this regard, we are very glad to confirm that from the reading of these papers, we can obtain direct and indirect recommendations for transforming media and optimizing animal defense.

Ultimately, this Special Issue of *Journalism and Media* asks us to use media narratives strategically in order to transcend the standard anthropocentric narratives that have facilitated these ecological crises, and to avoid the instrumental lens through which we typically showcase free-living animals. The studies presented herein instead show us who those free-living animals really are, what they really want and need, and defend their right to exist freely, hopefully inspiring us to move toward coexistence.

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## Article

# Jumping the Shark: White Shark Representations in *Great White Serial Killer Lives*—The Fear and the (Pseudo-)Science

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**Abstract:** Sharks are among the most endangered nonhuman animals on the planet because of industrial fishing, the shark meat and fin trade, expanding recreational fishing, and other anthropogenic causes. White sharks (*Carcharodon carcharias*), the most visible in popular culture, remain vulnerable (VU, IUCN Red List) and understudied, although population recovery is having a measure of success in regions like the Eastern Pacific and the Northern Atlantic of the United States. As numbers rise, *Jaws* associations also remain in vogue in programming that emphasizes human–wildlife\*\* conflict such as Shark Week’s *Great White Serial Killer Lives*. Network marketing typically promotes this content by hyping shark science. Textual analysis, however, suggests that exposure to pseudoscientific narratives and unethical fear-inducing images is counterproductive to wider support for conservation programs and public recognition for sharks’ rights to their habitats.

**Keywords:** white sharks (*Carcharodon carcharias*); shark–human conflict; predators/carnivores and perceived threat; fear; science; pseudoscience; *Jaws*; media representation

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Sharks are captivating nonhuman animals who, like many of their terrestrial counterparts, are under threat of extinction from anthropogenic causes (Dulvy et al. 2017). Approximately 100 million sharks per year are taken by both legal and illegal commercial fisheries both for the shark meat and the shark fin trade (Hammerton and Ford 2018) and as a result of overfishing and by-catch (Cardeñosa et al. 2018; Ferretti et al. 2010). Increasing demand for consumer goods that range from pet food and cosmetics to vaccine adjuvants as well as booming recreational fishing are contributing to the depletion of these populations. Threats from plastic pollution (Environmental News Network 2020), mercury and arsenic toxicity (Barcia et al. 2020), ocean acidification and dead zones (Vidal 2004), dwindling refuges (Letessier et al. 2019), and other hazards also persist in their habitats. As apex carnivores who comprise over 500 species present on the planet for 420 million years, sharks regulate food webs, and their loss influences the functioning and resilience of marine ecosystems (Heupel et al. 2014).

The Sixth Mass Extinction (Steffen et al. 2007; Ceballos et al. 2015) continues to impact sharks at variable rates. Because habitats, morphology, and reproductive rates vary among species, broad sustainability criteria do not apply, even as the recovery of populations remains expedient. White sharks (*Carcharodon carcharias*), the most visible and popular in the media, are at globally vulnerable levels (VU), while the number of mature individuals continues to decrease (IUCN Red List 2020). Population distribution in most regions is also understudied because of the difficulty in investigating large migratory marine nonhuman animals even as technology continues to improve (Huvneers et al. 2018, p. 1). Despite that some areas like the Eastern Pacific and the Northwest Atlantic are seeing a relative population rebound (Guerra 2019, p. 369; Huvneers et al. 2018, p. 3), in most, figures continue to be modest, ranging from the 100 s to the 1000 s, and risk of overexploitation remains high (Huvneers et al. 2018). In many others, data is limited, and reliable abundance indicators are lacking (Huvneers et al. 2018, pp. 2–3). As a pelagic species, white sharks are also in need of transnational protections in Exclusive Economic

Zones (EEZ) and data on socio-economic and cultural indicators to enhance protections (Dulvy et al. 2017, p. R566).

Despite an upsurge in human population (Rees 2020) and more people moving to or recreating on the coasts, negative shark–human interactions remain at low levels (International Shark Attack File 2019). Despite being low-probability, high-consequence events, private individuals, governments, and media scrutinize them by engaging negative emotions (Sunstein 2002, p. 84). Media treat these incidents as high-impact and high-affect, as well as newsworthy and saleable, due to their potential for dramatization as detrimental to human personal safety, property, economic viability, and recreational prerogatives (Guerra 2019, p. 369; Nyhus 2016). Although TV programs are meant to help fill the knowledge gap by delivering science in an entertaining fashion, media also remain focused on human–wildlife conflict with large sharks. Reliance on fear through gory reenactments of incidents and their scarring aftereffects minimizes science by way of pseudoscientific *Jaws*-like formulas (Neff 2015; Evans 2015, pp. 265–66; Metz 2008) that have transformed the white shark into a media cash cow (Parker 2016). This focus, moreover, displaces attention from the shark species and populations in urgent need of recovery (Shiffman et al. 2020) and negatively impacts public opinion and support for conservation and effective policy-making (Hardiman et al. 2020; Neff and Hueter 2013; Bornatowski et al. 2019, p. 34). It also fundamentally distracts from the vision that sharks have intrinsic rights to their habitats.

## 1. Literature Review

Media remain primary sources for the human manufacture of relations with nonhuman animals through narratives and imagery that speak to dominance and exploitation as normative social behaviors (Linné 2015, p. 58). Disparagement of apex species usually occurs when humans are outcompeted for shared space or resources (Ford and Hammerton 2020, p. 152). Human–wildlife conflict can therefore trigger intense emotions that hinge on mental representations of a species, beliefs about humans’ place in the nonhuman world, and the degree of situational control that determines how much an individual is willing to cede to the survival of other species (Jürgens and Hackett 2021, p. 11).

Shark–human relations, however, are not monochromatic but diverse and contingent on both human and shark agencies. For humans with knowledge of the marine environment, shark experiences are highly individual and dependent on value-based relationships with both the ocean and its inhabitants (Gibbs 2020, p. 8). The nature of encounters can hinge on knowledge of species behavior during the day, night, or season; feeding patterns; prey occurrence; and visibility (Parletta 2019; Gibbs 2020, p. 10). Sharks are also known for their ease in attracting humans with their beauty, calm demeanor, curiosity, and even shyness (Gibbs 2020, pp. 9–10, 11–14). Since dramatic shark–human encounters accounted for as “attacks” make it into the official record while other kinds of experiences (positive or neutral) are excluded, what is reported is typically reshaped in media products through overemphasis on affect and unfavorable anthropomorphic projections that demonstrate a consistent negative bias toward sharks.

Studies show that media reporting is overwhelmingly driven by shark-on-human violence. A 2012 U.S. and Australian study on print media articles between 2000 and 2010, for example, showed that shark incidents, labeled “attacks”, were featured over five times conservation and other concerns (Muter et al. 2013, p. 190). Implicit geographical bias detrimental to sharks has also been found to be common in the reporting of terrestrial versus aquatic human–wildlife conflict. Findings from a 2018 study revealed that in human–wildlife conflict media reports between 1875 and 2017, those from developed countries highlighted shark incidents 65 percent of the time, while, in developing countries, 90 percent focused on terrestrial human–wildlife conflict. Shark incidents in these reports were sensationalized as “attacks” (Bornatowski et al. 2019, pp. 33–34).

Media reportage also aggravates conflict by implying express calculation on the part of the shark through the use of labels like “vicious”, “savage”, “killer”, and “monster”

(Simmons and Mehmet 2018). An analysis of language in 310 articles on human fatalities during Western Australia shark encounters between August 2010 and April 2014 generated a direct linkage between “shark” and the value-laden term “attack” as well as associative terms like “man-eater”, “rogue”, “killer”, “monster”, “horror”, “Jaws”, and even “sighting” as prescriptive of risk (McCagh et al. 2015, pp. 274–75). A study of Facebook pages of Australian media—i.e., newspapers, television, and radio—also uncovered a similar emphasis on white sharks in threatening interactions with humans as well as recurrent use of the term “attack” along with mitigation and/or deterrents such as culling (Le Busque et al. 2019).

Post-incident accounts, for their part, also tend to exploit the language of crime to describe shark suspects as elusive by “giving authorities the slip” or fleeing the scene like a “fugitive from justice” (Peace 2015). Reports also further the impression that shark populations are rebounding and fast approaching the status of nuisance or vermin through references to a surge in incidents and a focus on their succession (Bornatowski et al. 2019, p. 34; Sabatier and Huveneers 2018; Miller 2003). These allegations not only imply that sharks are not as endangered but that they are potentially fair game for eradication.

Othering media discourses that demand vilification of sharks as apex species chiefly bank on fear (Ford and Hammerton 2020). These discourses amplify the perceived risk of being bitten and/or killed by a shark and influence social tolerance of these nonhuman species by exacerbating difficulties in managing their populations (Myrick and Evans 2014, pp. 547, 557; Guerra 2019, p. 370; Sabatier and Huveneers 2018, p. 338). Even mere exposure to media headlines about shark–human interactions has been found to amplify risk perception (Le Busque et al. 2021a). Fear amplification is pernicious because it aggravates perceived human–wildlife conflict, given that simply due to perceived harm, the greater the fear of the nonhuman animal or species, the higher the chance exists for his or her elimination (Guerra 2019, p. 369; Hammerton and Ford 2018; Ordiz et al. 2013; Le Busque et al. 2021a). Fear is also linked to short-term responses and lethal control policy-making regardless of the seriousness of events, the effectiveness of results, or the lack of public support for culling programs (Pepin-Neff and Wynter 2018a; Gibbs 2020, pp. 12, 15; McCagh et al. 2015, p. 276).

Studies show that fear is also the prime driver in the business of selling sharks to TV audiences, with the most recent viewing exacting the greatest anxiety (Myrick and Evans 2014, p. 559), likely due to the medium’s ability to translate events into the present (Edgerton 2001, p. 3). Shark programming capitalizes on human fear to such an extent that a mere 60 s of background music in shark documentaries influences perceptions of the species as savage and violent, with visuals or without (Nosal et al. 2016, pp. 6, 11, 13). Participants in a survey on fear of sharks also predictably linked these nonhuman animals to large size, teeth, predatorial behavior, blood, danger, and death, as well as fear of the ocean and open-ocean swimming after drowning and water depth (Le Busque et al. 2021b, pp. 4–5). Despite sharks’ status as some of the most endangered species in the world (Shiffman 2018), human fear of these nonhuman animals has come to drive what media about the species are produced, what kind of content is disseminated, and what messages are persistently communicated (Merskin 2018, p. 46).

## 2. The White Shark in the Media: A Shark Is a Shark Is a *Jaws* Shark

Of the small number of shark species involved in human–wildlife conflict, white sharks are the subject of the most trepidation and fascination and serve as template for sharks in popular culture. A *Washington Post* article points to the species’ reputation as “media stars” and “silent assassins” and credits the feature release *Jaws* (Spielberg 1975) for their rescue from obscurity (Dunkel 2015). The film’s commercial success and wide reach (Lundén 2012), which set the standard for white sharks as “rogue” nonhuman animals through the spectacle of fatal encounters (Francis 2012, pp. 47, 56), has also enabled monetization of their image by way of an ever-burgeoning repertory. A 2013 ABC News Nightline report aired in the U.S. counted no less than 50 films starring sharks as movie

villains (Donovan and Morris 2013), a tally that a report three years later hiked to over 70 films (Brown 2016). Analysis of 109 shark movies on the Internet Movie Database (IMDb) also uncovered that, similar to news coverage, 96 percent of films featured sharks in pursuit of human prey that ended in death (Le Busque and Litchfield 2021). Speaking of the genre's commercial viability, senior box office analyst at Exhibitor Relations Jeff Bock noted that, because of their "primal pull" on audiences, these features are for the most part "inexpensive . . . [to produce, and] provide fantastic bang for your buck . . ." Comescore senior media analyst Paul Dergarabedian, for his part, echoed similar thoughts in describing the shark genre as "review-proof" and "one of the most resilient . . . in all of film" (Katz 2019).

On TV, Discovery's Shark Week, marketed as "the prime showcase for all things shark" (Duhaime-Ross [2013] 2014), has carried the *Jaws* mantle since 1987 through documentaries, blood-in-the-water accounts, feature films, and celebrity-centered specials. While deemed to promote shark scientist exposure, the annual summer media event has also received its share of criticism for exaggerating the fear factor, twisting scientific research, and furthering false narratives about nonexistent marine creatures (Shiffman 2018; Wallace 2019).

Network executives and producers nonetheless continue to promote shark programming for contributing to the species' popularity and aiding conservation efforts (Stockton 2016). Jeff Kurr, director of the *Air Jaws* and *Great White Serial Killer* franchises noted in an interview that Shark Week programming has helped "make people aware that sharks . . . have a lot of challenges" and that catching them is no longer acceptable (Cavanaugh 2020). Because these programs are meant to be partly educational, Shark Week content is usually plugged in the media by way of its scientific value. Executive VP of digital media Scott Lewers observed in a separate interview that "It's science first but mixed with entertainment" for audience engagement (Shiffman 2018). Kurr, for his part, has promoted his *Great White Serial Killer* franchise as based on "a lot of great information and a lot of great science . . ." and cited a study by Martin et al. (2009) on white shark hunting methods as inspiration (Cavanaugh 2020).

Early research on science in TV documentaries established that it is the result of two sets of parameters: fantasy and dramatization, on the one hand, and factual information and argument, on the other (Silverstone 1984, pp. 387–88). Rather than scientific veracity, however, producers of Hollywood entertainment aim to generate verisimilar images that conjure up scientific credibility while also invoking ambiguity and polysemic interpretations of "reality" (Frank 2003, pp. 428, 429, 447). Moreover, over the past 15 years, Discovery Network's factual entertainment has witnessed a gradual distancing from scientifically verifiable claims through the proliferation of techniques and forms of argumentation that have produced pseudoscience rather than science (Campbell 2016).

Shark Week programs have been flagged for their dependence on narrow and overdramatic *Jaws* representations, which cuts across documentary formats that supposedly educational content (Lerberg 2016, p. 35). In an earlier interview, Kurr pointed to his *Great White Serial Killer* series as chronicling "the most intriguing shark attack story since *Jaws*. But unlike *Jaws*, this story is 100 percent true. It's about a series of mysterious great white attacks that we solve using the latest shark science" (Aitzen 2017).

Needless to say, detailing events by way of *Jaws* iconography, with its innate commodification of fear, is about "not knowing" sharks as much as arguably knowing anything about them for the way this imagery is clamped on incidents in an anthropocentric and culturally-dominant fashion (Fishman 1980). While metaphors are typically deployed to help audiences relate to science, to the extent that they are liable to be seen as factual, they are also incorrect (Kueffer and Larson 2014, pp. 720, 722). In addition, the *Jaws* formula renders sharks unilaterally responsible for human-wildlife conflict by way of three elements: the shark's intentionality behind the events, the shark's return to willfully strike again, and the shark's forcing of the human hand to "deal" with the situation by giving pursuit and entrapping (if not killing) him or her (Neff 2015, pp. 114, 123; Pepin-Neff and Wynter 2018b, p. 1). Rather than deploying specific language to describe the nature of the

encounter (Pepin-Neff 2014) and examining variables such as visibility or anthropogenic causes, the *Jaws* analogy also enables conflation of all interactions under the term “attack”, while prior to 1930 these incidents were designated as “shark accidents” (Pepin-Neff in Kraterou 2021).

*Jaws* iconography can also function as a “script” as it updates encounters through stereotypical usage and circumvents contestation when deployed as a passing mention across media formats (Van Dijk 1981, 1988). Moreover, recalling and stacking incidents by way of *Jaws* imagery generates a retroactive form of “shark frenzy” (Gibbs 2020, pp. 14–17) that assaults the public with fear and misinformation and is highly prescriptive in the way humans should interpret diverse shark experiences.

Because media are hard-pressed to speak of shark species in ways other than antagonistic *Jaws*-type discourses, this kind of pseudoscientific TV content poses a real risk to sharks for its potential persuasiveness when coupled with particular entertainment techniques and the objectivity-based claims common in documentary (Campbell 2016, p. 21). Due to science’s high standing in film and TV programming, and efforts to overemphasize the scientific status of claims for the purpose of credibility, it is therefore necessary to examine this content for its potential impact on shark wellbeing, the species’ rights to their habitats, and ongoing population recovery.

Campbell lists a number of criteria about pseudoscientific programs in factual entertainment that center on depictions of cryptids (Loch Ness, Bigfoot), ghost hauntings, and extraterrestrial visitors, which are useful when considering *Jaws* shark programming:

1. Statements about the “reality” of particular phenomena in these programs do not meet the standards of logic and evidence of established science due to their unrepeatability, weakness, or outright falsehood. In other words, to be viable, these statements would necessitate the rethinking of well-established science garnered through a rigorous process of observation, testing, and experimentation (Campbell 2016, pp. 188, 193; Sokal 2006, p. 288).
2. Visual communication of science is chiefly accomplished through superficial “accounterments” or “trappings”, such as the enlisting of real scientists who supply samples or provide specimen analysis, insertion of lab imagery, and the use of technology, all of which attempt to ensure a measure of credibility for the pseudoscientific theories floated in the program (Campbell 2016, p. 193; Brewer 2012, p. 324).
3. Evidence collection and witness examination are usually performed by a two-person team invested in the research, who also engage in “fact-finding” missions yet fail to secure conclusive evidence to back up their claims. The team relies on uncontested interviewee statements as a form of witness testimony, which amounts to little more than anecdotal evidence. Given the lack of conclusive proof, the team’s “discovery trips” also ultimately serve as nothing more than entertainment for themselves and the production crew.
4. A third party in the program functions in the role of skeptic. Yet, this individual is never allowed the last word nor the opportunity to definitively put to rest the story’s central argument, since the goal is to keep viewers from disbelieving (Campbell 2016, p. 206; Koven 2007, p. 200).

Given that Discovery Network produces factual entertainment with pseudoscientific subjects across its many platforms, and this content is scheduled adjacent to programs which explicitly cross the line into the contrived (Campbell 2016, pp. 21, 185–86), it is of little surprise that the above formula has found its way into shark-themed shows that incorporate the *Jaws* script. Indeed, to draw in larger audiences, producers have opted to blend pseudoscientific topics like ghost hauntings with shark themes, as seen, for example, in *Shark vs. GoPro* (Rober 2021). This analysis will show that, despite the science hype, argumentation and entertainment techniques in *Great White Serial Killer Lives* closely track with the above criteria for pseudoscientific content, which exacerbate shark–human conflict,

and disregard repeated calls to shift the negative reputation of the species for its impacts on public support for conservation.

### 3. Materials and Methods

*Great White Serial Killer Lives* is the fourth in a five-installment series that features shark encounters off the waters of Surf Beach, California between 2008 and 2016. The fourth installment is the subject of analysis because it solves the mystery behind the encounters. Likely because of its climactic nature, Discovery marked the program's prominence by way of an enviable primetime slot at the outset of Shark Week 2017. Sister network Animal Planet also re-aired it on 11 January 2020, attesting to its long shelf life as a standalone program.

To distinguish the elements outlined in the above criteria, the author performed a transcription of the entire program and conducted a textual analysis of plot structure, narration, as well as verbal and audiovisual elements, to provide an in-depth look at how producers, writers, editors, and cast members put forward messages about the existence of a *Jaws* shark. No scientific instrument was used for analysis. The investigation of narrative forms like documentary is known for its "lack of a universal method of analysis", which requires operationalization of the methodology by way of the "cognitive purpose"—i.e., by defining the scope and aim of the research—within a distinct set of guidelines (Mikos 2014, p. 420; Mikos et al. 2008, pp. 82–95). Inquiry was also grounded in Critical Animal Media Studies (CAMS), which lies at the intersection of media and cultural studies, and utilizes both textual and content analysis to gauge how media representation of nonhuman animals such as sharks, who are tarnished by *Jaws* aspersions (Francis 2012; Le Busque et al. 2021a; Le Busque and Litchfield 2021; Aich 2021), affects their lived experience (Merskin 2015, p. 12).

Results provide an overview of plot structure divided by segments and sub-segments. Because viewing occurred without the advantage of ad insertion, story segmentation was assessed through breaks inserted in the editing process by producers and/or signaled via a change in location, characters, or subject matter. Shark visuals—coded as medium shots (MS), medium close-ups (MCU), close-ups (CU) and extreme close-ups (ECU)—were catalogued by assessing images of whole sharks and body parts like dorsal and eyes. Use of sound was described by tone and instrument wherever possible and gauged for how it may further a particular emotional response. Audiovisual elements were examined together since viewers encounter these cues jointly. They also contain pointers that guide audiences to feel in particular ways and take certain actions (Mikos 2014, p. 411), in this case, to fear sharks. Audiovisual elements, however, can also function to close down meaning and limit how the audience interprets information (D'Amico 2013, p. iv). Therefore, shark images in the program were also examined for purported "aggressive" poses; i.e., sharks with an open (and bloodied) mouth or nose, lunging at bait in- or off-frame, and vertically going up the water column reminiscent of the 1975 Spielberg movie.

Discussion was structured through the principal cast of characters, which followed the formula of a two-person investigative unit plus a skeptic. The first two are entertainment figures with established media relationships that help publicize their brand (Metz 2008, p. 343), while the third is a renowned white shark scientist. Since character objectives in storytelling are arranged through oppositions that maximize narrative tension (Dancyger and Rush 2007, pp. 63, 191), analysis focused first on the investigative team's arguments and how they built purported evidence for a *Jaws* shark. The input of the shark scientist, as he attempted to clarify pseudoscientific claims by means of established science, was examined last.

### 4. Results

#### 4.1. Plot Structure

In *Great White Serial Killer Lives*, Brandon McMillan and Ralph Collier continue their search to unveil the mystery behind a series of strikes that recur every two years off the

waters of Surf Beach, California. McMillan, introduced as a surfer, animal trainer, and TV personality, conducts witness interviews, while partner and “shark attack researcher” Collier is charged with collecting shark tooth fragments destined for a DNA database that will identify individuals behind the strikes in question. White shark biologist Michael Domaier, cast in the role of skeptic, must shed light on the argument that a supposed *Jaws* shark is haunting the area.

A bird’s eye view of the plot reveals an introduction, seven segments, and twenty-two sub-segments. Except for the first segment, which features the most recent encounter, the remaining six segments briefly recapitulate the Surf Beach shark–human encounters between 2008 and 2014 in preceding installments. The case-stacking strategy mirrors the “shark frenzy”, as it intersects with the crime and mystery format, to rehearse the idea of the white shark’s criminality. The “whodunnit” scheme justifies the use of forensic science methodologies, such as evidence-collection and DNA analysis, to land the culprit. It also provides the main thrust of the drama (Campbell 2016, p. 57).

Since the introduction is designed to readily capture viewer attention, the male voice-of-god Narrator presents the events as a series of “brutal” incidents that have left the community reeling and wondering why they are occurring. He underscores that the two-person investigative unit has put together a decade-long file of evidence and, by virtue of producers’ time investment, attests to the thoroughness of the probe. Viewers are left to trust in the order of developments as *the* true account behind the incidents despite the fact that many plotlines can be fashioned from the same events and that the key to understanding a story’s meaning is in tracking how it unfolds (Ellefson and Kingsepp 2004, p. 204).

The introduction also sets the tone for priming the sensationalist *Jaws* angle through 15 shots of white sharks chiefly in medium close-ups (MCUs) and 13 or 86.6 percent captured in purported aggressive displays: with open jaws or lunging. Visuals also include blood-in-the-water effects and beach warning signs accompanied by ominous sound motifs. This segment is meant to hook viewers by simulating the visceral experience of being on the receiving end of a white shark bite. It also short-circuits critical analysis since it is practically impossible to give into instinctual triggers and logically dissect the audiovisual imagery (Biancorosso 2010, p. 321).

Segment 1 chronicles a 1 September 2016 bite on a spear fisher in the waters off Devil’s Jaw—Point Argüello—about 8 miles north of Surf Beach. The encounter is featured upfront because, fortuitously for the producers, the young man in question had mounted a GoPro camera on his spear gun and taped part of the proceedings. However, since the clips are not up to the visually dramatic standards of this kind of programming, reenactments of the shark closing in on the youth and grabbing his foot follow in short order. The visuals and narration, as in *Jaws*, are accompanied by sound effects of a frenzied drum that mimics the human heartbeat to evoke stress before a shark incident (Biancorosso 2010). Reenacted audio of an emergency call in a frantic woman’s voice also amplifies the tension. The encounter is dubbed as “the latest”, consonant with the story of a criminal *Jaws*-like shark at large.

The twenty-two sub-segments that follow launch new leads into the investigation. Apart from the introduction and segments 2–7, Collier is seen in 13 sub-segments and McMillan in 15. They appear together in two segments and three sub-segments to convey that they are on the same page. Domaier is featured in eight sub-segments—1, 2, 4, 5, 10, 11, 20, and 22—while physically segregated from the other two on a boat off the area’s coastal waters to denote his third-party role (Table 1).

Table 1. *Great White Serial Lives Plot Structure.*

Segments and Sub-Segments	Cast Member(s)
<p><b>Introduction and 6 segments:</b> Brief recap of shark encounters between 2008–2014; Collier and McMillan seen together in intro and segment 3.</p> <p><b>Segment 1:</b> Spear fisher off Devil’s Jaw struck (2016); dubbed the most recent.</p> <p><b>Segments 2, 4–7:</b> McMillan (alone) interviews surfers, kayaker, and other witnesses in 2008–2014 shark encounters.</p>	McMillan, Collier (intro, seg 3) McMillan (seg 4, 5, 6, 7)
<p><b>Sub-segment 1:</b> Narrator makes the case that McMillan and Collier are thinking the shark culprit could be a female on a 2-year migration coming back to her hunting grounds. Domaier begs to differ. He is on site on a boat to deploy satellite tagging and find out whether the sharks are coming from the Farallon, Guadalupe, or Southern California. Narrator calls shark concentration in the area “abnormal.”</p>	McMillan, Collier Domaier
<p><b>Sub-segment 2:</b> Collier measures shark teeth involved in “attacks” and explains measurement technique. Domaier on boat shoots down methodology: inconsistency of tooth patterns. Notes that first 3 sharks measured between 16–17 ft., last one was 20 ft. He clarifies that it is simply more sharks traveling through the area.</p>	Collier, Domaier
<p><b>Sub-segment 3:</b> Report that kayaker was struck near Gaviota Beach (2015). Voice of male surfer interviewed by McMillan says that it felt like something massive hitting.</p>	McMillan
<p><b>Sub-segment 4:</b> Domaier hopes to capture sharks and tag them.</p>	Domaier
<p><b>Sub-segment 5:</b> Domaier finds no sharks, only a whale carcass with shark bites.</p>	Domaier
<p><b>Sub-segment 6:</b> McMillan with Collier at Morro Bay (2015). Narrator states they have solid evidence for a single shark in multiple attacks.</p>	McMillan, Collier
<p><b>Sub-segment 7:</b> Narrator notes that Morro Bay is just 30 mi. north of Gaviota. Collier bases his assertions that it could be the same shark based on 3 attacks in Morro Bay by white sharks in the span of 11 days 30 min. apart and separated by 400 yards.</p>	Collier
<p><b>Sub-segment 8:</b> McMillan with male surfer who was hit (2015). McMillan states that shark was “stalking you” and surfer replies that it struck him as “predatorial.”</p>	McMillan
<p><b>Sub-segment 9:</b> Collier with female surfer whose board was bit after the male surfer’s board. Collier measures distance of shark teeth on male surfer’s and female surfer’s boards and purportedly finds a match. Collier states that there is precedent for same shark coming back because the same shark attacked several people in 1916 and 2010.</p>	Collier
<p><b>Sub-segment 10:</b> Narrator wonders if it is the same shark coming back on a two-year interval to kill. Domaier on boat interjects that there is no evidence of a shark that has figured out how to kill or eat people or that likes to do so but says nonetheless that the pattern of strikes coincides with his own discovery of the female 2-year migration cycle.</p>	Domaier
<p><b>Sub-segment 11:</b> October 2016, 2 months after the spear fisher hit at Devil’s Jaw. Domaier and assistants reel in and tag a 14½-ft. female shark. Long sequence.</p>	Domaier
<p><b>Sub-segment 12:</b> Guadalupe I—McMillan with “naturalist”/cage dive operator Jimi Partington who explains how sharks eat elephant seals. McMillan asks a leading question, noting that if an 18-ft animal can take a chunk out of an animal that large (elephant seal), a human should be no problem. Narrator adds that a large female will leave the area pregnant.</p>	McMillan
<p><b>Sub-segment 13:</b> Collier expects to find out if same shark is “responsible” for the strikes. Heads to morgue for shark tooth enamel from body of surfer killed in 2010 encounter, which is taken to Cal Lutheran for DNA analysis, which is described as a revolutionary methodology.</p>	Collier
<p><b>Sub-segment 14:</b> Collier goes digging for more clues: fragments left behind in any of the attacks to find the shark “responsible.”</p>	Collier
<p><b>Sub-segment 15:</b> Guadalupe II: McMillan with naturalist/cage diving operator Jimi Partington who touches nose of baited shark so mouth gapes. Dubbed as rarely-seen behavior. Long sequence.</p>	McMillan

Table 1. Cont.

Segments and Sub-Segments	Cast Member(s)
<b>Sub-segment 16:</b> Collier with sea otter biologist in Morro Bay to collect more shark tooth fragments. Tally of 160 otters shark-bitten.	Collier
<b>Sub-segment 17:</b> Collier collects more tooth fragments in Santa Ynez, California from a shark-bit kayak in 2014. Owner notes that shark rolled kayak over and came out of the water. Dorsal size: 3 feet. Domaier on boat has also collected a tiny bit of skin sample from dorsal of female tagged for DNA analysis.	Collier
<b>Sub-segment 18:</b> Collier looks to have the DNA analysis done at Cal Lutheran and find out whether there is a match for the shark behind the 2010 surfer death.	Collier
<b>Sub-segment 19:</b> Guadalupe III—McMillan with Jimi Partington. Clip of Shark Emma going after backup air supply of Jimi’s submersed cage.	McMillan
<b>Sub-segment 20:</b> Domaier has tagged a 14½-ft female, a 17-ft. female, and a 10-ft. male. Reports location on satellite tracking device. Only first female located.	Domaier
<b>Sub-segment 21:</b> Collier and McMillan wait for results from Cal Lutheran: no match found. Narrator says with tooth enamel samples, investigation now building a genetic database of white sharks in the region. Collier: identify shark “responsible.”	McMillan, Collier
<b>Sub-segment 22:</b> No match found. Narrator notes that number of hits off Surf Beach can be explained by more people recreating in the water coming across an increasing number of white sharks. Domaier encounters a small elephant cove that puts an end to the mystery behind the strikes because it functions as a shark ‘refueling stop’. Narrator notes that humans are not on the shark menu since sharks are following a growing number of seals. But as McMillan takes to the water on his surfboard, Narrator muses about the thought of a giant hungry female coming back to the area and another appointment with the shark.	Domaier, McMillan
<b>Total Appearances: McMillan:</b> 15; Collier 13 (together in 5); Domaier: 8 (on boat)	

#### 4.2. Visuals

The program includes a total tally of 205 images of sharks of various sizes (ECU-MCU-MS), with 89 or 43.4 percent in presumably “aggressive” poses—with mouth open and lunging at bait and, like *Jaws*, traveling vertically up the water column in sub-segments 1, 15, and 17 (Table 2). This representation effectively places sharks in reenactments that make the case against themselves, and strengthens the argument that nonhuman animals deserve legal rights that protect them from humans (Dunayer 2015, p. 92).

While sharks who are marked for consumption are cut up for parts and sold as nonliving objects or “absent referent[s]” (Adams 2015, p. 60), when inscribed as predators of humans, their body parts take on additional meaning that registers “the term shark . . . as a signal of horror” (Lerberg 2016, p. 38). These projections redefine sharks by way of an exclusively reductive approach that objectifies them by way of “the fin, bite and death . . . [as] the dominant sign of their character” (Lerberg 2016, p. 35).

The dorsal in the program functions as a trope for the shark’s “stalking” in line with the *Jaws* formula (Neff 2015). It appears in 12 shots—in segments 3 and 4 and in sub-segment 2, 3, 6, 9, 12, and 17—in an assortment of medium shots (MS), medium close-ups (MCU), close-ups (CU), and extreme close-ups (ECU) to denote the animal’s threatening yet slippery presence. Only in sub-segments 11 and 20 are the sharks acted upon when their dorsals are tagged.

The shark’s consciousness, as in *Jaws*, is suggested through a handful of reenactments of dangling legs on a surfboard or individuals on a kayak from the perspective below. It is also centered on the eye—usually photographed one at a time as it trains on the camera—and deployed through progressively larger extreme close-ups (ECUs) across segment 4 and sub-segments 1, 3, 4, 8, 9, and 12 to convey the idea of looming danger as the shark draws near. These images assume that sharks in proximity to humans per force represent a threat because they not only injure but return time and again to kill (Neff 2015, pp. 114, 123).

Table 2. Shark Visuals.

Total images of sharks of various sizes and ages: 205.  
 Eighty-nine visuals or 43.4 percent in presumably aggressive poses: whole sharks with mouth open, lunging, and in *Jaws* poses.  
 Shark body parts: dorsal (“stalking”), eye (“consciousness”)

Segment/Sub-Segment	Total	Aggressive	Dorsal	Eye
Introduction:	15	13		
Segment 1:	7	2		
Segment 2:	4	3		
Segment 3:	0	0	1 MCU	
Segment 4:	5	1	1 MCU	2 ECU shark with eye on camera
Segment 5:	2	2		
Segment 6:	4	2		
Segment 7:	7	4		
Sub-segment 1:	9	4 <i>Jaws</i>		1 ECU right eye and FX
Sub-segment 2:	1	1	1 CU-ECU	
Sub-segment 3:	4	2	1 CU 1 MS	1 blurry CU eye SLO MO 1 ECU eye
Sub-segment 4:	3	0		1 very large ECU eye
Sub-segment 5:	0	0		
Sub-segment 6:	6	2	1 MCU-CU 1 MCU FX	
Sub-segment 7:	3	2		
Sub-segment 8:	4	3		1 larger ECU eye
Sub-segment 9:	6	3	1 ECU 1 CU	1 huge ECU eye
Sub-segment 10:	3	1		
Sub-segment 11: (shark reeled in, dorsal tagged)	29	0	3 MS 2 MCU	
Sub-segment 12	10	4	1 ECU 1 MS	CU-ECU shark with eye on camera
Sub-segment 13	8	7		
Sub-segment 14	6	5		
Sub-segment 15	35	20 <i>Jaws</i>		
Sub-segment 16	2	2		
Sub-segment 17	6	1 <i>Jaws</i>	1 MCU	
Sub-segment 18	0	0		
Sub-segment 19	6	2		
Sub-segment 20 (tag attached to dorsal)	7	0	2 MCU 1 CU	
Sub-segment 21	2	1		
Sub-segment 22	11	2		

While a projection of the primate eye’s preeminence, these shark eye images also reproduce the human–nonhuman animal encounter by ascribing the animal a “power” that leaves the

human looking over in fear. In so doing, they avoid pointing out its correlate: that “the eyes of an animal, when they consider a [hu]man are attentive and wary” (Berger 2009, pp. 4–5). The shark’s positioning in the frame—typically at center with mouth open to denote aggression—disavows the reality that the camera is the aggressor, as the individual photographed observably reacts with caution or fear, while the Narrator doubles down on the species’ hostile nature.

#### 4.3. Sound

Shark visuals occur alongside nefarious sound effects with dissonant tones that include the pounding of a drum, which emulates a human heartbeat under stress to create suspense (Biancorosso 2010; Winters 2008). The use of percussion plates marks the shark’s ominous presence as if materializing out of nowhere like a menace. Sound effects also emulate submarine sonar and the sound of the wind in desolate landscapes to denote the shark’s rogue and spectral attributes as s/he silently stalks victims and disappears like a ghost into the dark ocean in line with eco-horror aesthetics. Electronic organ-like effects associated with the shark’s savagery and crunching aural effects that mimic the shark biting are part of the sensory barrage designed to overwhelm the viewer. These foreboding, discordant tones do not let up until the waning moments and corroborate that the aim of the program is to communicate a persistent sense of danger in line with the species’ purported villainous nature. Consonant with spectacle, these sound effects are also designed to distract viewers from pondering the implausible premise of a *Jaws* shark on the loose.

### 5. Discussion

#### 5.1. *The Investigative Team and the Jaws Shark: The White Shark as Monster*

As seen in Campbell’s model, the investigative team’s role, which is aligned with both network’s and producers’ interests, is that of relentlessly pushing the existence of the *Jaws* shark as monster. Monster imagery conforms to eco-horror conventions that express the “aesthetics of transgression”, which destabilizes the fanciful notion of human control over nature (Fuchs 2018a, pp. 1, 13; DeMello 2021, p. 400). These conventions do not favor identification with the shark (Fuchs 2018b, p. 12), but instead prioritize the triumph of righteous humans, who are assumed to have an ontological decency that the monster lacks by virtue of having proven his or her status through lethal incidents (Carroll 1990, pp. 16, 141).

In segment 2, the Narrator first posits the existence of such a shark by venturing that the strikes are not a “one-time random thing” but a pattern that recurs every two years, while, in sub-segment 1, he expands on the idea by noting that McMillan and Collier believe that the culprit may be a single individual—a female—coming back to her hunting grounds every other year. The “shark frenzy” exercise, seen in the introduction and segments 1–7 by stacking events dubbed as “attacks”, resumes in sub-segment 3 with a report of a shark biting a fisherman’s kayak off Gaviota Beach in 2015. Sub-segment 6 deploys news clips which feature said individual relaying that the shark emerged with the front of the kayak in his mouth and gesturing that the eye was *yea* big. His testimony prepares viewers for two visually compelling cases off Morro Bay in 2015.

To introduce these sections, in sub-segment 7 the Narrator steps up the tension by observing that Morro Bay is only 30 miles north of Gaviota Beach. Collier, joined by McMillan at the scene, argues that three “attacks” occurred in 11 days removed by a mere 30 min and 400 yards, purportedly enough evidence to suspect one shark. While fear-laden and suspenseful, these assertions disregard that bites only *appear* to be a pattern, and instead are “independent, random and rare” and anything but “intent-based” (Pepin-Neff 2014). The Narrator nonetheless maintains that the investigators have found proof of a bite match that will buttress their claims.

As McMillan visits with a male surfer whose board was bitten in Morro Bay, he observes in sub-segment 8 that while most sharks take a bite and leave, in his case, the shark returned as if “stalking you”, and by way of this leading statement, extracts from the surfer the observation that the shark’s behavior felt “predatory.” The inserted visual—a

slow motion extreme close-up (ECU) of a white shark swimming from left to right of the frame—underscores the large eye to drive home the idea of a stalking animal in the *Jaws* script (Neff 2015). The sound effects have a sinister quality achieved by scaling-up dissonant notes reminiscent of monster imagery in eco-horror movies.

In sub-segment 9, Collier's visit with the female surfer, whose surfboard was likewise damaged in another Morro Bay encounter, yields recollections of "an enormous shape" underneath, which subsequently emerged and destroyed her board. Two extreme close-ups (ECUs)—of a shark whose jaws open and close in slow motion and of a shark eye as the animal slowly submerges—are appended to her statements. Slow motion and doubling effects extend the display of the purported killer to reiterate the idea of a predator stalking his or her human victim. The view of the eye, accompanied by submarine sonar sound effects, denotes a specter that slips in and out of the scene unnoticed consonant with the white shark's criminal image. Collier tells the female surfer about her counterpart's encounter a short distance away and only half an hour earlier, and posits that the same shark could be behind both events. The Narrator interjects that there is historical precedence for white sharks assailing multiple people, or up to two during the same day. As Collier proceeds to measure her board, he finds a bite match that presumably lends his theory credibility, which the Narrator bolsters by reiterating the one shark-multiple-aggressions theory. This supposed match, as it relates to earlier stalking allegations, fails to hold up against the repeatability standards of independent scientific assessment. For good reason, Domaier challenges the methodology in sub-segment 2 for its lack of precision. Nonetheless, the Narrator again ponders whether the same shark could be returning every two years to strike.

The lab scene in sub-segment 13 features Collier preparing shark tooth fragments for DNA analysis collected from kayaks, surfboards, and dead sea otters as a way to find the shark "responsible." He couches his inquest in moral terms even though gauging nonhuman animal behavior by way of human standards is both unethical and absurd (Pollo et al. 2009, p. 1358). This section includes visuals of sharks with jaws showing, lunging at bait, and coming straight at the camera. Shots incorporate three slow-motion sequences (MCU, MS), which work to extend the display and amplify the shark's supposed monster-like traits.

While DNA analysis from shark enamel is described as a revolutionary technology designed to impart scientific credibility to the investigation, it speaks to an entirely different set of narrative prerogatives that Linda Williams has termed the melodramatic mode. The melodramatic mode, which pervades American film, television, theater, and literature, filters events through simplistic Manichean clashes that pit good against evil to underscore the tribulations of innocent humans and help establish their moral credibility in the story. It summarily does away with complexities because its role is to ensure that moral authority is located squarely with the human victims (Williams 1998, pp. 72, 74, 77, 80, 82). Since white sharks are pelagic, hard-to-track, and unable to survive long in captivity, they have dodged the physical and psychological impacts of enclosure imposed on other species and, for this reason, are reviled for daring to remain elusive and beyond human control (Peace 2015). The DNA-matching is therefore a way of encircling and entrapping the white shark in line with the *Jaws* formula as proxy for exacting a quintessentially melodramatic form of justice for the human deaths in the story. This imagery projects human control and authority over shark species and appraises them not only as subordinate but ultimately as without any "ontological basis of existence" apart from human evaluation (Ford and Hammerton 2020, p. 150).

The shark's monster image reaches a crescendo in sub-segments 12, 15, and 19 when McMillan visits with Jimi Partington, who heads a cage diving tourist operation in the waters off Mexico's Guadalupe Island. Guadalupe is well known for large female white sharks who travel to the area to feed on elephant seals and to mate. Sub-segment 12 features Partington explaining how sharks eat—with teeth that resemble "steak-like knives" and by swallowing prey whole. He details migration patterns that McMillan and the narrator

attempt to tie to the Surf Beach events to buttress the idea of a returning *Jaws* shark. This sub-segment features three extended slow-motion sequences of sharks—11 s (MCU-CU), 6 s (CU), and 15 s (CU-ECU)—that enlarge the shark image and stress the dangers at stake.

Sub-segment 15, the longest section in the entire program, features a sequence in which Partington recurrently baits a large white shark. As the lured individual comes out of the water following the pulley with bait, Partington touches the nose area so that the jaw gapes. This section incorporates no less than a total of 35 shots, and 20 in which the shark comes out of the water with mouth open lunging at the bait. At one point, the shark miscalculates and lands the bite on a metal railing in front of Partington in a sequence repeated no less than 10 times in slow motion to underscore how close he came to danger. (This sequence also appears in the introduction as a “tease” to draw in the viewer as well as in sub-segment 14). To distract from any harm to the baited individual, the Narrator describes Partington as a shark champion who aims to school the public at large about the species’ “true nature” and whose prime concern is their welfare. The entire display is justified as a way of showing the aftereffects of shark encounters. Despite avowing that the shark is not being aggressive but only reacting reflexively, the narrator’s comments reify the encounter as eminently destructive by making clear that anything in the way of the jaws is imperiled. To reiterate the idea of the shark as menace, this sub-segment also includes a visual of a white shark going up the water column reminiscent of *Jaws*. Sub-segment 19, for its part, features a clip of Emma, a supposed hostile shark who is seen striking the back-up air supply of Partington’s submerged cage. The segment ends with the Narrator’s caution to never face away from a white shark.

Despite the purported educational angle, the Guadalupe segments are about the spectacle of the adult white shark’s dominant position in the marine food chain and viewers imagining the horror of getting caught in the bloody experience through the appropriate distance of televisual images. This display obscures larger issues like shark species’ role in performing ecosystem functions and services, which, in turn, correlates marine nonhuman animals’ body (and jaws) size, mass, and mobility with nutrient storage, transport, cycling, and dispersal in promoting biodiversity and genetic variance (Tavares et al. 2019). As spectacle is known to do, this section has the potential to lull viewers into passivity about solving marine environmental problems by encouraging audiences to merely sit back and enjoy the show. For good reason, these kinds of representations are considered ecoporn since they disconnect images from referents in the real world and re-contextualize them through objectification (D’Amico 2013, pp. 149, 150, 206). The rhetorical function of this imagery is to control discourse parameters in order to reify the shark’s savagery. In the process, it confuses the real and the representational with no ultimate return to the real (Merskin 2018, p. 47).

### 5.2. The Shark Scientist

As the “skeptic” in the story, white shark biologist Michael Domaier is given the task of conveying shark science accurately and dispelling any pseudoscientific theories about the existence of a *Jaws* shark. The camera introduces him to viewers by photographing him from a lower angle upward to signal his status as an authority. Domaier disagrees with most of the theories floated about a “killer” shark on the loose but hopes to uncover whether the sharks hail from the waters off the Farallon, Guadalupe Island, or from Southern California proper, and whether a new adult hotspot has surfaced. He makes clear that the area is already known as a pupping ground where sharks can safely grow, explore their surroundings, and investigate new habitats. He also notes that the “killer” shark theory is unsound and that the increase in encounters is due to a larger number of individuals traveling through the area. He supplies the viewer with a crucial sense of process that differentiates shark growth stages, behaviors, and migration patterns lacking in *Jaws*-type descriptions. For example, he explains that “[w]hen . . . sharks grow up they’ve got to figure out where they want to be as . . . adult[s].” This information implies trial and error

and a learning curve, and counteracts the decontextualized images of sharks of various ages and sizes baited to pass for a villainous movie character.

When, in sub-segment 10, the Narrator again questions whether the same individual is behind the previous incidents with kayakers and surfers, Domaier categorically shoots down the notion of a reprobate shark and notes that no evidence exists for “a shark that’s figured out how to kill people . . . likes to kill . . . and . . . eat people.” His statements, however, are undercut by appended images of a white shark (ECU) with mouth opening in slow motion accompanied by effects that mimic the sound of the wind through inhospitable, desolate landscapes, as well as an 8-s (MS-MCU-CU) sequence of a white shark coming at the camera to the pounding of a drum and high dissonant notes. When Domaier points to the compelling nature of the two-year strike interval at Surf Beach, given that his own research had uncovered the female migration cycle, images of the surfers killed in 2010 and 2012 alongside blood-in-the-water effects are attached to his statements. The inserted visuals and sound effects transform the degree of theorization that is part and parcel of the scientific method into outright interference with shark science to keep alive the idea of a *Jaws* shark in the viewer’s mind.

The extensive reeling and tagging sequences of a 14½-ft. female in sub-segment 11—which only rivals in duration the Guadalupe “monster” display in sub-segment 15—on the other hand, resembles a dangerous cowboy roping adventure that re-images the ocean and the shark within it as a frontier-like environment that necessitates conquering. This lengthy exercise, perilous for both humans and nonhumans alike, is prioritized over other forms of shark science because it provides tantalizing entertainment for Discovery’s viewer demographic. It also calls attention to the lack of female shark scientists in the program given that women make up half of the American Elasmobranch Society (Shiffman 2018).

In sub-segment 20, audiences get a glimpse of shark satellite-tracking technology in action. While arguably also a way of encircling the white shark, this technology investigates shark population sizes and distributions in the service of recovery and offers the program a measure of scientific credibility. However, of the three tagged individuals, including a 17-ft. female and a 10-ft male, the technology can only pinpoint the 14½-ft. female’s location even as the expectation is that all will return to the area. Nonetheless, given the program’s “slippery” shark imagery, the technology’s limitations also reaffirm the white shark’s elusive aura.

When the DNA results arrive in sub-segment 21, predictably, no match is found. In sub-segment 22, the Narrator finally concedes that the events of the past five years may be due to more humans in the water encountering an increasing number of sharks. Domaier doubles down on *Jaws* shark speculation and reaffirms: “[W]hat’s happened at Surf Beach is *not* . . . one shark.” He also comes across a small cove with a new elephant seal colony, which he describes as an important shark interim feeding station in 85 miles. The discovery shows that the elephant seal population, almost driven to extinction by human hunters, is recovering and that the sharks are simply following after them. Since the investigation set out to uncover the motive for the strikes, the Narrator acknowledges it as solving the Surf Beach mystery for its location some miles south. It is also only after this revelation that he notes that humans are not shark prey, even as those who insist on swimming near seal colonies expose themselves to considerable risk.

Despite this admission, the Narrator expresses trepidation about the thought of a giant, hungry female making her way back to the Surf Beach area. As McMillan takes to the waves on his surfboard, the image of a white shark (CU) under the water line fills the frame in slow motion accompanied by a low dissonant wind-like effect, crescendo sizzling, and a pound on percussion plates. An inscription in the frame teases about the next appointment with the shark on 20 October 2018 at 6:02. All the science-hyping notwithstanding, Domaier is ultimately not allowed to cast aside the idea of a *Jaws* shark since producers do not intend to discard the image for the considerable profit it represents.

The voice-of-god Narrator, whose role in the documentary format is to remain above the fray, functions as the driving force behind the idea of the *Jaws* shark in the program.

Of the 52 references to the term “attack”, which appear consistently in the shark research literature to inscribe sharks as predators of humans and to commoditize fear (Le Busque et al. 2019, p. 2; McCagh et al. 2015, p. 274; Neff 2015; Muter et al. 2013, p. 190, 34 are made by the narrator. This voice also provides for turning points that insistently push forward the *Jaws* scheme through the idea of a single shark’s intentional strikes in a two-year repeating pattern (segment 7 and sub-segments 1, 6, 10, and 15). Argument- and evidence-presentation techniques exploit knowledge gaps in shark science—such as difficulty in assessing both white shark population numbers due to small- and large-scale migrations and distribution-related environmental drivers across regions (Huvneers et al. 2018, pp. 1, 5)—to confuse viewers with the idea of a returning *Jaws* shark.

It goes without saying that *Jaws* imagery is counterproductive to the text’s scientific angle not only because it rehashes clichés that weaken science in the public eye as an evaluative, measured system of inquiry, but because it fundamentally devalorizes shark individuals and species in their totality (Kueffer and Larson 2014, p. 721). Although documentary is expected to blend science with entertainment (Evans 2015, p. 266), the balance in the program is struck in favor of eco-horror features that are consonant with criticism of factual entertainment’s shift away from production of thoughtful scientific content toward pseudoscientific programming that slides head first into fiction (Campbell 2016, pp. 1, 2).

Leading questions designed to extract emotionally-charged answers and unquestioned witness testimony about sharks explicitly targeting humans, as well as wide use of science accouterments, like staged lab scenes and the participation of scientists who provide specimens for DNA analysis, attempt to add scientific credibility to the proceedings. “Fact-finding” trips up and down the Central and Southern California coast to collect shark tooth samples, as well as excursions to Guadalupe Island to display the power of a shark bite and tie visiting sharks to Surf Beach incidents also predictably yield a lack of conclusive evidence that one shark is behind the encounters. Aside from furthering the narrative’s forward thrust in the manner of a TV crime investigation, said jaunts amount to little more than mere diversions.

The shark scientist in the role of skeptic does furnish much needed clarification as he solves the “motive” for the Surf Beach incidents. Yet, tantalizing images of sharks with purportedly bad intentions are also spliced in to undercut his assertions. This imagery suggests that the shark scientist, although recognized as an authority, is not allowed to definitively put to rest the idea of a *Jaws* shark regrettably inspired by a movie featuring a 25-ft. *mechanical shark*. Even though Domaier is introduced as an expert in white shark science, he is also described as an additional investigator, which understates his authority. This move is detrimental to shark conservation since scientists are trusted by the public to be credible purveyors of information and are also influential in engendering attitude change by increasing the level of concern about a public problem (Oxley et al. 2014, pp. 256, 258, 264; Petty and Wegener 1998; Pew Research Center for the People and the Press 2009). By undercutting Domaier’s authority and input in the service of entertainment, producers missed out on the shark scientist’s ability to create the kind of impactful change that fictional films with their “suspension of disbelief” directive cannot offer. Objectivity techniques of science in TV documentary also enabled producers to “balance” the investigative unit’s *Jaws* shark speculations against scientific assertions as if these were equally weighted, despite that the team’s expertise was not readily discernible as is typical of pseudoscientific programs (Campbell 2016, pp. 186, 192; Metz 2008, p. 343). Consonant with pseudoscience, then, the program’s chief aim was to prevent viewers from disbelieving in the mythical *Jaws* character by exploiting their lack of familiarity with sharks and enabling continued profiteering from defamatory representations.

Characteristic of the reversals that occur in Hollywood entertainment, two years before the fourth installment’s first airing, Kurr and McMillan disavowed the idea of a *Jaws* shark by respectively stating in the same interview: “[E]verybody knows . . . [that] a great white shark is just trying to eat. . . . They’re not trying to target humans . . . ” and “the more you work around a shark, the more you realize . . . *Jaws* definitely got it wrong; they’re not

bloodthirsty killers ... [nor] mindless ... [but] one of the more intelligent animals in the world ... " (Bierly 2015). The strategy of clearing up misconceptions outside the program's boundaries confirms that producers wish to distance themselves from the misinformation they sow while reaping the financial benefits offered by sponsors. Yet, treating cinematic or televisual projections of shark images as if they occurred independently of ethical concerns is a non-starter (Ford and Hammerton 2020, p. 161). Further, decisions to stage white shark recovery as a threat to humans are ill-considered given that the release of the Spielberg's *Jaws* intersected with the emergence of the environmental movement and, as such, is seen as backlash against these concerns (Ingram 2000, p. 88). Rehashing this kind of imagery during an ongoing extinction event that scientists, researchers, NGOs, and even environmental organization donors are feverishly attempting to check and reverse decidedly registers as both profoundly anti-science and anti-conservation.

## 6. Conclusions

The proliferation of pseudoscience in factual programming and producers' decision to dedicate resources to complete fictions that amplify the entertainment factor and skimp on science is especially deleterious in the case of sharks whose image widely diverges from anthropocentric norms and the phylogenetically closer species for whom most humans feel empathy (Gibbs 2020, p. 11; Bornatowski et al. 2019, p. 34; Ingham et al. 2015). Hostile shark representations are not trivial since they aggravate perceived human-wildlife conflict, instill fear that foils funding appeals during conservation campaigns, and harm these nonhuman animals through species vilification that has real-life consequences for them.

Human-wildlife conflict is known to increase with the perpetuation of pseudo-scientific attributes and culturally dependent anthropomorphisms that must be offset with factual knowledge and careful image-shaping of the species in question (Jürgens and Hackett 2021, pp. 12, 14; Apps et al. 2018, p. 1). Lowering fear of sharks by providing scientific information and focusing on the minimal risk of strikes (Pepin-Neff and Wynter 2018a; Aich 2021, p. 1), as well as emphasizing bite unintentionality and species' vulnerability have been found to engender a more favorable opinion of these nonhuman animals (Lucrezi et al. 2019, pp. 9, 10).

Remedying routine omission of white sharks' protected status across media genres also remains pivotal given that it veils systemic human predation of these species and the need for effective transnational legal protections. For this reason, advocating for the human right to all environments regardless of impacts should also be avoided since sharks have rights to their habitats and conservation requires a multi-decadal approach (Ford and Hammerton 2020, p. 151; Frisch and Rizzari 2019). In addition, given that adverse encounters are a result of miscalculation, the term "attack" should be discarded because it places the entire responsibility on the shark. Media practitioners should ideally follow new prescribed uses that label these interactions as adverse (Yuhás 2021), and/or deploy terms that accurately convey shark error.

Research shows that the greater a species' decline, the more intense public pressure becomes to ensure improvement in shark management and conservation (Boissonneault et al. 2005, p. 1). Social scientists have also observed trends toward greater biophilia that are driving more effective conservation policy (Manfredo et al. 2020). Enlarging species coverage and scientific content to address shark roles in marine ecosystem health as well as supplying critical-anthropomorphic portraits that personalize these nonhuman animals (Whitley et al. 2021, p. 840; Qirko 2017) can contribute to their conservation by enhancing human empathy. In like manner, reporting on new scientific discoveries, such as white shark preferences, which coincide with associations that suggest the existence of friendships (Schildt et al. 2019; Solstice Media 2019), can work to underscore individuality in a positive light and tap biophilic trends. Only by shifting imagery away from traits, behaviors, dispositions, and values that solely suit ill-fitting human standards, and acknowledging sharks' intelligence, emotions, and preferences, progress can be made toward respectfully addressing these nonhuman animals as planetary stakeholders.

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## Article

# Tiger King and the Exegesis of COVID-19 Media Coverage of Nonhuman Animals

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**Abstract:** Beginning with the premise that the media participates in the manufacturing of the societal consent that enables and perpetuates the systematized exploitation of nonhuman animals, this article explores how media coverage of such nonhuman animals (and of wildlife in particular) during the COVID-19 crisis may influence our consumption of popular entertainment in a way that centralizes the discussion on the implications of established speciesist practices. I specifically focus on the impact of the first season of Netflix's successful docuseries *Tiger King: Murder, Mayhem, and Madness*, directed by Eric Goode and Rebecca Chaiklin, which was released in March 2020, a key moment in the worldwide management of the pandemic. *Tiger King* has generated significant controversy because of its languid commitment to a solid conservationist message and to the paradigm of animal advocacy documentaries. However, understanding how and why nonhuman animals were considered newsworthy by COVID-19 media provides us with some interpretative keys through which to reapproach the significance of the show. Analyzing the series' main themes and motifs in light of the media's narratives on lockdown, wildlife, and human interference over nature allows us to continue exploring methodologies through which to question the multiple anthropocentric discourses that structure and order societal consent to the existence of zoos.

**Keywords:** *Tiger King*; COVID-19 media; popular culture; zoos; quarantine; captive wildlife

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## 1. Introduction

In 2020, as human societies worldwide shut themselves in their homes following governmental recommendations or obligations to decelerate the spread of coronavirus, the media voraciously dove into the exploration of the many stories that could compound an overall sociocultural narrative of the health crisis. In this unprecedented global scenario in the age of modern technology and communication, nonhuman animals gravitated towards the center of media attention in order to address the anxieties, uncertainties, and excess of information and misinformation surrounding the pandemic. This paper explores how discourses, meanings, and connotations associated with nonhuman animals during the pandemic may have influenced audience perceptions on wildlife<sup>1</sup> in Netflix's hit seven-episode docuseries *Tiger King: Murder, Mayhem, and Madness*, directed by Eric Goode and Rebecca Chaiklin. The first season of *Tiger King* was released in March 2020, coinciding with the beginning of lockdown in the United States and around the world, and would become one of the most viral, binge-watched shows during quarantine, with dozens of millions of viewers in only the first month. The documentary, which was intrinsically problematic in terms of its treatment of captivity narratives, seemed structurally torn between an unapologetic absorption of formulaic entertainment and an alleged conservationist agenda. However, the pop culture phenomenon that it became, I argue, should not preclude its historicization within a highly convulsed era in which coronavirus was redefining human interactions and spatial encounters with nonhuman animal others. The massive popularity of *Tiger King* during as extraordinary a time as the pandemic begs the question as to whether

such new ways of looking at animal otherness, wildlife, and the spaces they occupy invite alternative “readings” of the series’ representation of the decadent American zoo culture and of the threat of extinction.

## 2. The Anthropocentric (In)visibility of Nonhuman Animals

The exegesis of documentaries is irreparably bound to the historical context and cultural zeitgeist from which they emerged and into which they are released. *Tiger King* was five years in the making, and so the type of environmental concerns with wildlife that the show reflected (or, as some critics would argue, sidestepped) answered to pre-COVID anxieties and sensibilities. By the late 2010s, climate change, accelerated loss of biodiversity, the threat of contaminants such as plastics, the depletion of oceanic ecosystems, and the overall umbrella concept of the Anthropocene had permeated public discussions and entered many countries’ national and international political agendas for compromise. The extent to which the media was effective in leading to action to counteract problems of such magnitude, however, remains questionable. What seems clear is that a narrative pattern had been shaping; one in which discourses of extinction were authenticated through scientific authority and often expressed with overwhelming lists of threatened ecosystems and ecological disasters:

Indeed, the 2010s mark the decade when the impacts from climate change became unmistakable, at least for any objective-minded observer. As temperatures rose, Arctic sea ice melted far faster than models had predicted. The world’s coral reefs suffered widespread and devastating bleaching events. And regions around the world grappled with some of the costliest, deadliest, and most extreme droughts, hurricanes, heat waves, and wildfires in recorded history. (Temple 2019, para. 21)

Despite pre-COVID-19 public discussions on global warming, mainstream journalistic connections between the ecological crisis and the systemic unethical treatment of nonhuman animal others had been disproportionately scant. After all, media and communication have been instrumental in the manufacturing of societal consent for the industrialized and systematized abuse of nonhuman others (Almiron 2016, p. 27), and what little attention the media did pay to animal abuse tended “to support, rather than challenge, hegemonic speciesism in a number of ways” (Taylor 2016, p. 42). As Spiehler and Fischer add, “the public isn’t very concerned about the plight of animals—or is concerned, but has a high tolerance for cognitive dissonance” (Spiehler and Fischer 2021, p. 2). The invisibility of nonhuman animals in capitalist systems has been long noted by John Berger (Berger [1980] 2009) and Carol Adams (Adams [1990] 2015): the former famously discussed how nonhuman animals have been surrogated by the consumable, cultural representations that we have of them, while the latter theorized about the piecing of their bodies into edible fragments, rendering the actual nonhuman animal, the “absent referent”, unworthy of visibility or moral consideration. The normalization of mass consumption of nonhuman others has been further validated by media practices that both dictate and naturalize their conception as commodities to be objectified or commercialized with.

Certain types of narratives that deal with nonhuman otherness bear a complex connection to the manufacturing of consent. Such is the case of documentary films. Wildlife documentaries, for instance, have a long history of nonhuman animal advocacy in television culture and have sparked all sorts of discussions pertaining to the ethics of wildlife representation (Bousé 2000; Chris 2006; Horak 2006; Mills 2010, 2012, 2017; Mitman 2009). In basic terms, these films are characterized by the representation of wild animals in their habitats with minimal human intervention, with the object of reflecting “natural” instincts and behaviors. The genre, however, has been exposed on a number of occasions for its manipulation of the time and spaces in which the represented nonhuman animals function. In addition, the genre’s claims of advocacy must be contrasted with the use of a rhetoric and technique that, on the other hand, strengthen the collective consent to objectify nonhuman animals. Wildlife documentaries’ overt reflections of mainstream ideology (Chris 2006,

p. xix) and heteronormativity and monogamy (Mills 2012) function under a consensual assimilation of anthropomorphism that informs our own human cultures, frequently disregarding the factors and findings that may justify the conceptualization of nonhuman animals as sentient subjects worthy of moral consideration.

*Tiger King*, in any event, does not qualify as a wildlife documentary per se, and as we will see, its intrinsic connections to nonhuman animal advocacy documentaries are fragile. In the twenty-first century, partly as a response to the growing awareness of the perils of the Anthropocene and the need for a market to refer to these issues, there has been a notable increase in the production of these so-called animal advocacy (or even activist) documentary films that have countered mainstream media's manufactured consent of nonhuman animal exploitation. Ranging from more welfarist to more deontological approaches, or even treating animal protection as primarily beneficial to human interests, these documentaries have resorted to methods such as undercover footage, strategic use of authority figures, and the sensuous, raw representation of nonhuman animal suffering in the hands of humans and their industries through visuals and soundscapes. As Loy states, "[b]y engaging strategically and meaningfully in this public discourse [on nonhuman animal exploitation], advocates can help alter the anthropocentric paradigm of our times and lay the foundation for the transition to a more eco-centric model" (Loy 2016, p. 221). Among the many titles, we may find documentaries imploding agriculture, farming, and the food industry and exposing myths about proper nutrition (*Super Size Me* (Spurlock 2004); *Food, Inc.* (Kenner 2008); *Cowspiracy: The Sustainability Secret* (Andersen and Kuhn 2014); *Lucent* (Delforce 2014); *The Game Changers* (Psihoyos 2018)). There are also documentaries such as *Earthlings* (Monson 2005) and *Dominion* (Delforce 2018) that construct their shock tactics with the accumulation of footage of wanton cruelty and abuse in a number of industries (food, clothing, entertainment, tourism, the pharmaceutical and medical research industries, etc.). Others build their criticism against such industries by focusing on the individuality of one particular victim or species. Coperthwaite's *Blackfish* (Coperthwaite 2013) and Marsh's *Project Nim* (Marsh and ir 2011), for instance, respectively articulate anticaptivity messages through the tragic stories of a Sea World orca and a chimpanzee used for research in language and grammar acquisition. Schatz's short film *An Apology to Elephants* (Schatz 2013) depicts the history of the exploitation of elephants in the entertainment industry, and Psihoyos's award-winning *The Cove* (Psihoyos 2009) portrays the massacre of scores of dolphin pods in Taiji, Japan. Other films are case studies of the destruction of particular habitats and the massive disappearance of wildlife (*Virunga* (von Einsiedel 2014); *Seaspiracy* (Tabrizi 2021)), and others focus on the work of acknowledged activists (such as Jo-Anne McArthur in Marshall's *The Ghosts in Our Machine* (Marshall 2013)) and their criminalization (*Your Mommy Kills Animals* (Johnson 2007); *The Animal People* (Hennelly and Suchan 2019)). Yet others focus on emphasizing the interspecies similarities with humans, depicting the legal conundrum (*Unlocking the Cage* (Hegedus and Pennebaker 2016)), or the act of "becoming" the nonhuman animal other and being invited into "their" world (*My Octopus Teacher* (Ehrlich and Reed 2020)). These are just part of a shortlist of productions that aim to educationally shatter our active and our passive involvement in the manufacturing of consent. As Claire Parkinson [Claire Molloy] contends in her landmark study *Popular Media and Animals*, "not all news media representations trivialize animals. Public interest in conservation, animal welfare, animal rights, ethics and the environment has prompted the inclusion of animal stories that blur the line between soft and hard news in newspapers and television" (Molloy 2011, p. 7). Whether *Tiger King* merits being categorized as an animal advocacy documentary is a reasonable debate that will be further explored throughout this paper. For now, it is suffice to say that its reception must be regarded from the point of view of how it compares to the narratives purported in these types of films.

In addition, beyond observations as to the structure and genre of the series and how these might strengthen or challenge the manufacturing of societal consent, what this paper seeks to understand how media discourses and stories on nonhuman animal otherness during the pandemic may have filtered themselves into the *Tiger King* narrative, offering

metaphors and interpretations that the creators of the show could not have anticipated. The anthropocentric urgency of the pandemic, with its fundamental focus on saving human lives, in many ways pushed the discourse of a perishing world to the forefront, rendering evident how the mismanagement and destruction of the environment had caused the outbreak of the virus. In their study on the UK's leading media coverage of nonhuman animals as COVID-19 vectors, Hooper et al. refer to these as the "it's our fault" narratives, based on "a presumptive concern about the human role in dramatically affecting the lives of animals in the wild through an emphasis on littering, the human spread into traditionally understood animal spaces, or a broader concern about the environmental impact of the pandemic" (Hooper et al. 2021, p. 12). These types of "we-brought-this-on-ourselves" patterns became part of the scaffold of the narratives that were to define the global health crisis, providing it with a set of images and an identity that could in time consolidate a historiographic record of the period. To focus on the health of the planet was in the interest of self-preservation first, and so mainstream media's manufacturing of consent when it came to the exploitation of nonhuman animals remained for the most part intact at its core. What did change in the media's coverage of nonhuman animals was the reason why they were newsworthy enough to figure in different types of stories and headlines that compounded the sociocultural narratives of the crisis. Long accustomed to a cultural apparatus of modernity in which they have "disappeared" and have been replaced by commodified consumables (Berger [1980] 2009), nonhuman animal bodies became, in a way, a very "real" thing—one with very real consequences.

By claiming that the media's coverage of nonhuman animals since the beginning of the pandemic has made them more "visible", I do not mean to convey that this has been to favor their consideration as sentient beings: although some progress may have been made in this regard, the overall focus on anthropocentric interests, as mentioned above, mostly overpowered arguments that called for a cautionary protection of the environment and management of natural resources for the sake of the nonhuman animals themselves. What I mean is that, although the media presupposes representation in and of itself, the nonhuman animals that were covered by these reports were done so on the basis of their biological significance precisely because their bodies, their physiologies, and how humans process them and make them consumable commodities had direct consequences over human health. The "absent referents" that were made visible by the media were not sentient nonhuman animals with complex subjectivities—they were embodied liabilities that had to be properly monitored and manufactured to avoid grand-scale risks for humans. In the words of environmental and business historian Joshua Specht,

COVID-19 is a reminder of our embeddedness in the animal world. Despite the conceptual boundaries we draw between human and nonhuman, we are in intimate contact with animals everywhere in the world . . . Animals make our world, whether visible or not. And sometimes that centrality has fundamental consequences. (Way et al. 2020, p. 468)

Spiehler and Fischer argue that indirect animal rights activism that focused either on wet markets in particular or on the larger, transnational issue of intensive farming ran the risk of ultimately backfiring and servicing corporative monopolization of nonhuman animal agriculture, as well as of fueling racist rhetoric, however unintentionally. Beyond the validation or counterclaims to their discussion, what I would like to draw attention to is the fact that indirect forms of activism have been, it seems, rather prevalent throughout the pandemic. By indirect activism, Spiehler and Fischer refer to forms of activism that appeal to public interests but that are designed to accommodate the activist's primary agenda—to abolish nonhuman animal exploitation:

[I]t's indirect in the sense that the issue that's supposed to 'hook' the audience isn't the one that's the primary motivation for the activism, even if it's an issue about which the activist is genuinely concerned; instead, it's an issue she hopes to

use to motivate others to act in ways that fit with her primary objective. (Spiehler and Fischer 2021, p. 2)

The very need to resort to indirect activism is a confirmation of the extent to which anthropocentric concerns underlie the damage control of the pandemic. In other words, despite the fact that nonhuman animals gain prominence in COVID-19 narratives, it does not mean that their presence indicates a shift regarding their moral consideration. As advocates employing indirect forms of activism suggest, according to Spiehler and Fischer, the public's primary concern is with food safety and the effects of zoonotic diseases on humans, not with nonhuman animal suffering or environmental degradation. Mainstream COVID-19 media, therefore, catapulted nonhuman animals as embodiments that were newsworthy insofar as they were evidence of human self-sabotage. As Yin et al. ascertain, "[w]hile humans and animals were simultaneously harmed by COVID-19, ethical concerns for human suffering were prioritized" (Yin et al. 2021, p. 1426).

In what I hope to be a fruitful gesture, what I intend to convey in this study is that for all the anthropocentric interests that motor COVID-19 media stories on nonhuman animals, we may still reappropriate our roles as consumers and interpreters and find exegetical paths through which to make eco-centric concerns viable. In other words, being a responsible consumer of media coverage involves being an active critic, not a passive recipient, and in that exercise of responsibility we would do well to make room for the study of how media discourses can potentially absorb narratives in which anthropocentric and nonhuman-animal-centered issues can coexist and converge. The focus on *Tiger King* is particularly strategic in this regard because examining its structural narratives and audiovisual rhetoric against the backdrop of COVID-19 media is not just an active stand against the purism of anthropocentrism, but also against the viral, mainstream reception of a show that all-too-clearly spreads the comfort zone of collective manufactured consent. By contextualizing the docuseries in the wider discursive frameworks of COVID-19 media coverage of nonhuman animals, we may instrumentalize stories of the pandemic and turn them into devices and mechanisms through which to reassess the narratives purported by the show, and thus offer alternative and plausible readings that can be integrated into popular culture.

### 3. Watching *Tiger King* during Lockdown

On 20 March 2020, Netflix released the seven-episode docuseries *Tiger King: Murder, Mayhem, and Madness*, directed by Eric Goode and Rebecca Chaiklin. The show became an unexpected hit—Nielsen ratings estimated that more than 30 million people watched it in the first ten days, as word-of-mouth spread all over social media about a documentary on the gun-toting, eccentric, violent, and double-crossing individuals that kept, bred, abused, and exploited large cats (and other captive wildlife) in their poorly managed private and roadside zoos. A vivid and tongue-in-cheek portrayal of Trump's rural white America, the show capitalized on what seemed like an endless source of outrageous characters that populated the business, topped off by Joe Exotic (Joseph Maldonado-Passage), the gay, gun-crazed, former owner of the Greater Wynnewood Zoo in Oklahoma who sports a bleached mullet and has a penchant for vulnerable young men. As if echoing nineteenth-century freak shows and the publicity tactics of P. T. Barnum, the docuseries paraded, through interviews and preposterous footage, the bizarre and outlandish likes of the meth addicts and their enablers, megalomaniacs, unofficial murder suspects, con artists, ex-convicts, and felons that feuded against one another, culminating with a murder-for-hire subplot that leads to Exotic's 22-year prison sentence. "All of these characters and behaviors are approached with the simplified, pleasurable spectacle of meme culture" (Lagerwey and Nygaard 2020, p. 561). Even the inclusion of disabled zoo staff and characters that identified as queer seemed to serve an agenda of making poverty and trauma entertaining, as episodic narratives drew on the climaxing tensions of the violent relationships and documentary conventions slipped into techniques reminiscent of reality television and true-crime serials.

As critics of the show soon made clear, the series' indulgence in parodic and melodramatic character portrayal played well with bingeing audiences, but overshadowed the contextual problem that had, as admitted by director Eric Goode himself, been the original reason for the making of the documentary: the fact that there were between 5000 and 10,000 tigers held captive in America, while fewer than 4000 remained in the wild. The conservationist message quickly became diluted, as the documentary fed into the narcissism and instability of the personalities only to occasionally show or remark on the cruel and insalubrious conditions in which nonhuman animals were kept in zoos (the opening and closing sequences of the documentary, interestingly enough, do dedicate a few minutes, as if apologetically, to the urgent situation that tigers face as an endangered species). For the most part, the documentary fell frustratingly short from centralizing the discussion around proper conservation. Among other things, it nurtured the narrative of private and roadside zoos being similar to accredited types of sanctuaries, such as the one owned by Exotic's archenemy, Carole Baskin. A prominent piece against the series was Rachel Nuwer's article for *The New York Times* a couple of weeks after Netflix's release. Significantly titled "Why *Tiger King* Is Not *Blackfish* for Big Cats", the article pointed out that not only did the series fail to address the urgent situation of captive wildlife more adamantly, but that it further threatened to worsen the situation by creating "a glamour around tiger ownership, and assign[ing] a folk heroism to the 'Joe Exotic' personality that could set back efforts to end the abuse and ownership of big cats" (Nuwer 2020, para. 8). Indeed, certain statements made by right-wing conservatives downplayed and infantilized the wildlife conservation issues at stake. When rumors started circulating that Joe Exotic was fishing for a presidential pardon, Donald Trump Jr. declared on air that "You know what the real tragedy is right now from that whole show? None of us knew that you could have had a pet tiger for like two grand" (as cited in Flood 2020, para. 13). The flooding amount of Internet memes flaunting statements and expressions that were popularized by the docuseries further attested to the trivialization of wildlife preservation. These collective actions evince the extent to which Steve Baker's claim that "the animal is the sign of all that is taken not-very-seriously in contemporary culture; the sign of that which doesn't really matter" (Baker [1993] 2001, p. 174) still holds true. Writing for the *Orlando Sentinel*, Fokidis chimed into criticism of the show, noting the lack of "commentary from any real wildlife conservation experts", and the overexposure to the reasoning of the breeders and owners that make up "the show's main personalities" and that "are misleading and just plain wrong" (Fokidis 2020). Most bewildering was perhaps the popular backlash that Carole Baskin faced and the amount of support that Joe Exotic received from viewers (and even celebrities) who were convinced that he had been wrongfully accused of attempting to orchestrate a murder-for-hire. As written in the *Los Angeles Times*, "[b]inge-watching justice is officially a thing" (Ali 2020, para. 15). The second season, which premiered on 17 November 2021, followed suit with five episodes in which the criminal schemes only seemed to grow larger, and in which it appeared as if both "cast" and show creators desperately tried to cling to season 1 memorabilia of shocking imagery and statements in order to capitalize on the remnants of the series' popularity. Critics such as Lopez (2021) condemned the show's ongoing cynical stance on endangered species, recalling the pointlessness of showing footage of animal abuse in a scattered narrative agenda.

To get back to season 1, despite the discursive flippancy and the overt focus on the human characters, the scattered details about nonhuman animals' miserable lives in zoos and other types of facilities may, I argue, have become particularly noticeable by viewers on account of the circumstances surrounding the pandemic. Just nine days before Netflix released the series, the World Health Organization had declared COVID-19 a pandemic. In the United States, crisis management escalated with the President's declaration of a National Emergency on March 13 and the issuing of a travel ban on non-Americans coming from a list of European countries. California became the first state to issue a mandatory stay-at-home order on March 19, and in the following weeks the majority of the states followed with either mandatory or advisory orders. From late February to April, countries around

the world issued their own orders and regulations with varying degrees of restrictions, with the second half of March having been a particularly determining period for lockdown in Europe, North and South America, and Africa (Coronavirus 2020).

It seems reasonable to think that *Tiger King* would not have enjoyed the success that it did had its release been scheduled differently or had there not been a pandemic. The documentary came out at a time in which countless narratives, hypotheses, theories, and debates on coronavirus saturated the media, and *Tiger King* offered the kind of digestible entertainment formula that provided a fast and easy way to escapism. These escapist strategies should not be, however, easily dismissed. A study by Grondin et al. (2020) showed that the isolation and loneliness experienced during quarantine had an effect on psychological perceptions of time. Among other observations, they contended that the loss of temporal landmarks, the uncertainty about the duration of lockdown and the return to “normal”, and the anxiety that scores of people experienced had a profound effect on the organization of one’s time and one’s life at large. To cope with this, the WHO recommended self-imposed forms of organization and routines, directing attention to time elsewhere in order to make the duration appear as short as possible. At the same time, the saturation of the media contributed to the impression that the beginning of quarantine was distant. In this context of disturbed perceptions of time, watching TV series and bingeing on screens could provide some sense of routine and the solace of an escapism from the overwhelming excess of information and misinformation that was systematically consumed and that offered confusing (or at least indefinite) predictions regarding a vaccine, the end of quarantine, or the flattening of the curve. This might explain why a docuseries with apparently nothing to do with the urgency of the pandemic might have met such widespread success. As Michelle Orange put it in a critical commentary published in *VQR*, “I knew less about the show . . . than I did about the haste with which people were choking it down . . . Everyone was inside now. The need to watch a lot of something and then make fun of it appeared vital and universal, a rare source of unity” (Orange 2020, p. 204). I argue that for all the strife for evasion, however, *Tiger King* still operated on an imagery, symbols, and indexes that compelled viewers to think about the pandemic and its effects—in other words, shows and other entertainment-related activities were instrumental in carving out the subnarratives that defined the experience of quarantine, in the same way that the pandemic itself informed the way such output was assimilated and consumed.

For one thing, as argued earlier, nonhuman animals were becoming newsworthy in a number of ways in which, although anthropocentric interests remained prevalent, their (in)visibility was framed within the contextual landscapes of the pandemic. As embodiments, they had had a determining role in the outbreak, its evolution and its management, whilst their spatial connections to humans were being reassessed and appreciated under the lens of a newly found collective awareness as to their existence. Watching representations of captive wildlife within the context of confinement and isolation presented the unplanned opportunity to empathize with nonhuman animal subjects whose movements were curtailed by cages. “The space which they inhabit is artificial”, Berger states. “Hence their tendency to bundle towards the edge of it . . . Nothing surrounds them except their own lethargy or hyperactivity. They have nothing to act upon—except, briefly, supplied food and—very occasionally—a supplied mate” (Berger [1980] 2009, p. 35). Caged wildlife shed some interpretative light into the sense of dullness and demotivation that vast numbers of quarantined people experienced, as their psychological time in the nothingness of fleeting actions made thinking about time unbearable. In the same way that caged wildlife fall into pointless stereotypies such as pacing back and forth, so do people force themselves into routines and escapist activities to pass the time. During lockdown, a number of memes connecting quarantine with the framing of wildlife in zoo cages circulated through social networks. One such example featured four pictures of a panda bear sitting on his/her haunches in a bare cement cage staring aimlessly or with his/her head on the wall. The caption reads: “Now you know how the animals in a zoo feel!” Another meme featured pictures of a brown bear also sitting dully on the corner of the cement-floored cage, an orca

floating on his/her side in a tank that is obviously too small, an elephant leaning his/her head against a cement wall, and a close up of what seems like another elephant pressing his/her tear-eyed face against bars. "So, you're sick of isolation?" states the caption.

Quarantine and isolation, in other words, precipitated comparisons with other forms of existing in time and space. In the same way that the media flourished with reports on the lessons that astronauts could teach us about managing solitude (Kluger 2020), so did we perhaps begin to reconsider the irreparable damage done to nonhuman animals kept in zoos by restricting them from multiple types of freedoms. Zoos have, of course, a long history in the visual materialization of imperialistic and colonialist practices through which to overpower, alienate, and frame everything and anything falling in the category of "other". Scholarly histories of zoos (Hoage and Deiss 1996; Hanson 2002) and of their exegetical possibilities (Malamud 1998) have examined the spatial and visual dynamics of the exhibitionism of wildlife that is aimed at defining and representing the power of the culture that carries out the act of caging. One of the things that Malamud notes about zoos is that they

Perpetuate a *restrictive* popular cultural sense of nature. Predominantly, audiences experience the zoo's collection of captive animals not as a small sample of much larger and more varied wild populations, but as the best example they can ever expect to see. (Malamud 1998, p. 35)

Nonhuman animals caged in zoos, in other words, are museum pieces, synecdoche of a world that is slowly disappearing, slowly dying. In the follow-up special to the first season of *Tiger King*, in which TV personality Joel McHale interviews, during quarantine, several of the "cast" members, an ex-worker of the GW Zoo states that

I never thought that [tigers] should be kept in captivity. But I knew the reality of it and the reality of it is, they cannot be returned to the wild. And there's not much of a wild for them to return to. (Goode and Chaiklin 2020, Ep. 8, 18:16)

This position has been very prominent in the articulation of discourses that elevate the role of zoos as sanctuaries of sorts, where the preservation of wildlife is marketed as the prime purpose. Horak identifies this type of argumentation in narratives embedded in multiple wildlife documentaries. Describing *Awesome Pawsome*, a 2000 Animal Planet program in which four tiger cubs are raised as domestic cats, he notes that "[t]he rescue of tigers from extinction, this program, too, tells us, is a matter of setting up zoos and wildlife parks" (Horak 2006, p. 472).

*Tiger King* does not proactively endorse these sorts of views that cleanse the public image of zoos, but it does provide the big cat owners who think that way with ample space in which to develop their ideas. The ethics of human intervention in the management of wildlife is, at the same time and as I have suggested above, one of the motifs that structured the newsworthiness of nonhuman others during the pandemic. Quarantine, specifically, led to two types of stories about wildlife: those about how the welfare of wild and feral animals had been compromised by the absence of humans and those about how that same absence had proven favorable for many species. The narrative of how zoos rehabilitate and preserve endangered species fits within the first group's emphasis on the benefits of human monitoring and surveillance. According to these stories, dependence on the provision of food, care, exercise, and protection is instrumental for the welfare of countless nonhuman animals. What is interesting about such reports is that many of the proclamations about the vulnerability of nonhuman animals in the face of human absence were themselves contested by evidence brought up in subsequent stories. Deutsche Welle (DW), Germany's international broadcaster, for instance, reported how a German animal rights charity called for the need to tend to city pigeons whose main source of food (leftovers and scraps) had disappeared and who faced the real threat of starvation (Martin 2020). Other organizations worldwide, such as the Fundación para el Asesoramiento y Acción en Defensa de los Animales (FAADA) in Spain, however, reassured concerned citizens that pigeons and other

urban birds had a high capacity for adaptation to the new circumstances and would be able to find food on their own (FAADA 2020). Somewhat contradictory predictions and evidence also surrounded discussions about the effects on wildlife tourism and conservation. In May 2020, the BBC reported a surge in poaching activities in Southeast Asia and in Africa, mainly as a result of the rural migration of populations unable to support themselves in the cities, but also as a consequence of the diminished activity of rangers and even tourists who functioned as inadvertent guardians (Matthews 2020). On the other hand, press reports from 2021 claimed that the pandemic had led to a decrease in poaching of certain threatened species such as the rhino in South Africa, as the lack of tourists allowed better visibility of poachers, whose movements were under the radar (BBC 2021; Frost 2021). Having in mainstream media contesting narratives about the effects of quarantine on wild animals' welfare, I argue, favors the questioning of naturalized arguments pertaining to strategies for conservation, such as the insistence on zoos as the only viable space in which to protect endangered species. As long-time anti-zoo advocate Malamud writes, "[t]he zoo's ecological messages are false, and it is therefore unethical for zoos to abet the dissemination of this disinformation" (Malamud 2012, p. 128).

At the same time, COVID-19 media discourses that fed into narratives of loss and death exacerbated the threat of extinction in other ways. The numbers and estimations of the millions of human deaths from coronavirus, the fading of activities and behaviors once considered "normal", and the replacement of face-to-face modes of communication and affection with rituals and forms of mediation that adjusted to the demands of social distancing all signified the obsolescence of what was once common and familiar. In this context of sensibilities, nonhuman animals categorized as threatened and endangered species have acquired a discursive significance as emblems of the loneliness and the solitude of extinction. However, what may be disappearing is not just the endangered animals, but some part of the savage capitalist subculture that commercializes them. The critical approach that *Tiger King* makes to zoos, however flawed in so many ways, may in this way also be integrated within discourses of extinction that signify on the disappearance of an industry that seems long past its ethically sound historical momentum. The pandemic's slow assimilation of disappearance and re-envisioning of the "new normal" assist with the interpretation of tigers as outdated imagery from a culture of domination that, through manufactured consent, has systematically marginalized and exploited them. In this sense, as a show streamed during quarantine, *Tiger King* may also have contributed to naturalizing and collectively easing into a much-needed cultural change regarding wildlife management and the extinction of zoos, and the Baskins' strife to pass the Big Cat Public Safety Act may be regarded as a venture that complements the shifts towards the "new normal".

Framed against pandemic-related discussions on nonhuman animals, *Tiger King* could hence offer some insight into an interpretative space beyond what the show, with its clear drive towards entertainment, formally suggested. The very subject matter of nonhuman animals held in zoos was dissonant with the set of stories that celebrated how the absence of humans had led to flourishing wildlife. These were mainly media stories on how the emptied and silent urban spaces were being transited by wildlife. As Hockenhull et al. note,

the rapid reduction in human activity (and the associated noise, traffic, and pollution) brought with it the opportunity for global wildlife to fill the voids left behind and exploit the environs that the presence of humans and/or their associated pollution had previously rendered inaccessible. (Hockenhull et al. 2021, pp. 1–2)

Whether true or false, such reports "gave people across the globe positive news and pleasure at a time of great uncertainty" (Hockenhull et al. 2021, p. 2). The aesthetic effect of such sightings led to a revision of the extent to which divisions between cultural and natural spaces were artificial constructs intended to allocate nonhuman animals in spaces that were historically and politically deemed as heterogeneous to human society. Others claimed that these forms of "trespassing" were not new, and that it was just the elimination

of human distractions that had made the nonhuman animals more visible as occasional occupants of urban spaces: “While it is possible that wildlife claimed deserted streets and parks during the shutdown, the reported spike in sightings could simply be due to an increase in observations of wildlife that were always there” (Zellmer et al. 2020, p. 2). A random sample of reports considered to be newsworthy include that of how a fox was spotted trotting down Downing Street (National Geographic en Español 2020); photographic galleries of nonhuman animals taking the streets of Tel Aviv, Istanbul, Nara, Mar de Plata, London, Venice, or New Delhi, among many other cities (The Guardian 2020; Chalasani 2020); or the reporting of scientific evidence of the improved conditions for wild animals to manifest their natural behavior. For instance, an article published in *Science* (Derryberry et al. 2020) addressed how the reduction of noise pollution in the San Francisco Bay allowed local birds to communicate better and meet more optimal conditions for mating, a study that was then picked up by the media (Hernández-Bonilla 2020). These journalistic depictions are significant not so much because they referred to sightings per se, but because the narratives themselves were exploring new ways through which to make the nonhuman animal visible within what seemed like a helplessly anthropocentric apparatus. Indirectly, such representations informed multispecies ethnographies and perspectives that revolve around “how a multitude of organisms’ livelihoods shape and are shaped by political, economic, and cultural forces” (Kirksey and Helmreich 2010, p. 545). In this sense, nonhuman animality has the potential to be conceived and assimilated not as dichotomous from human cultures, but as embodiments that conceptually and spatially participate in the horizontal or the “rhizomatic” (Deleuze and Guattari [1980] 1987, p. 11) articulation of a *bios* of living organisms that range from cells, molecules, viruses, and microbes to plants, fungi, and animals. What the absence of humans visibly pictured and exposed was the artificiality of hierarchical binarisms built upon anthropocentric cultural constructs, all the more emphasized by coronavirus’ infection of human and nonhuman animal vectors alike.

At the same time, however, ridding media discourses of binarisms and dichotomies still proved to be a quixotic gesture in many ways. The way the sightings of nonhuman animals were framed operated upon a discourse of authenticity, the narrative being one of an extra-human world that had been given a “breather” with human confinement, and that served as a hopeful reminder that nature could be recovered. Admittedly, these discourses that revived the embodiment of nonhuman animals had much to do with the aesthetic values that Western culture places on wildlife symbolism (and perhaps, especially, the United States with its historical dependency on the notion of wilderness for the proclamation of a national identity (Nash [1967] 2001)). As Isenberg notes, “[w]ildlife ennobles us; it may even be our salvation. But its values are those we ascribe to it, and the benefits of preserving wildlife accrue to us, too” (Isenberg 2002, p. 60). The cultural construct of wildlife and wilderness is aesthetically based on an alleged heterogeneity with human participation. *Tiger King* showed, on the other hand, the full perversion of human intervention, as nonhuman animals were caged and commodified into profitable items made to lead miserable lives. From breeding, cub-petting, declawing, and poor nutrition and veterinary care to actual dispensation of individuals by shooting, the amount of cruel and barbarous practices that the series revealed presented a stark contrast to the wildlife that was otherwise peppering the media with reports on how they took the streets.

Simultaneously, the media coverage that dealt with the disastrous consequences of human interference with wildlife and natural habitats revolved mostly around the alarm caused by wet markets in China and Southeast Asia. Scientific hypotheses on the nonhuman animal hosts (bats and pangolins) and the contagion to humans through their ingestion (or the ingestion of domestic animals that had been exposed to the diseases of wild ones in such markets) triggered an array of discussions fueled by different types of passions. After all, “virus is not just what we talk about, it is how we talk about it” (Gray 2021, p. 93). Conspiracy theories met with the burgeoning xenophobia and racism of voices (infamously including that of President Donald Trump) eager to publicly condemn China as the sole culprit of the disaster. Hooper et al. noted how the *Mail* and *The Sun* basked in

xenophobic and racist reporting, and utilized nonhuman animals to further encourage such views. Referring to the *Mail*, they write that “[t]he paper expressed concern for animals, but that concern usually served as a tool to berate the Chinese as the cause of Britain’s problem with the virus” (Hooper et al. 2021, p. 8). These hierarchical antinomies that continued to separate white Western identity from Asian “otherness” ran parallel to the anthropocentric placement of nonhuman animals as the minor casualties of the pandemic, equating the long-established correlations between racism and speciesism and precluding the abovementioned realm of multispecies *bios*.

More educated perspectives, on the other hand, identified the source of the problem not as a Chinese one, but as a human one: in his *New York Times* article significantly titled “Our Cruel Treatment of Animals Led to Coronavirus”, David Benatar (2020) claimed that the transmission of zoonotic diseases did indeed emerge from the unsanitary conditions of East Asian wet markets and the probable consumption of wild animals, but that these circumstances were part of a wider, global practice resulting from a brutal commodification of food animals that led to both profound abuse and public health hazards. This connectedness between Eastern and Western practices proved rather difficult for the animal rights movement to deal with at a discursive level. The direct call for the disappearance of wet markets (Singer and Cavalieri 2020; Bassey and Eyo 2020) became commonplace amongst animal advocates and internet users who had only just learned about the existence of such markets. Somewhat in line with the abovementioned study by Spiehler and Fischer (2021), Chang and Corman note that many animal advocacy organizations fell back into a rhetoric that came dangerously close to a racist privileging of certain issues over others: “The foregrounding of wet markets as the single origin and sole propagator of problems related to the pandemic prevents us from pairing our critiques with a strong anti-racist commitment” (Chang and Corman 2021, p. 61).

The massive coverage of what wet markets were and how they operated led public opinion to the belief that meddling with wildlife could have devastating effects for humans. The narrative became one of human hubris and anagnorisis—the awakening to the realization that nature could not ultimately be controlled, and that there was something inherently immoral (even if for anthropocentric reasons) in the processing and consumption of wildlife. In this light, Scheible questions the connections that audiences could make between their own confinement, the caging of wild tigers, the imprisonment of Joe Exotic, and the caged pangolins in Wuhan’s Huanan Seafood Wholesale Market. He leaves the question unanswered, and shifts the focus onto the damage caused by the carbon footprint left by the millions of viewers of *Tiger King*, rendering the media as an agent in the “ailing allegory” (Scheible 2020, p. 570).

Beyond this undeniable damage to the environment, I would argue that growing knowledge and awareness of wet markets and the devastating effects of unchecked and unethical interventionism over natural habitats and wildlife rang well with the lingering motifs of regret and guilt that now and again troubled some of the docuseries characters. Especially in the closing of the final episode of the first season, the narrative becomes one in which the victimhood of the wild animals serves as a haunting reminder of the active role that one plays in perpetuating exploitation and cruelty. Erik Cowie, an employee at the GW Zoo, expresses his sense of having betrayed several tigers when Joe Exotic came to their execution: “Y’know, those cats trusted me. And so they could look me in the eye when they died. I was the guy that was right there. That means a minute to me. A heavy minute” (Goode and Chaiklin 2020, Ep. 7, 11:40). Saff, another former employee, says of the endless feud: “Nobody wins. Everyone involved is a so-called animal advocate. Not a single animal benefitted from this war. Not a single one” (Goode and Chaiklin 2020, Ep. 7, 32:40). Even Joe Exotic himself comes off as somewhat sympathetic at the end of the seventh episode, in a rare moment of redemption in which he admits to the suffering he has inflicted on nonhuman animal individuals:

Are the animals happy? Who the hell knows? I finally moved my two chimpanzees last week. Probably one of the hardest days of my life. They sat in cages next to each other for over ten years. And we moved them to the Great Ape Center in Florida. And in two days they were out in a big yard hugging on each other. Did I deprive them of that for ten years? Yep. I deprived them of being chimpanzees. Did I do it on purpose? No, I was wrapped up in having a zoo. (Goode and Chaiklin 2020, Ep. 7, 36:35)

These attitudinal vestiges recall the conversion narrative that, for instance, articulated Psihoyos's *The Cove* (Psihoyos 2009) through the figure of former-dolphin-trainer-turned-activist Ric O'Barry. In the case of *Tiger King*, which is so heavily invested in "othering" the marginal rural white community that sustains these zoos, conversion narratives function as bridges to human redemption—paradoxically, one becomes "humanized" with the acceptance of personal responsibility for nonhuman animal captives. In the context of the pandemic, narratives of remorse and regret for our treatment of wildlife have played well (even if for purely anthropocentric interests) because they give the illusion that a lesson may have been learnt, and that reform of the system (abolishment or restrictive control and surveillance of how wildlife is sold and consumed in markets) is in place. The extent to which these beliefs may or may not be self-deluded is yet to be seen in long-term effects. Paula Arcari's (2021) eloquent study on the extent to which mainstream media has assimilated and legitimized critical animal perspectives after our collective revisionism of the objectification of nonhuman others suggests that little progress has thus far been made. Effective normalization of alternative ways through which to think about nonhuman others begins with the practice of non-normative discourses in dominant media that will directly or indirectly question our consent of speciesism.

Yet another topic that rang familiar was the easy expendability of nonhuman animal lives. The documentary made it a point to question Exotic's actual involvement in the murder-for-hire of Carole Baskin, suggesting that he may have been framed by his ex-partner, Jeff Lowe. To emphasize this hypothesis, it echoed the opinion that the charges on wildlife violations, which included Exotic's violent execution of five tigers, were strategically used by the prosecution in order to make up for the lack of evidence implicating him in the plotted murder. Against the backdrop of countless stories of the extermination of nonhuman animals to prevent the spread of coronavirus, these acts of cruelty deeply resonate once more within the narrative of the extreme consequences of human interference with domestic animals and wildlife.

In China, companion animals were reportedly rounded up for execution at a time when the World Health Organization claimed that there was no evidence to support the theory that the virus could be transmitted to pets (Macrae 2020; Thomson 2020). In addition, in Western nations such as the UK, the demand for companion animals to cope with the solitude of lockdowns led to "an increase in puppy farming, theft and smuggling of animals from abroad" (Fox 2020, section Panic-Buying Pets, para. 3), and to their subsequent abandonment once confinement was over and the responsibility of pet-caring dawned on irresponsible owners. Further evidence of the disregard for animal welfare came with the execution of fur animals in Spain, France, and especially in Denmark, which "euthanized" approximately 17 million minks (Frater 2020; Kessler 2020). Uncontrolled panic came with the knowledge that a number of pets and nonhuman animals in zoos had contracted the virus from human vectors in Europe, the United States, and Asia, while, as Coman and Ancuta point out as recently as in 2021, "there is currently no evidence that animals are involved in the spread of the pandemic in the human population" (Coman and Ancuta 2021, p. 70). The senselessness of massive extermination of nonhuman animals in a gesture disguised as philanthropy certainly gives us pause, and Exotic's cruel dispensing of individual tigers stands as a clear metonymy of the vulnerability that nonhuman animals face with our collective consent to the existence of spaces of captivity.

When the senselessness and the guilt sink in, one may find solace in the occasional public reaction against the management of these spaces. The deliberate execution of captive wildlife in zoos or circuses has attracted considerable media attention, of course, since pre-COVID days. Scholars often recover the story of the public electrocution of the elephant Topsy in Coney Island in 1903 precisely because of what it has meant in terms of nonhuman animal representation in modern, capitalist media and with respects to technology (Nance 2013, pp. 184–86; Tobias 2013, pp. 292–313; Stallwood 2018). Bombastically publicized as a “murderous beast”, Topsy’s death seemed to have been of little moral regard except for a handful of sympathizers. More than one hundred years later, however, the narratives justifying the execution of zoo and circus animals were being questioned and actively campaigned against in social media. A famous case was that of the Copenhagen Zoo’s decision to “euthanize” an eighteen-month-old giraffe called Marius for being genetically undesirable for breeding, and then dissecting him in front of an eager audience that included children in order to stage a scientifically “educational” and teachable moment (Smith 2014).

A well-known pandemic story keeping up with this thematic tradition was the proposed resolution of the Neumünster Zoo in Germany to kill off several of the nonhuman animals in their facilities and even feed their corpses to other caged animals to avoid their starvation, as the zoo faced financial difficulties in the midst of the COVID-19 crisis. “Although this contingency plan was never implemented, it triggered worldwide media coverage and public consciousness regarding the dismissal of animal welfare. Subsequently, donations from around the world started to flood into the zoo” (Yin et al. 2021, p. 1426). These collective gestures in the interest of the welfare of nonhuman animals that have already been wronged in so many ways also speak to the emerging practice of connectivity ethics that the pandemic has instructed us in. As Cabalquinto and Ahlin (2021) point out, quarantine has educated human communities in the manifestation and expression of digital languages of self and social care, whereupon the need for connectivity and empathy has sensitized our affect towards others. As public discourses of care grow and evolve in online platform imagery and language, and as all subjects, regardless of gender, race, or species acquire an online identity that substitutes their physicality, we learn to acquiesce and integrate ourselves into all forms of otherness to which we are connected. From the confines of our home, and by navigating through the labyrinthic distractions of saturated media reports, we can maximize our potential for care—and concerning ourselves with the misery of nonhuman animals held in zoos is a most ethical start.

#### 4. Conclusions

As an isolated, decontextualized documentary, *Tiger King* stands as a difficult series to categorize in terms of its controversial (mis)messaging of the dire situation of endangered wildlife, namely, tigers and large cats. The impact the show had in popular culture evinces in many ways the extent to which nonhuman animals continue to be regarded as marginal, and its compulsion to operate under the auspices of fast, formulaic entertainment was heavily targeted by critics who exposed the creators’ lack of concern for the conservation issues at stake. However, watching and reexamining the documentary in light of the media discourses that it landed on upon its release allows us to understand the malleability of interpretation. This process of discursive contextualization is an active exercise of responsibility on the part of consumers of both media and wildlife. The object is not to salvage the sinking ship of the series itself, but to reassess the mechanisms by which society’s manufactured consent of nonhuman animal exploitation operate. Popular culture products such as *Tiger King* present rare opportunities through which to analyze how mass consumption of anthropocentric narratives can be imploded from within, and how we can employ the media to train ourselves to reach beyond passive reception.

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## Note

- <sup>1</sup> Throughout this article, the term “wildlife” expressly refers to nondomesticated nonhuman animals that, unless forced into captivity, live in their natural habitats.

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## Article

# Becoming More-than-Human: Realizing Earthly Eudaimonia to (E)coflourish through an Entangled Ethos

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**Abstract:** Organisms across the biosphere are experiencing extinction rates so dire that scientists have marked the Anthropocene as the sixth mass extinction in the planet's history. Accordingly, plants and animals, by and large, are not flourishing on this deathly planet. Yet, perhaps it is possible for these more-than-humans to thrive—to realize *eudaimonia*, an ancient Greek concept meaning to flourish by living well—when humans reimagine their relationships with the natural world. In this study, I augment critical animal and media studies with creative cultural studies to arrive at creative/critical animal and media studies. Through this framework, I utilize rhetorical criticism to analyze how the documentary *My Octopus Teacher* reimagines interspecies relations to offer alternative pathways for *earthly eudaimonia*, a life approach centered on (e)coflourishing. I find the octopus, through its *entangled ethos*, teaches the human sensitized compassion with a significant result: the more-than-human octopus transfers her animality to the human who evolves to become more-than-human as well. I offer two arguments: first, contemplating earthly eudaimonia through an entangled ethos creates a space for ecological reflection; this space invites audiences to approach the more-than-human world with sensitized compassion and animality; second, analyzing the documentary through a creative/critical animal and media studies lens offers a unique perspective that foregrounds exploring imaginaries for peaceful, earthly coexistence while maintaining a critical focus against speciesism.

**Keywords:** creative/critical animal and media studies; rhetoric; environmental communication; eudaimonia; ethos; more-than-human; sensitized compassion; sixth mass extinction

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## 1. Introduction

The planet Earth is drenched in death, as animals and plants experience extinction rates so dire that scientists have marked this event as the sixth mass extinction in the planet's history. These organisms—or more-than-humans (Abram 1996)—are dying off precipitously due to the Anthropocene, a name to describe the “practices of dispossession and genocide, coupled with a literal transformation of the environment, that have [continually] been at work for the last five hundred years” (Davis and Todd 2017, p. 761). The Intergovernmental Science–Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES 2019), the successor to the 2005 Millennium Ecosystem Assessment, explains the sixth mass extinction in startling detail:

An average of around 25 per cent of species in assessed animal and plant groups are threatened, suggesting that around 1 million species already face extinction, many within decades, unless action is taken to reduce the intensity of drivers of biodiversity loss. Without such action, there will be a further acceleration in the global rate of species extinction, which is already at least tens to hundreds of times higher than it has averaged over the past 10 million years. (pp. XV–XVI)

Humans are creating a world of ashes. In this time of enormous death across the planet's breadth, humans must explore alternative ways of coexisting with more-than-human beings.

One response to the Anthropocene and the sixth mass extinction is compassionate conservation, a movement in conservation biology centered on the wellbeing of more-than-human animals. Compassionate conservation holds peaceful coexistence as a core tenant (Wallach et al. 2018), an ethic that “emphasizes the need to reflect on human actions” (Hayward et al. 2019, p. 764) that impact wildlife<sup>1</sup> so that nonhuman animals and “humans can *coflourish*” (emphasis added, Wallach et al. 2018, p. 1260). Engaging with conservation biology may seem unprecedented in communication studies, yet the field has done so before. Cox (2007), in the inaugural issue of *Environmental Communication: A Journal of Nature and Culture*, argues the field of environmental communication should follow conservation biology to also become defined as a crisis discipline. To continue environmental communication’s conversation with conservation biology, I answer compassionate conservation with a care-oriented disciplinary approach (Pezzullo 2017). I do so by drawing attention to how rhetorical scholar Barnett (2021) advances a concept synonymous with peaceful coexistence termed “earthly coexistence.” For Barnett, earthly coexistence is a commitment to “dwelling peacefully upon the earth and working with our more-than-human cohabitants in ways that are mutually beneficial” (p. 368). Earthly coexistence recognizes ecological interconnectedness as unescapable—and, Barnett declares, rhetoric scholars must consequently take notice. Therefore, “perhaps [a] shockingly capacious notion of rhetoric” (p. 369) is necessitated, one “that embraces—or at least attempts to account for—what exceeds the human” (p. 370). Yet, communication, rhetorical, and media studies have traditionally marginalized scholarship that engages with ecological concerns (Pezzullo 2016; Almiron et al. 2018). If the communication studies field is to advance peaceful, earthly coexistence, then we require a framework that breaks with tradition by sending critical inquiries into the communication and representation of more-than-human animals. A promising avenue for this approach can be found in critical animal and media studies.

Critical animal and media studies (CAMS) is a burgeoning subdiscipline that combines critical animal studies (Best et al. 2007) with critical media studies (Ott and Mack 2014) to analytically critique “The media’s role in manufacturing human consent for the oppression and exploitation of nonhumans” (Almiron and Cole 2015, p. 3). CAMS productively attends to the media representations that constitute the human power relations that thread throughout Earth’s ecologies to dominate more-than-human animals. However, as Freeman (2015) notes, CAMS is primarily concerned with how “the mass media participate in maintaining a speciesist culture” (p. 265). Therefore, CAMS may not be well equipped to analyze how media resists speciesism to benefit animals by authentically and compassionately representing peaceful, earthly coexistence.

Perhaps augmenting CAMS with a creative perspective would allow it be more responsive to how media represents *coflourishing* between more-than-human animals and humans during the sixth mass extinction. DeLuca (2019a) proposes a shift from *critical* cultural studies to *creative* cultural studies, which moves “from critique and judgment to understanding and creativity” (p. 177). Rather than critiquing, the work now “imagines new ways of understanding the world” (p. 177). This move supports the inquiry into peaceful, earthly coexistence to answer Bekoff’s (2013) question: “How can we build and maintain clear and unobstructed corridors of compassion and coexistence” (xxi)? Exploring media and their animal representations from a creative lens would open space for this crucial work. However, just as detractors of compassionate conservation argue that it is nigh impossible to do no harm to animals (Hayward et al. 2019), assuming media should escape a critical inquiry due to their best intentions would be idealistic. Therefore, I argue for *creative/critical* animal and media studies (C/CAMS) to maintain a critical perspective as support for exploring alternative pathways for peaceful, earthly coexistence in media. C/CAMS offers an opportunity to analyze how media composes *coflourishing* relationships between more-than-human animals and humans in the Anthropocene, while remaining aware of how those reimaginaries may contribute to speciesism.

In this study, I perform a C/CAMS-informed rhetorical analysis of the documentary *My Octopus Teacher* to explicate how it offers an alternative vision for peaceful, earthly coexistence through its representation of a more-than-human octopus transferring her animality to a human so that he too becomes more-than-human. I analyze the film through two Aristotelian concepts. First, I engage with *eudaimonia*, a classical Greek ethic concerned with the condition of flourishing. I converge Wallach et al.'s (2018) concept of peaceful coflourishing with Barnett's (2021) earthly coexistence to arrive at *earthly eudaimonia*, or how more-than-human animals and humans (e)coflourish for peaceful, earthly coexistence. Second, I leverage the lens of *ethos*, or one's character as constituted by their actions. I integrate ethos with Gruen's (2013) urging for an empathy attendant to the unique differences in animals to establish *entangled ethos*. When employed by a human, entangled ethos refers to how a particular kind of character emerges through compassionate ecological relations. For a nonhuman animal, entangled ethos is the character that arises when they concatenate with their ecology. In my analysis, I find the documentary's co-protagonist, an embattled filmmaker who I term as "the human," to become transformed by the octopus's ethotic teachings: the human learns sensitized compassion to become delicately concerned with the suffering of more-than-human animals; this informs his capacity to participate in earthly eudaimonia to (e)coflourish; then the human becomes animalized by attaining a deep connection to nature—in other words, the more-than-human octopus transfers her animalized ethos to the human, who then evolves to become more-than-human as well. I offer two arguments: first, contemplating earthly eudaimonia through an entangled ethos creates a space for ecological reflection; this space invites audiences to approach the more-than-human world with sensitized compassion and animality; second, analyzing the documentary through a creative/critical animal and media studies lens offers a unique perspective that foregrounds exploring imaginaries for peaceful, earthly coexistence, while maintaining a critical focus against speciesism.

I first leverage a critical focus to explicate the literature on more-than-human animals, media, and Aristotelian concepts to build a framework for C/CAMS. Then I analyze the documentary through primarily a creative lens to explore its mediated representations of the octopus and human. I finish with the rhetorical implications of my analysis, the use of C/CAMS as a methodology, and practical recommendations for media communicators.

## 2. More-than-Humans Abound in Media

With the creative/critical stance of C/CAMS in mind, I strategically choose how I refer to animals in this study to deploy a lens that disrupts anthropocentric power relations while providing possible pathways for earthly eudaimonia. Abram (1996) comprehensively names the (non)beings in nature, including nonhuman animals and plants, as well as the abiotic elements that co-constitute ecosystems—like rain, wind, and the tides—as *more-than-human*. The more-than-human term, then, productively encapsulates all of nature in a single expression to honor and emphasize ecological interconnectivity. The more-than-human term has gained significant traction in communication studies, with rhetorical scholar Endres (2020) declaring that it has become a fundamental assumption in the field of environmental rhetoric. They continue, noting how the more-than-human term "simultaneously recognizes that humans are animals and acknowledges that it is not just humans who are capable of communication, intersubjective relationships, and agency" (p. 317). Significant to peaceful, earthly coexistence, Endres concludes that the more-than-human term provides a "pathway toward radically reimagining of our relationship with the environment and a form of hope in the Anthropocene" (p. 327). The more-than-human term, then, creatively decenters anthropocentrism to resist "hierarchical speciesistic thinking that [humans are] 'higher, better, or more valuable' than other animals" (Bekoff 2013, p. 15). Considering these affordances, I refer to nonhuman animals as more-than-humans throughout this study.

Media studies is a discipline that explores how humans use media to communicate worldviews through representation. As a rhetoric, media functions suavisly to influ-

ence and mold audiences. Critical media studies explores these persuasive acts to analyze “the media’s role in constructing and maintaining particular relationships of power” (Ott and Mack 2014, p. 17). CAMS broadens these moralistic concerns to include nonhuman animals, an understudied foci in critical media studies (Almiron et al. 2018). Indeed, media studies has much to offer the critical inquiry into more-than-human animals. As Barnett and DeLuca (2019) write, “Media are the sites of all the unfolding dramas of human and more-than-human life,” that “give shape to the world as we know it” by revealing “the world and position us as actors within it” (p. 103). Media, then, composes worlds anew through representations that open or close the possibilities for relational transformations.

Documentaries are a medium that engages with environmental issues to shape the world toward particular outcomes. Nature documentaries project human perspectives, values, and desires upon the natural world through capturing footage of more-than-human beings to compose narratives both entertaining and salient to human audiences. Pierson (2005) names three primary occidental perspectives through which documentaries engage with nature: first, nature as a laboratory for scientific advancement; second, nature as threatened by human-caused degradation and depredation; third, as a sacred realm deserving protection and offering enlightenment (p. 707). However, nature documentaries are often critiqued for perpetuating human supremacy and speciesism. As Freeman and Jarvis (2013) advocate, documentaries must “actively cultivate ecological responsibility and newfound respect toward animals as fellow sentient beings” (p. 265) if they are to serve the natural world. Moreover, Barnett (2016) finds in his analysis of the 1995 documentary named *Safe*, documentaries can “productively immerses audiences in sensorial spaces and times that can (at least temporarily) generate ecological modes of attention and attunement” (p. 209). Thus, nature documentaries can perhaps answer Freeman and Jarvis’s (2013) call for mediated representation that persuades audiences toward ecological modes of living.

### 3. Creative/Critical Animals and Media Studies

Formally introduced in the book *Critical Animal Media Studies* (Almiron et al. 2015), CAMS is a field concerned with interrogating how more-than-human animals are exploited and oppressed through their media representations. Drawing on critical animal studies and its revelatory response to the speciesism found in animal studies (Best et al. 2007) and critical/cultural studies and its attention to power relations (Ott and Mack 2014), scholars in CAMS are committed to engaging critical media studies in conversations on the ethical treatment of more-than-human animals and how media constitutes and perpetuates speciesistic ideologies (Almiron and Cole 2015). CAMS scholars explore how media harm more-than-human animals through varying angles, including Cole’s (2015) analysis of rhetorics that legitimate the human domination of animals by ignoring the ethical implications of consuming their flesh; Cudworth and Jensen (2015) tracing how a TV program about animal companionship offers insight into the disruption of the normative power dynamics found within interspecies relations; and Malamud (2015) interrogating how visual culture inimically captures attention with mediated animals to obstruct the plight of these more-than-humans in the real world. Yet, as Merskin (2015) clarifies, even as CAMS critiques speciesism to decenter anthropocentrism, it does not “deny human disadvantages” (p. 15). Freeman (2015) agrees, noting that CAMS is committed “to promoting justice for *all* living beings” (p. 266). CAMS is therefore attentive to animal and human interrelations as it recognizes the interconnected consequences of speciesism (Plec 2015). The critical perspective in CAMS can serve as a productive foundation for exploring peaceful, earthly coexistence.

Creative cultural studies (CCS) is a field that prioritizes creating new understandings of the world over critiquing injurious power dynamics. Boldly established by DeLuca (2019a), creative cultural studies is a response to “Proliferating ecocides, rampant overpopulation, and excessive consumerism [which] all present daunting challenges that exceed the grasp of” a critical methodology (DeLuca 2019b, p. 337). Poignantly outlining what this new field could be, DeLuca (2019a) writes:

Imagine a Cultural Studies dominated not by critique but creativity, not reason and rationality but feeling and affect, not ideology but experience, not subjects but assemblages, not moralism but understanding, not lonely humans but the pandemonium of things. (p. 171)

DeLuca continues, offering a transformative agenda, “As scholars, our task is not to judge an already given, static world and find it false and lacking, but to encounter and explore a ceaselessly changing, creative, eventful pluriverse” (p. 176). The need for this creative turn is as startlingly as it is sobering. Contemplating visual media studies at large and DeLuca’s commitments to creativity, Hariman and Lucaites (2019) remark, “The only ‘rational’ response” to exigent catastrophe “might be an even larger commitment to ‘irrational’ hope: to look desperately but positively for the means for ‘possible new worlds’” (p. 345). CCS offers an alternative to critique, one that is primed to address the calamitous consequences of the Anthropocene.

Drawing on Nietzsche, Whitehead, and Deleuze and Guattari, DeLuca (2019a) creates a methodology predicated on understanding and creativity. CCS compels scholars to “trace connections, focusing on relationships between things (which include non-human actants), understanding agency as distributed, and tending to affective forces” (p. 177). These methods provide a framework for analysis that is generative, lively, and responsive to DeLuca’s (1999) “irrational hope” that change is possible in this time of massive ecological death. Additionally, applying these methods constitutes an act of creation itself, producing scholarship that pushes academic boundaries by tracing novel possibilities for relating to more-than-human nature. Rather than relying on skepticism, CCS is additively open to the messiness of a constantly changing world.

C/CAMS is a convergence of CAMS and CCS intended to serve a significant purpose: to analyze the reimagining of more-than-human animals and human relationships in the media while maintaining a critical perspective “to advocate for a cultural shift toward justice for animals” (Freeman 2015, p. 265). CAMS forms the bedrock of C/CAMS because, as Brunner (2019) compels, “Critique must lead to creation, which offers avenues to hope” (352). Creativity, then, is informed by critique. We cannot necessarily compose ecocentric futures if we are unable to critically distinguish among imaginaries that may in fact legitimate speciesism. Additionally, while CAMS and CCS may part in their methodologies, both share similar commitments. Like CAMS, CCS is positioned to address ecocide through centering on the more-than-human. To that end, DeLuca (2019a) constructs CCS to support nonhuman “animal and plant studies” (p. 189) through “an orientation that accounts for the more than human, this earth *teeming with the pandemonium of things*” (emphasis in original, p. 171). These two methodologies find synergy through their mutual devotion to more-than-human animals. Altogether, C/CAMS is attendant to critique through its orientation to crisis (Cox 2007), yet also to creativity via its commitment to care (Pezzullo 2017).

C/CAMS is attentive to how more-than-human animals become media through human design. Adams (2013) contends that “Animals function as media when humans use them to convey information to other humans” (p. 20), and, I would add, as agencies that facilitate nonhuman animal and human interaction. Animals can be impressed with human meaning making for suasive purposes, in other words. However, as Adams notes, humans using nonhuman animals as media can be critiqued as a form of anthropomorphism. Indeed, the title of the documentary speaks of its commitment to anthropomorphism: *My Octopus Teacher*. Yet, I analyze this instance of attributing human characteristics to nonhuman animals deliberately; I do so through Schutten and Shaffer’s (2019) “strategic anthropomorphism,” which they describe as an “alternative form of civic action” (p. 4) that emphasizes animal–human similarities to “connect humans to more-than-humans” (p. 9). Strategic anthropomorphism offers a lens to understand how media represents nonhuman animals as media to communicate alternative pathways for earthly eudaimonia. I must note, however, that despite adopting Adams (2013) animal as media theory, I do not agree that more-than-human animals, by virtue of being “ambiguous entities” (p. 29) in Adams’

words, are stripped of their agency when represented as media. As I will argue below, while “animals do not speak the same languages as humans” (p. 29)—and therefore are unable to linguistically “challenge the human use of them as evidence” (p. 29)—they still have the capacity to energetically exhibit forces that are persuasive to humans (even if that persuasion becomes reduced to the parts humans think we understand). Parrish (2021), striking for a middle ground in this conversation with Adams (2013), underscores how nonhuman animals’ “interactions can hold agency, or, like humans, sometimes they are unwitting pawns in the games of other agents” (Parrish 2021, p. 305). With this midpoint in mind, it is productive to draw on Endres (2020), who reminds us that, “There are multiple forms of rhetorical agency within the more-than-human world” (p. 317). One of which, as I detail below, can be found in internatural communication (Plec 2013).

#### 4. More-than-Human Communication

Within communication studies are scholars who break from tradition by questioning how more-than-human animals participate in the mysteries of communication. Kennedy (1992) is credited with first making this move in his seminal article “A Hoot in the Dark”, where he radically redefines rhetoric as the “the energy inherent in communication” (p. 2) and therefore prior to symbolic acts. Kennedy further specifies that rhetoric is “the emotional energy [that] impels the speaker to speak, the physical energy expended in the utterance, the energy level coded in the message, and the energy experienced by the recipient in decoding the message” (p. 2). In this recasting, Kennedy decenters symbolic language as the prime locus of communication to recognize that rhetoric is inherent in the very expression of life. More-than-human animals are not only rhetorically capable, but rhetorically empowered. The natural world now has a voice and can therefore form “speaking, deciding assemblies” (Peterson et al. 2007, p. 78) to participate in the conversations that determine its death and wellbeing.

Yet, conversations are constituted by a reciprocal interplay between interlocutors. Recognizing the need to account for interrelations that include diverse entities, Plec (2013) conceptualizes internatural communication, a term for “The exchange of intentional energy between humans and other animals” (p. 6). Internatural communication provides a space to translate more-than-human communication to offer insight into ecological co-constitution. Through internatural communication, scholars have explored how popular media captures the embodied expression of animals to subtly advance speciesist and racist ideologies (Plec 2015); orcas engage in protest rhetorics through internatural activism (Burford and Schutten 2017; Schutten 2021), and the rehomings of salmon creates a biorhetoric that compels reflection on ecological degradation (Plec et al. 2017). Internatural communication offers a lens to explore how animal communication interacts with the human world to produce saliency and meaning.

By expanding the boundaries of what constitutes communication, internatural communication acts as a lens to productively disrupt dominant concepts in communication studies. Augmenting Kennedy’s (1992) rhetoric-as-energy perspective, Seegert (2014) eschews symbolism to define “rhetoric as the relational force of signals interacting with the world” (p. 160). From this perspective, rhetoric is affective, or the “capacity to affect and be affected” by being “moved by sameness and difference . . . by the many bodies (human and nonhuman, animate and inanimate, living and dead, natural and artificial) with which we share the world” (Barnett and DeLuca 2019, p. 102). In sum, rhetoric emerges in ecologies where energy impels the acts that send relational signals forcing through concatenating networks.

#### 5. Earthly Eudaimonia

*Eudaimonia* is an Aristotelian concept, one fiercely debated throughout history due its ethereal characterization by the Greek scholar. Aristotle (2009) develops eudaimonia in his *Nicomachean Ethics*, and the term is commonly translated as “happiness.” However, the happiness Aristotle describes is not strictly an emotional or mental state. Rather,

eudaimonia is perhaps more precisely understood as an experience. So, after widespread contention with eudaimonia's interpretation as happiness, [Brown \(2009\)](#) notes that scholars generally agree that "flourishing" is a more accurate translation (p. x). As an ethic, eudaimonia is concerned with how humans flourish through living their best life. Yet, scholars have noted the ambiguity of Aristotle's explication of eudaimonia. The ancient Greek first articulates that happiness is achieved through actions, but at the end of the book, he shifts to this ethic as realized through contemplation. [Ackrill \(2001\)](#) argues that one solution is to consider the former in service to the latter: "right actions are right precisely in virtue of their making possible or in some way promoting theōria [contemplation]" (p. 180). I take eudaimonia as both the in-the-moment acts and the meditations that reflect afterwards. Eudaimonia, then, emerges as a rhetoric through (inter)action and is later leveraged as a rhetorical appeal by deliberating on what constitutes right action.

Aristotle's account for eudaimonia is limited for two reasons; however. He describes eudaimonia as not achievable outside the human experience, and also as benefiting the individual rather than those connected in relationship. First, [Aristotle \(2009\)](#) excludes nonhuman animals from eudaimonia because while they are alive, animals are "obedient to reason" and are not capable of "possessing reason and exercising thought" (p. 11) as humans do. Yet, animal cognition philosophers like [Andrews \(2020\)](#) challenge these anthropocentric notions, contending that animals participate in rational decision-making unique to that more-than-human mind. I dispense with Aristotle's anthropocentrism and locate eudaimonia as a flourishing existence achievable by nonhuman animals through their conscious decisions. Second, Aristotle explicates eudaimonia as self-oriented through centering on how an individual secures pleasant moments, lives self-sufficiently, and exhibits moral excellence ([Murphy et al. 2014](#)). I disagree with Aristotle's self-serving approach to Eudaimonia, since individuals are always enmeshed in living networks. Flourishing is limited when the surrounding life is deteriorating—a point being made duly evident in the sixth mass extinction. As [Plec et al. \(2017\)](#) stress, "the happiness and flourishing requisite of [eudaimonia] must be anchored in relationships, including those with the more-than-human world" (p. 255). Therefore, I understand eudaimonia as consciously realized through "a life of harmony and balance" ([Murphy et al. 2014](#), p. 74), but only with other beings so that they too may flourish. Eudaimonia is now an ethic of the ecological good where one (e)coflourishes within ecological constraints so that other beings may also thrive. I term this variant *earthly eudaimonia*.

Earthly eudaimonia is a rhetorical appeal to live an ecologically attuned mode of life, one that emerges through right (inter)action and leveraged later through deliberating on that action. Locating a vision for a resistant lifestyle in the tiny homes movement, [Colombini \(2019\)](#) describes a eudaimonic rhetorical appeal as a "countervailing mode of life that facilitates well-being and thus is desirable on its own terms" (p. 459). As an appeal, eudaimonic rhetorics operate contrastively to oppose other ways of life deemed harmful to well-being. A eudaimonic rhetorical appeal, then, is itself a critique against dominant ideologies and the inimical modes of life those belief systems sanction. Additionally, earthly eudaimonia broadens [Plec et al.'s \(2017\)](#) salmonid eudaimonia where "the flourishing of salmon and the flourishing of humans" (p. 248) are entangled to include the flourishing of all the beings interrelating in an ecology. An earthly eudaimonia, then, is a rhetoric that emerges when life thrives—and also when ecologies degrade and die. Earthly eudaimonia as a rhetorical appeal provides a framework for understanding how eudaimonia is persuasively leveraged to constitute alternative modes of peaceful, earthly coexistence.

## 6. Entangled Ethos

Ethos—one's character and credibility—is a rhetorical concept parsed and debated by scholars since introduced by [Aristotle \(2015\)](#) in his book entitled *Rhetoric*. Famously declared by the ancient Greek scholar as the "the most effective means of persuasion" (p. 8), ethos manifests through three traits found in the speaker's speech and comportment: good sense, good moral character, and goodwill towards the audience. However, ethos

as conceived by Aristotle is limited as it reinforces a logocentric approach to rhetoric. As [Wisse \(1989\)](#) explains “The way Aristotle presents ethos . . . is rational in so far . . . as the hearer can rationally decide for himself whether he thinks the speaker is reliable or not [sic] (p. 33). To find an ethos more suited to more-than-human animals’ rhetorics, we must momentarily look past the Greeks to their successors: the Romans.

The Roman’s account of rhetoric, particularly in the work of Cicero, conceives ethos as an emotional expression of one’s character. While Aristotle and his Greek contemporaries viewed ethos and pathos as distinct from one another, “the Roman critics came to view [ethos and pathos] as different degrees of the same thing” ([Kennedy 1972](#), p. 101). The Romans considered ethos and pathos to be counterparts, or two sides of the same persuasive currency. [Kennedy \(1972\)](#) further delineates this Roman perspective: whereas “ethos is gentle and mild and demonstrates the speaker’s moral character; pathos consists of strong emotions like anger, hate, fear, envy, or pity” (p. 505). Considering rhetoric as a force with varying degrees of intensities, ethos is a moderate “emotion [which] arises from the character of the speaker” (p. 101), and pathos is a force of passionate intensity. Ethos, then, is extra-rational, or affective, as it operates on the level of being. This account for ethos is productive for more-than-human animal rhetorics because it forgoes the anthropocentric requirement for language. Now ethos transpires not only by discursive signification, but also relationally through asignifying physical encounters.

A productive ethos for animal communication can be found by merging elements from both the Greek’s and Roman’s conceptions of one’s character while emphasizing its physicality. While the Romans viewed ethos as fluid through its connection to pathos, they also found it immutable. [May \(1988\)](#) explains that “The Romans believed . . . character does not evolve or develop, but rather is bestowed or inherited by nature” (p. 6). Yet, the Romans had a practical reason for this rigidity: legal records in those ancient times bound one’s persona to their family name ([Baumlin 1994](#)). Conversely, [Baumlin \(1994\)](#) finds Aristotle admitting to ethos as amenable to “an active construction of character” (p. xv) when the Greek describes it as capable of shifting or changing depending on one’s actions. The Aristotelian ethos, then, is flexible in its emergence. Additionally, ethos is not purely a phenomenon produced by language, as it also arises through physicalities that more-than-human animals can utilize. In addition to speech, ethos also includes the rhetor’s “habits, strengths, weaknesses, virtues and vices” (p. xii) and their “physical presence and appearance . . . gestures, inflections, and accents of style” (p. xvi). Ethos, then, comprises characteristics that are physically demonstrated in the moment and do not require language for their conveyance.

In this study, I combine the Roman conception of ethos as a fluid intensity with the Aristotelian notion that one’s character is malleable, all through an approach that recognizes that ethos materially emerges in relationships. I name this dual approach an *entangled ethos* in response to [Gruen’s \(2013\)](#) call for an empathy that, as an ethic, becomes entangled by valuing the unique differences of more-than-humans. Entangled ethos emphasizes how ethos contextually evolves, emerging through the transmitted affects, emotions, and feelings living creatures experience in relationship to other beings or objects. Entangled ethos is attendant to ecologies as it dynamically develops from concatenating relationships.

Rhetorical scholars have noted how animals leverage ethos to shape their relationships and conditions. As [Parrish \(2013\)](#) explains, “Human and nonhuman animals can understand the effects of reputation, and will set out to cultivate a particular ethos as it suits them in a rhetorical situation” (p. 85). For example, [Kennedy \(1992\)](#) proposed that among animals, “ethos is likely to reflect hierarchy or ‘pecking order’ in the society; in many groups, especially of mammals, certain members have greater authority than others” (p. 15). Animals are well aware of how to utilize their character to achieve beneficial outcomes—to flourish, in other words.

Of particular importance to this study is how octopi employ ethos to thrive and influence humans. An octopus’ intelligence and learning capacities make it well suited to cleverly utilize ethos. Through mimicry, the more-than-human “octopus . . . can easily take

the appearance of anything she touches” and thereby “shape ethos in subtle and varying degrees” (Parrish 2021, p. 85). Octopi shape their ethos to engage in internatural communication. Additionally, octopi and their ethos have swayed humans since time immemorial by inspiring advancements in the arts and sciences (Nakajima et al. 2018). Greek and Roman art, for example, drew upon the octopus’ character through representations designed to shape symbolic cultural codes. Octopi are fascinatingly adroit users of ethos.

## 7. (E)coflourishing through the More-than-Human Evolution

*My Octopus Teacher* is a 2020 Netflix Original Documentary that explores the interrelations between humans and the wild to advocate for a caring mode of relating to the natural world. The documentary follows Craig Foster, a fatigued filmmaker, and his attempt to find purpose through seeking connection with nature. The human disconnects from his family to plunge into the ocean where he meets an octopus. Astounded by the clever cephalopod, the human documents the octopus as she teaches him ecologic lessons. He emerges from the kelp forests with an eco-centric perspective that transforms his interspecies and familial relationships. The film has won numerous awards, including an Academy Award for Best Documentary Feature and the Golden Panda Award from Wildscreen. Critics have contributed to *My Octopus Teacher*’s widespread acclaim. Travers (2021) lauds the documentary as a “dazzling, deep-dive into interspecies communication” (para. 9), while Stefansky (2020) styles the film as an emotional “examination of where humans place ourselves in relation to the natural world, why we often feel as though we are separate from it, and what happens to us when we realize that divide is a myth” (para. 5). The film offers a compelling reimagining of internatural communication that has resonated with Western culture.

Throughout the analysis, I refer to Foster as “the human” to decenter anthropocentrism by leveling his reference with that of the octopus’s. This analysis, then, not only serves the creative focus for C/CAMS by exploring alternative pathways for earthly coexistence, but also my critical commitment, through deprivileging the human perspective in an ecologic context. CAMS scholar Merskin (2015) poses two compelling questions that guide this C/CAMS analysis: “how do representations of animals . . . impact the lives of real animals? And what can we learn about ourselves by looking through the lens with which we look at other animals” (p. 12)? Lastly, the human narrates the footage of his past experiences while seated at a table in his home to provide a reflective perspective on the events represented in the film.

### 7.1. Separation, Descent, and Encounter

The documentary begins by answering “the why”—why a human would seek an ecological education on flourishing from an octopus. The human provides two reasons. First, he narrates how he suffered a deep disconnection from nature that he could not otherwise resolve, and second, he describes experiencing a severe bout of burnout from becoming overtaxed with film work. First, the human had unsuccessfully sought to connect to nature in the past. He recounts an earlier experience where he participated in a documentary about aboriginal hunters in the central Kalahari. He remarks that the hunters “were probably some of the best trackers in the world” (Ehrlich and Reed 2020). Yet, not even these expert hunters could teach the human how to bridge the gap he so keenly felt. He laments that the hunters “were inside of the natural world. And I could feel I was outside. And I had this deep longing to be inside that world”. The human sought a pathway to the natural world, but it would not become available until he experienced a culminating personal crisis.

Second, the human, exhausted from film work, experiences an internal breakdown so profound he becomes bereft of purpose and disconnected from his family—with ramifications for his initial ethos. The human describes how his life had become an “absolute hell” (Ehrlich and Reed 2020) from overworking. Consequently, he says, “I hadn’t slept properly for months. My family was suffering. And I was getting sick from all the pressure.” The

results were twofold. The stress became so intense that the human developed an aversion to his film work. He expresses “Your great purpose in life is now . . . just in pieces.” His connections with his family also suffered: “I just couldn’t, in that state, be a good father to my son.” The human needed an answer to this internal dilemma and realized he required “a radical change . . . And the only way I knew how to do it was to be in this ocean.” The human begins spending an inordinate amount of time away from his family as he explores the sea. Initially, the human’s disconnection from his family impairs his ethos. His credibility and goodwill are cast in a negative light by his documented admission and actions to willingly disconnect from his family. It is through this fraught ethos that the human encounters the octopus.

Delicate and gentle music plays as the human, swimming underwater, comes upon a strange, novel sight in the kelp forest. He spies a collection of shells held together by something unseen. Then, an octopus suddenly glides out from her cover. The music swells as the human comments, “It’s a hard thing to explain, but sometimes you just get a feeling . . . there’s something to this creature that’s very unusual. There’s something to learn here” (Ehrlich and Reed 2020). The human is bedazzled by the experience of an intelligence beneath the waves. A creature so mysterious, yet so clever, must have something to teach. While the human does not yet fully comprehend what he will learn, he notices a glimpse of (e)cofLOURishing in the octopus’s entangled ethos—her character, in other words, that emerges through relating to the kelp forest ecology. The experience slightly alleviates the human’s burnout and he begins documenting the cephalopod to learn a different approach to life.

## 7.2. Ecological Attunement

The human documents the octopus extensively to learn his first lesson: how to become attuned to an ecology. Previously, the human found himself fundamentally disconnected from nature. Now he follows the octopus into the natural world through experiencing her entangled ethos. The more-than-human octopus is shown following the human as he documents her. But then the human bumbles by dropping a camera lens, frightening the octopus. With her trust in the human broken, the octopus abandons her den. To locate the octopus, the human realizes he must become more entangled in the kelp forest ecosystem than ever. “I had to learn what octopus tracks looked like . . . What’s the difference between octopus tracks and heart urchin tracks and fish tracks? . . . I needed to learn everything. And then you have to start thinking . . . like an octopus” (Ehrlich and Reed 2020). In his search, the human learns not only more about the octopus, but of the many more-than-human animals interrelating throughout the ecology. The more enmeshed the human becomes, the greater his ecological attunement. After an arduous week of underwater tracking, the human’s persistence pays off:

Finally . . . there she was. It’s like . . . a human friend, like, waving and saying, “Hi, I’m excited to see you”. And I could feel it, like from one minute to the next, “Okay . . . I trust you, human. *And now you can come into my octopus world.*” (emphasis added)

The more-than-human octopus invites the human into the wild through her entangled ethos and the human attunes to the web of relations that comprise the kelp forest ecology. As the human learns ecological attunement, his ethos entangles with the more-than-human world to provide insight into how this ecosystem flourishes.

By becoming enmeshed within the entangled ethos of the octopus, the human experiences an epiphany about the kelp forest ecosystem. His revelation closes the divide between himself and nature:

And it hit me how she was teaching me so much . . . People ask, “Why are you going to the same place every day?” But that’s when you see the subtle differences. *And that’s when you get to know the wild.* So when these thousands of threads going off from the octopus to all the other animals, predator and prey, and then this

incredible forest . . . just nurturing all of this. And now I know how the helmet shell is connected to the urchin and how the octopus is connected to the helmet shell. (emphasis added, Ehrlich and Reed 2020)

The octopus's entangled ethos reveals the ecosystem's earthly eudaimonia: the kelp forest "nurtures" the creatures within so that they may flourish amongst one another. Earthly eudaimonia is present not through how one organism flourishes somehow separate from the others, but how the web of creatures (e)coflourish by interrelating. Now that the human has learned ecological attunement, he is ready for the next lesson.

### 7.3. Sensitized Compassion

The human, through becoming ecologically attuned, is now ready to learn from the octopus sensitized compassion—a delicate concern for the plight of animals. After forming an intense bond with the octopus, the human witnesses as she faces death at the jaws of a predator. A more-than-human pyjama shark latches onto the octopus and death rolls, tearing off one of her eight arms. A tense moment transpires where the octopus is in danger of predation—but then the mollusk cleverly escapes into a deep crack and then limps back to her den. The human monitors the octopus throughout the week and is uncertain she will survive. Emotionally entangled with the octopus, the human contemplates "I felt very vulnerable. As if somehow what happened to her had happened to me in some strange way" (Ehrlich and Reed 2020). The octopus's eye is shown in a close-up image while the human voices his now-realized sensitized compassion:

And then this almost felt, psychologically, like I was . . . going through a type of dismembering. You start thinking about your own death and your own vulnerability, worried about your family, your child. I hadn't been a person that was overly sentimental towards animals before. *I realized I was changing. She was teaching me to become sensitized to the other.* Especially wild creatures. (emphasis added)

Through his unfolding relationship with the more-than-human octopus, the human attains the capacity for sensitized compassion. The human's ethos becomes entangled through compassionate relations with the more-than-human world. In doing so, the human recovers from his burnout to regain relational capacity for his family. However, he also extends that compassion to animals by becoming capable of sensitively caring for wild animals as he would a loved one. His ethos, once fraught, is repaired by entangling with the more-than-human world.

The human's sensitized compassion continues to develop throughout the film to inform his engagement with earthly eudaimonia. Near the documentary's end, a succession of scenes emphasize his sympathetic concern for animals while accompanied with a gentle piano melody: the human holds a baby octopus in the palm of his hand, and a variety of unborn sea creatures wiggle and wobble in their eggs. The human narrates:

She'd made me realize just how precious wild places are . . . You slowly start to care about all the animals, even the tiniest little animals. You realize that every one is very important. To sense how vulnerable these wild animals' lives are, and actually, then how vulnerable all our lives on this planet are. (Ehrlich and Reed 2020)

As the human's sensitized compassion for nonhuman animals grows, so too does his capacity to (e)coflourish with more-than-humans through peacefully, earthly coexistence. He can now participate in earthly eudaimonia: to (e)coflourish with a range of more-than-human beings. Thus, a rhetorical appeal emerges on a mode of life centered on the concern for nonhuman animals. Through this eudaimonic rhetoric, the film invites the audience to (e)coflourish by becoming sensitive to the predicament more-than-human animals face in a world dominated by human activity. In this vision for (e)coexistence, nonhuman animals are no longer pushed to the margins, but instead are central to worldly concerns. The human—and perhaps the audience—are now ready for a significant evolution.

#### 7.4. A More-than-Human Evolution

By becoming sensitively compassionate to more-than-humans, the human is primed for a transformative evolution that is the octopus's final lesson: the human adopts the more-than-human octopus's ethotic animality to also become more-than-human. The human reflects on this change as orchestral music swells in a scene depicting the octopus touching the human's hand:

My relationship with the sea forest and its creatures deepens . . . week after month after year after year. You're in touch with this wild place, and it's speaking to you. Its language is visible. I fell in love with [the octopus] but also with that amazing wildness that she represented and . . . and how that changed me. *What she taught me was to feel . . . that you're part of this place, not a visitor.* (emphasis added, Ehrlich and Reed 2020)

By representing the octopus as a more-than-human, the film creates a space to cherish and respect animals. Now, by evolving the human to a more-than-human status, the documentary animalizes the human so that he joins nonhuman animals in their lively goodness. He can participate in earthly eudaimonia not as separate to more-than-human animals, but as one himself. The audience, through the sense of care that arises from the film's representations, are also invited to become-more-than human. While the audience may not grasp the deep connection to nature perhaps necessary to become more-than-human, the aspiration is made tangible. This desire is eudaimonic in nature, meaning the audience is invited to live a mode of life where they too are animalized, while being sensitively compassionate to nonhuman animals amidst their human-caused challenges. The audience is offered this animalized earthly eudaimonia through an entangled ethos, or the ethics that emerges when one's actions are considered in the context of other living beings.

After becoming more-than-human, the human in turn evolves his child to a more-than-human ethotic status by teaching sensitized compassion and habituating him to the natural world. A scene transpires where the human crouches and points while his son pays close attention—and then a smile of wonder dawns on both their faces. The human emphatically narrates, "One of the most exciting things ever in my life, taking my son, walking along the shore and just showing him the . . . wonders of nature and the details and the intricacies" (Ehrlich and Reed 2020). The human teaches the child about the ecological interconnections to prepare the child to learn sensitized compassion. The film presents the child walking along the beach, drenched in sunlight:

He's like a little marine biologist now. He knows so much. And very powerful swimmer. And as he gets older, he seems to want to do it more and more. To see that develop, a strong sense of himself . . . an incredible confidence, but the most important thing, a gentleness.

The child gains "a gentleness"—a sensitized compassion—to care for more-than-human animals through the lessons taught to him by his father. Yet, the child realizes a deep connection with nature to become more-than-human not solely through his father's teachings. A scene shows the child contemplating the natural world through play as the human reflects, "And I think that's the thing that thousands of hours in nature can teach a child." The child evolves to also become more-than-human through spending an exceptional amount of time maturing in a wild place. Now the child can (e)coflourish with his fellow more-than-humans through realizing earthly eudaimonia. By stripping the encumbrance of adulthood from sensitized compassion and animality, the audience is further invited to participate in this alternative mode of existence. The result is a final appeal for earthly eudaimonia, persuasive through its innocent simplicity.

## 8. Conclusions

*My Octopus Teacher* represents a unique attempt by media to reimagine (e)coflourishing during a time of immense ecological death. I must note, however, that while I primarily

used a creative lens to analyze *My Octopus Teacher*, the film is not without its critiques—many of which are indeed valid. Critics, for example, have pointed out how the human may represent “the archetypal white lover [who] is enthralled as much by his own love as by his love object” (Lewis 2021, para. 3). Another critique could be how the human intensely surveils the octopus with little thought to her privacy as she experiences her most intimate moments, including parenthood and her eventual death (see Mills 2010). Yet, the purpose of the analysis was to move past a full critique, to instead seek understanding with less judgment. Not because critique is insufficient, but to explore alternative modes of coexisting with more-than-human creatures at a time so harrowing that Special Issues like this one are needed to address the incessant, planetary-scaled death of more-than-human beings.

In this study, I find four implications related to C/CAMS and the study of more-than-human animal representations by media. First, contemplating earthly eudaimonia through an entangled ethos creates a space for ecological reflection; this space invites audiences to approach the more-than-human world with sensitized compassion and animality. Through representing the human as transformed to a more-than-human, the documentary invites audiences to become delicately concerned with the natural world and to rediscover their own animality through considering the concatenations and commonalities humans share with animals. As Freeman and Jarvis (2013) urge, “Media narratives need to place humans in an interconnected web to avoid a dichotomous ‘us and them’ perspective” which “should foster further respect for fellow animals as persons/ individuals” (p. 265). In the sixth mass extinction, it is imperative that media productively create these spaces for reflection to shape the world in ways that mitigate the enormous death rates. Media, then, can aid in the transition to (e)coflourish with more-than-human animals in the Anthropocene.

Second, this paper reimagines interspecies relations from a rhetorical perspective under the C/CAMS methodology to itself advance earthly eudaimonia. I attempt to honor Cox’s tenant that environmental communication scholars have a duty “to enhance the ability of society to respond appropriately to environmental signals relevant to the well-being of both human civilization and natural biological systems” (emphasis in original, Cox 2007, p. 16). I do so in tandem with Pezzullo’s (2017) care approach to environmental commination that is “devoted to unearthing human and nonhuman interconnections, interdependence, biodiversity, and system limits” (p. 1). Guided by these two insights, I “put rhetoric to work for earthly coexistence” (emphasis in original, Barnett 2021, p. 368) to illuminate how it is possible to realize earthly eudaimonia by (e)coflourishing through an entangled ethos during the sixth mass extinction. When these eudaimonic approaches are highlighted, scholarship can emphasize and perhaps also shape the world to align with a vision for (e)coflourishing with more-than-human animals through an active, ongoing expression of sensitized compassion and shared animality. The work of C/CAMS then, is to offer these creative visions—supported by a critical perspective—to advance ethical interspecies relations to mitigate the sixth mass extinction.

Third, C/CAMS offers a methodology that is attentive to both the creative and critical demands of scholarship that explores more-than-human communication. While this study primarily leverages a creative lens to analyze an instance of mediated representation, the critical component is necessary to explicate the literature that tends towards speciesism and the marginalization of animal and ecological concerns (Pezullo 2016; Almiron et al. 2018). In other words, the literature must be critically explicated to ensure the theoretical frameworks deployed can serve analyses that explore the composition of new worlds. DeLuca (2019a) would agree with this perspective. He states that critique must “include the important supplement of creating” (p. 174), which he demonstrates by wielding a critical lens to create space for CCS. Overall, I find a critical perspective is necessary before scholars can begin exploring creativity. C/CAMS, then, is a methodology comprised of intersecting components that are salient throughout the process of producing analytical scholarship.

Fourth, media communicators can use C/CAMS as a framework to guide their work to support animals in the sixth mass extinction. Communicators should create new pos-

sibilities for (e)coflourishing while being critical to avoid speciesism. This work can be accomplished in several ways. First, communicators should “[Decenter] humanity to embrace a truly egalitarian view” of more-than-human nature (Almiron et al. 2018, p. 376). Nonhuman animal concerns should eclipse humans affairs. If strategic anthropomorphism (Schutten and Shaffer 2019) is used towards those ends, deliberate care must be taken to ensure interspecies relations are fostered while resisting speciesism. Second, media should denormalize nonhuman animal exploitation and oppression (see Nibert 2015) by cultivating respect and care for more-than-human animals through their mediated representations. Yet, this work can be accomplished creatively to offer audiences fresh perspectives that replace speciesistic ones. Third, media should explore “new possibilities for questioning, feeling, thinking, and becoming in a world composed of a pandemonium of things” (DeLuca 2019a, p. 190) to offer innovative imaginaries for peaceful, earthly coexistence. Media can provide alternative modes of existence to shape the world, even if only gradually.

Above all else, scholars and media communicators must heed Bekoff (2013), a compassionate conservationist, to understand that “Compassion is the glue that holds ecosystems and webs of nature together” (p. xix). As we intervene in the Anthropocene to relieve animals from the deathly pressures resulting in the sixth mass extinction, we must hold onto sensitized compassion to not only create and sustain earthly eudaimonia, but to do so without becoming unnecessarily impeded by speciesism.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> When describing nonhuman animals as “wild” or “wildlife”, I mean those in nature or who are free-living (non-domesticated). I do not mean “wild” in a derogatory sense.

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## Article

# 'All Fishing Is Wildlife Poaching:' Nonhuman Animal Imagery and Mutual Avowal in *Racing Extinction* and *Seaspiracy*

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**Abstract:** Images of nonhuman animals may be effective tools in producing climate concern and empathy for animals, particularly if animals are shown in natural habitats. Visual and narrative analysis of the documentary *Racing Extinction* identifies a practice of selectively recognizing the individuality of certain animals. Despite emphasizing the intrinsic worth of often-marginalized animals, *Racing Extinction* reproduces the marginalization of domesticated animals raised for consumption and less charismatic marine life. A close reading of the film's animal imagery also reveals a spatialized bias—visualizing violence against marine life overwhelmingly in China and Indonesia and by comparison associating the U.S. with indirect climate harm rather than the direct killing of animals. Intertwining a decolonial ethic with a critical animal studies perspective, this paper reveals how disjointed imagery of nonhuman animal suffering facilitates racial scapegoating, masks the exploitation of marine life by the U.S. and partitions uneven ethical responsibilities towards nonhuman animals. This is contrasted to the documentary *Seaspiracy*, which advances a universal, non-speciesist ethic of “mutual avowal”, contextualizing images of violence against marine life in a global frame.

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**Keywords:** *Racing Extinction*; *Seaspiracy*; manta rays; animal imagery; colonialism; fishing; shark fin trade

## 1. Introduction

*Racing Extinction* (Psihoyos 2015) is a 2015 Oscar-winning animal advocacy documentary, named “Best Green Film of the Decade” by the Green Film Network, which examines mass species die-off from climate change, overfishing and the illegal wildlife trade—particularly in manta gills and shark fins. *Seaspiracy* (Tabrizi 2021) is a 2021 documentary that also heavily focuses on nonhuman animal protection (hereafter, “animal” will be used to refer to nonhuman animals, not human animals or animals generally) and environmentalism, rocketing to the top ten list of the most watched on *Netflix* only a week after release (Korban 2021). Controversially, *Seaspiracy* parted from celebrated animal advocacy documentaries in the last decade that focused on particularly notorious marine industries: the Taiji dolphin hunt (*The Cove*), marine park captivity (*A Fall from Freedom, Blackfish*), shark-finning (*Sharkwater, Sharkwater Extinction, Fin*) or plastic dumping (*A Plastic Ocean*). *Seaspiracy's* criticism that places routine fish consumption alongside the Taiji dolphin hunt and plastic pollution has “bitterly divided the environmental community” between those who think that some form of fishing is ethical or sustainable, and those who do not (Steadman 2021). *Seaspiracy* and *Racing Extinction* are both somewhat distinct from the traditional wildlife/nature documentary, emphasizing both environmental protection and the moral worth of animals—a perspective still somewhat rare in environmental documentaries (Freeman 2012). Indeed, for those who long for films centered on animal justice alongside environmental harm without *Seaspiracy's* radical rejection of all animal consumption, some have recommended *Racing Extinction* in its place (Narula 2021).

*Racing Extinction* and *Seaspiracy* thus serve as useful comparisons to outline the intersections and tensions between an anti-speciesist approach opposing both use and consumption of animals as inherently unethical and an ecological approach that values animals primarily for their role in an ecosystem. Communication and media scholars have already noted that images of animals in visual climate communication are powerful motivators that can have vastly different results: an extension of anthropocentric principles applied to the environment or an environmental perspective unconcerned with animal suffering (Almiron 2019; Cole 2015; Freeman 2014). This paper contributes to these emerging conversations by turning a critical eye not only to which animals are featured more favorably in climate communication (as others have criticized the dominance of megafauna, see: Born 2019), but who is predominantly depicted as doing violence to animals. As graphic images of violence against animals may be uniquely powerful in shaping empathic response (Freeman and Tulloch 2013), I argue that it is particularly important for environmental communication scholarship to examine how animal imagery may highlight a selective concern for certain wildlife, mask other forms of environmental exploitation and reproduce colonial hierarchies of cruelty to animals.

This perspective is rooted in Critical Animal and Media Studies (CAMS), which advances an intersectional framework of “total liberation” (Nocella et al. 2015) that highlights the need for interspecies justice for both humans and nonhuman animals. CAMS argues that the human–animal binary informs and empowers colonialism, racism, sexism, ableism and more by discursively slotting certain populations closer to an “animal” nature that may freely face violence without regulation and others closer to a valorized “human” subject held in higher esteem. A CAMS perspective argues that environmental exploitation and animal suffering are inherently co-constitutive, noting that human/animal dualism empowers a larger human/nature dualism, producing a sense that humanity is “outside” and “above” the environment—facilitating environmental damage (Plumwood 1993). As the globe is careening towards disastrous climate change without sufficient response, there is an urgent need to foundationally rethink our relationship to nonhuman animals, the environment and ecological sustainability (IPCC 2021).

First outlining the relevant literature on animal imagery, this paper briefly summarizes *Racing Extinction* before examining its visual and narrative elements, identifying a spatialized hierarchy of responsibility for species extinction—primarily locating graphic images of animal killing in China or Indonesia and associating the West with indirect climate violence in the form of localized pollution or fossil fuel emissions. This distinction in emphasis locates violence against animals as inherently far off or distant (Born 2019; Whitley and Kalof 2014), replicating racial or national bias and mystifying the role the West plays in species extinction. I propose instead that visual climate communication should incorporate an “ethic of mutual avowal” (Kim 2015) that situates ecological harm within a universalist, non-speciesist framework that challenges the easy conflation of animal exploitation with particular locales and peoples. This is read through the example of *Seaspiracy*, which reveals a number of practical and theoretical insights for how to depict threats to animals in a more ethical manner.

## 2. Literature Review

Animal imagery may be a uniquely powerful tool to generate empathy for nonhuman animals and motivation for environmental action. As fear-inducing representations of climate change can encourage the impression that climate change is a distant temporal and spatial problem, there is a need to partner non-threatening imagery “with those that enable a person to establish a sense of connection with the causes and consequences of climate change in a positive manner” (O’Neill and Nicholson-Cole 2009, p. 376). Animal images may offer this sense of connection to personalize the abstract issue of climate change (Manzo 2010), connecting its effects to the fate of individuals in specific places (Born 2019, 2021; O’Neill 2020). In films, animal imagery functions as “a key component in the structure of human responses towards animals generally, particularly emotional responses” (Burt

2002, p. 11). Animal portraiture has been found to heighten feelings of empathy and kinship through selective anthropomorphism (Amiot and Bastian 2017; Kalof et al. 2011, 2016) while images of wildlife<sup>1</sup> in their natural habitat heighten a sense of sadness or concern (Whitley et al. 2021). For some respondents, images of human or animal suffering in wildfires were comparatively more motivating of climate concern than the destruction of property or smokescreens were (Duan et al. 2021), although other studies have found animal imagery without an empathic perspective failed to produce significant climate concern (Swim and Bloodhart 2015). Measurements of neural responses indicate that images of suffering animals (in this study: dogs) activated parts of the brain connected to empathic responses to human suffering (Franklin et al. 2013).

However, this empathic response may be limited in animal images that are disconnected from specific instances of human harm or in a remote location (Whitley and Kalof 2014). Environmental films risk portraying animals as “surrogate humans” in isolated and human-free environments (Huggan 2016, p. 16). Born (2019) noted that *National Geographic* portrayed polar bears as “anthropomorphized subjects of identification” and a “stand-in for humanity’s problems”, facilitating an abstract conception of a universal humanity reflected in the polar bear (p. 659). A focus on charismatic animals may reduce empathy for less charismatic species, obscure broader societal relationships that produce environmental catastrophe (Hansen and Machin 2008) and hide marginalized humans from the representations of climate change, such as Indigenous peoples in the Arctic (Tam et al. 2021). Although films may open up the ability for the viewer to empathize with nonhuman animals, empathic responses may also be limited by focusing on minor aspects of animal welfare, overlooking broader systems of violence (Aaltola 2014; Henry 2014).

Animals featured in climate visuals tend to be charismatic megafauna—penguins, polar bears, elephants, etc. (Lousley 2016), perhaps due to greater available information (Tisdell et al. 2004), similarity to humans (Gunnthorsdottir 2001), a sense of mammalian familiarity (Born 2019), facial signals and eye gazing reminiscent of human infants (Borgi and Cirulli 2016) or overall body mass (Gunnthorsdottir 2001). In particular, marine life such as hawksbill turtles and sharks tend not to be framed as charismatic animals (Tisdell and Wilson 2006, p. 154), although this may be changing due to the rise of ecotourism centered around particularly large elasmobranch species (Mazzoldi et al. 2019). For example, media coverage of species being considered for CITES (Convention on International Trade of Endangered Species) listing tends to describe terrestrial species in more anthropomorphic or emotive terms (e.g., “cute”, “intelligent”) than were marine species (e.g., “critical ecologically”) (Shiffman et al. 2021, p. 5). As pre-existing beliefs or values shape audience reactions to visual imagery (Domke et al. 2002), differing contexts or motivational cues might shape attitudes towards imagery of certain animals, although more research is needed (Thomas-Walters et al. 2020). For example, the shift away from ritualistic culls and extractive industries targeting dolphins and whales for oil and meat in some Western societies coincided with a greater value placed on dolphin and whale preservation (Mazzoldi et al. 2019).

This tie between extractive industries and changes in the ability of an animal to capture the public imagination may be explained by Berger’s (1980) account of animal disappearance. Industrialized areas, disproportionately centralized in the West, encounter wildlife and domesticated animals less frequently as hunting and urbanization forcibly remove wildlife from previous habitats and animals killed for consumption are hidden from sight (Broad 2016). Adams (2015a) refers to nonhuman animals raised for consumption as “absent referents”, an absence that disconnects the “thing” of a hamburger from the “someone” that was killed to create meat (pp. 59–61). The absent referent prevents the visibility of violence, shrouding animal killing behind “Ag-gag” laws and a discursive regime of objectification that divorces “meat” from the violence necessary to produce it (Adams 2015b). As contemporary Western culture most commonly encounters animals as images, the “discursive regime of wildlife photography” instead marks wildlife as a

spectacle that is “more real (more animal) than the animals encountered in daily life” (Brower 2011, pp. xvii–xix, 196). Mitman (2012) reaches a similar conclusion, arguing that nature films make animals into “spectacle, rather than beings we engage with in work and play” (p. 206), revealing a voyeuristic desire to be close yet removed from nature (Bousé 2011).

Eco-film analysis has argued that ecologically minded cinema has an important role in advancing environmental justice, as a “tremendous amount of moral thinking and development of ethical feeling” happens while watching films (Breteon 2015, p. 2). As von Mossner (2012) notes, films concerning environmental catastrophe transform “abstract scientific scenarios” into relatable ethical stories about particular beings (p. 98). However, there is a risk that eco-films might result in fatalism on the part of the viewer, if they understand environmental destruction to be “outside human agency or responsibility” (Kakoudaki 2002, p. 121). Campbell (2014) offers a clear differentiation between passive experience films such as *The Day After Tomorrow* (which Mossner takes up) and the “call to action” of environmental advocacy or justice films, such as *An Inconvenient Truth* (p. 64). *Racing Extinction* and *Seaspiracy* might be more accurately grouped in the latter camp: both films call upon the audience to make significant changes they can enact—a new diet, sustainable consumption patterns, a call for political and local activism, etc. rather than passively awaiting environmental devastation.

As a result, documentaries featuring wildlife not only shape our understanding of animals or the environment, they also “frame the conception of the human”, by forcing the viewer to consider life, death and ecological interconnectedness (Brower 2011, p. 197). As Chris (2006) argues, the wildlife film “is a prism through which we can examine investments in dominant ideologies of humanity and animality, nature and culture, sex, and race” (p. xiv). For example, the “empathic distress” from viewing animals suffer in wildlife documentaries (von Mossner 2018) might lead to empathic bias against ethnic groups seen as a common enemy (Hoffman 2001, p. 215). Likewise, the ability for an animal to capture the public imagination in media may be dependent on cultural and social particularities. Meta-analysis of the existing literature indicates that attitudes towards animal imagery may vary across cultural and demographic factors, particularly between Western countries and the rest of the world (Thomas-Walters et al. 2020). Sharks (particularly great whites) tend not to be considered charismatic animals but are often subsumed under a pseudoscientific “*Jaws*” narrative as aggressive killers (Cermak 2021; Le Busque and Litchfield 2021; Lerberg 2016). Despite the overwhelming dominance of this frame, sharks are increasingly becoming objects of concern, especially for Western subjects unaware of the connections between shark fishing and fishing for flounder, tuna or swordfish (Mazzoldi et al. 2019). Bloody images of sharks without their fins inspire a “visceral response” in Western countries that rarely encounter shark-based goods, heightening a focus on the fin-trade and displacing less visible forms of shark mortality, such as incidental catch (often referred to as bycatch) from other fishing industries and habitat destruction (Wilcox 2015).

Campaigns such as the WildAid shark-fin soup commercial have been criticized for generating concern for sharks by advancing an Asian Super Consumer stereotype (Margulies et al. 2019), which has been amplified by anti-Chinese backlash during the COVID-19 pandemic (Bergin et al. 2020). The Asian Super Consumer stereotype describes ecological campaigns that disproportionately focus on the wildlife trade in Asian countries (and China in particular), downplaying or ignoring the substantial role played by North America and Europe. Collard (2020) argues that the conflation of the wildlife trade with Chinese and Indonesian production displaces analysis of “colonial trade flows” from biodiverse countries towards wealthier nations—focusing on particular industries rather than the “top spots” of overall wildlife importations held by the U.S., followed by the European Union (pp. 12–13). Although it is true that there are many ways that regions can be destructive beyond wildlife imports (for example, local hunting, overfishing, or wildlife exports), the U.S.’ outsized role in wildlife imports (as the biggest consumer of wildlife internationally) often means that wildlife products from Taiwan, Thailand or China

are exported for US consumption (Olsen et al. 2021). It is also estimated that the U.S. is the largest importer of *illegal* wildlife products, although exact details of that industry are difficult to discern (Smart et al. 2021). In any case, my intention is not to argue that there are not intensively destructive fishing practices to be found outside of North America or Europe—but that the role of the West in marine destruction has been relatively sidelined in comparison to “notorious industries” in Asia. Instead, I believe that it is necessary to widen the scope of what marine practices are understood as destructive or “sustainable” as the poaching of wildlife from the ocean in the form of commercial fishing is always an act of tremendous violence and inherently ecologically unsustainable, even assuming an ideal state of best practices and regulations (McClanahan et al. 2021).

The recent focus on animal suffering in wet markets has made salient the interlocking and reinforcing nature of white supremacy and speciesism; selectively concerned with certain animals, China was depicted by some Western media outlets as both “the sole culprit” of the COVID-19 pandemic and uniquely brutal in the treatment of animals (Alonso-Recarte 2022, pp. 108–9; Chang and Corman 2021). Kim (2015) has documented a similar response to live animal markets in San Francisco, highlighting the disparate response to Chinese markets compared to Fisherman’s Wharf, an upscale animal market that avoided controversy. Inspiring “a media firestorm in which the tropes of Chinese cruelty, transgressiveness, backwardness, and recklessness were given full play” (Kim 2015, p. 104), the interlocking nature of speciesism and racism reveals itself in depictions of the Chinese as “cruel and transgressive *like* animals and *with* animals” (p. 102). As Western violence against animals is hidden by transforming animals killed for food into absent referents and masking the effects of climate change on free-roaming animals (Almiron and Faria 2019; Whitley and Kalof 2014), a disproportionate focus on outside transgressors may have the effect of locating animal exploitation as primarily belonging elsewhere. In this vein, Muller (2021) has argued that colonial speciesism disparages non-Western populations as inhumanly cruel or unclean for actions that are routine but hidden in the West. As a result of this spectacle, non-Western populations may be placed generally lower on the “sliding scale” of humanity for their transgressive relations with certain animals (Muller 2020, p. xvii; Deckha 2008; Ko and Ko 2017; Ko 2019).

### 3. *Racing Extinction* and *Seaspiracy*—Context and Synopsis

*Racing Extinction* is a 2015 documentary that weaves together themes of animal protection and climate change, connecting the inherent cruelty in wildlife hunting to the ecological harms of biodiversity loss. Director Louie Psihoyos’ previous film, *The Cove*, has been criticized for demonizing Japanese fisherman in contrast to an ecologically mindful West (Freeman 2012; Haynes 2013, p. 28). Freeman (2012) argues that *The Cove*’s limited focus on cetaceans ignores the exploitation of fish generally, discussing fish only as food or for their role in ecological stability (Freeman and Tulloch 2013). Although *Racing Extinction* has not received as much scholarly attention as *The Cove*, it has similarly been criticized for generating a Manichean dualism between unfeeling Chinese traders and Western environmentalists (von Mossner 2020), leading Truscello (2018) to conclude that the film produces a “orientalist visual grammar” (p. 264).

*Racing Extinction* follows Psihoyos and ocean conservationists Paul Hilton and Shawn Heinrichs around the world, drawing connections between local pollution, the wildlife trade and species extinction. The film begins at The Hump, an LA-based restaurant where the film crew successfully orders whale meat, resulting in protests against Japanese whale fishing. The crew then travels to the Cornell Bioacoustic Laboratory where they encounter audio recordings of blue whales and extinct species, such as the mating call of the last male Kaua’i ‘ō’ō. Heinrichs and Hilton lead the viewer through several Chinese wildlife markets where shark fins and manta gills are traded, before infiltrating a shark slaughterhouse in Pu Qi. Briefly touring an oyster hatchery and cows grazing in the U.S., *Racing Extinction* proceeds to Lamakera, Indonesia, filming Lamakerans killing mantas. After heading to the U.S. to observe various environmental efforts—a prairie reserve,

a greened Empire State Building, a low emission racing car and Elon Musk's plea for citizens to use electric vehicles—the grand conclusion of the film takes place in New York City, where Psihoyos projects images of endangered species onto major buildings from a retrofitted Tesla. Interspersed throughout the film are interviews with scientists describing the threats facing ocean wildlife and the need to dramatically reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

*Seaspiracy* is a 2021 animal advocacy documentary by Ali Tabrizi centered on the harms of fishing. Beginning with the effects of plastic on marine life, the film follows Tabrizi through major fishing areas: Japan, Hong Kong, West Africa, Norway and more. Interviewing a mix of marine biologists, nutritionists and ocean activists, *Seaspiracy* challenges the impetus behind sustainable fishing, favoring “a hands-off” approach that eliminates fishing wherever possible. Critical of the Western focus on notorious fishing practices in Asia (e.g., shark-fin soup, the Taiji dolphin hunt), *Seaspiracy* aims to show that there is *no* ethical or sustainable fishing, but that the attention on Asian industries displaces focus away from Western marine exploitation masked by rubber-stamped regulations and greenwashing (such as “dolphin-free tuna” certifications, which are heavily criticized in the film). For example, Tabrizi is shocked to realize that bycatch (the killing of non-target marine species by fisheries) near the coast of France kills ten times as many dolphins a year as the infamous Taiji dolphin hunt, which is the subject of several eco-films, including Psihoyos' *The Cove*. As a result, *Seaspiracy* outlines a universalist ethic towards marine exploitation, declaring that all fishing, even “sustainable” practices, must be rejected on ethical and environmental grounds.

#### 4. Methodology

As there is no universal method for film analysis (Mikos 2014, p. 420), the author followed Mikos' (2014) recommendation of developing a general cognitive purpose (a guiding set of questions) before observing the object of interest, reflecting on the levels of analysis potentially relevant for investigation. As analysis may be guided by any single or several different levels depending on the cognitive purpose (Mikos 2014, p. 413), analysis centered on the interplay of narration, characters and aesthetic choices that direct the viewer towards certain impressions of species extinction. Guided by an interest in intersectional approaches to nonhuman animal imagery in climate communication, the author transcribed the film's core plot structure, recording every instance of animal imagery and noting the duration and species of animal depicted (as far as possible). Salt (1974) recommends that a quantitative approach to film be carried out through comparison of one primary film to another within the same genre. Although this paper focuses more on the meaning generated within two specific films (rather than of the style of the director, as Salt does), I do take note of both the total number of shots or sequences and the length of each shot. The intent of such a “statistical method” of film analysis is to ground analysis in a repeatable, close reading of a film-maker's choices rather than a purely interpretative approach (Salt 1974, 2009, 2001). However, this approach goes beyond mere analysis of shots and shot length—making use of such quantitative metrics as the basis to chart the influence of a particular film-maker's beliefs or aesthetic desires (Salt 2001, p. 99).

Each sequence that shows one or more nonhuman animals was recorded as a distinct data point (although overall time onscreen was also recorded). Sequences were distinguished by “cuts” that resulted in a temporal shift, change of location, transition in subject of analysis, or otherwise interrupted running footage. Although this runs the risk of potentially repeating nonhuman animals across scenes, it is virtually impossible to identify if a given shark or dolphin reappears in wide shots that feature hundreds of animals. In any case, the montage itself is a necessary unit of analysis as decisions concerning perspective, backdrop or transition to new angles generates meaning through the editing process (Mikos 2017). As eco-films construct a particular reading of a topic through conscious decisions of what to include or leave out, it is particularly important to examine what is *not* shown (Loy 2016). Indeed, the invisibility of nonhuman animals in major films may be a dominant

way of propagating anthropocentric ideology (Loy 2016; Nibert 2002, p. 208; Taylor 2015). The analysis thus also critically interrogates what forms of animal imagery were not shown and what such silences reveal about the film.

Sequences that featured nonhuman animals were coded as *unharméd wildlife* (non-human animals not under immediate danger—either in natural habitat or forced into sanctuaries or other forms of captivity), *extinct* (preserved remains of extinct species), *threatened* (nonhuman animals depicted as injured, dying or dead and their body parts—flesh, gills, fins, etc.) or *other* (domesticated animals on farms, cartoons, etc.). Information and location of the actor that posed a threat (for threatened subjects) were also recorded. Although violence is levied against animals in a variety of direct (e.g., fishing, dismembering, trapping) and indirect ways (e.g., plastic pollution, greenhouse gas emissions), the *threatened* code emphasized the visual presence of direct imminent harm to animals rather than a general state of being threatened—which risked categorizing *every* animal featured as under threat of harm from captivity, climate change or habitat destruction. For example, although removing fish from their natural habitat and containing them within aquariums is an act of violence, sequences with aquariums were not coded as “threatened”. However, visual indications of animal disappearance were coded as threatened—as in projections of animals with a population counter plummeting to zero or images of animals dissolving into pixels with associated priming words such as “extinction”.

A similar difficulty arose in classifying nonhuman animals as *Racing Extinction* is filled with images of animal corpses and dried remnants. Informed by a Critical Animal and Media Studies (CAMS) perspective that seeks to make the hidden processes of violence against animals recognizable (Almiron et al. 2016), I coded images of animal body parts (e.g., gills, fins, flesh of fish, cows or whales sold for consumption) as *threatened* even though such threats may have occurred prior to filming. A CAMS perspective rejects the anthropocentric privileging of human interests over other animals, acknowledging the ethical demand to bear witness to the violence inflicted against other animals (Freeman 2009, p. 104). A central aspect of CAMS is an intersectional framework (Crenshaw 1989) that examines the discursive interconnections between animal and human oppression—unpacking how anthropocentric discourse acts in tandem with colonialism, racism, gender normativity, sexism, ableism and more—to constitute a collective matrix of oppression built around a distance from an idealized male, White European human subject (Almiron 2019). This is particularly important for animal advocacy that makes use of environmental frames, as such strategies may advance a genuinely universal approach to animal oppression (Almiron 2019; Freeman 2014) or further solidify such violent systems by enhancing racist tropes (Kim 2015) or advancing eco-friendly oppression of animals (Cole 2015). The former has been termed the “total liberation” or “abolitionist approach” to animal liberation (Nocella et al. 2015; Francione and Charlton 2017). Other scholars have argued that scholarship examining media aimed at a largely Western audience ought to challenge anthropocentric framings within a “decolonial telos” that centralizes the role Western actors play in reproducing colonial violence, animal oppression and masking their own complicity (Muller 2021). This is not to abdicate critique of non-Western animal oppression or advance a moral relativism that denies global violence against animals. As Kim (2015) argues, the aim is not to say that “there is no *there there*” when facing animal suffering, but to critique how non-universal frames selectively choose certain animals as a “vehicle for ethnocentrism and even imperialism”, re-creating speciesist hierarchies of value along national and racial lines (pp. 82, 83, emphasis mine).

## 5. Results

The results first describe the number and location of animal images in *Racing Extinction* (Figure 1) and in *Seaspiracy* (Figure 2). Total time of footage and more specific analysis is discussed in Sections 5.1 and 5.2, but the absolute number of sequences was used to generate the graphed comparison.

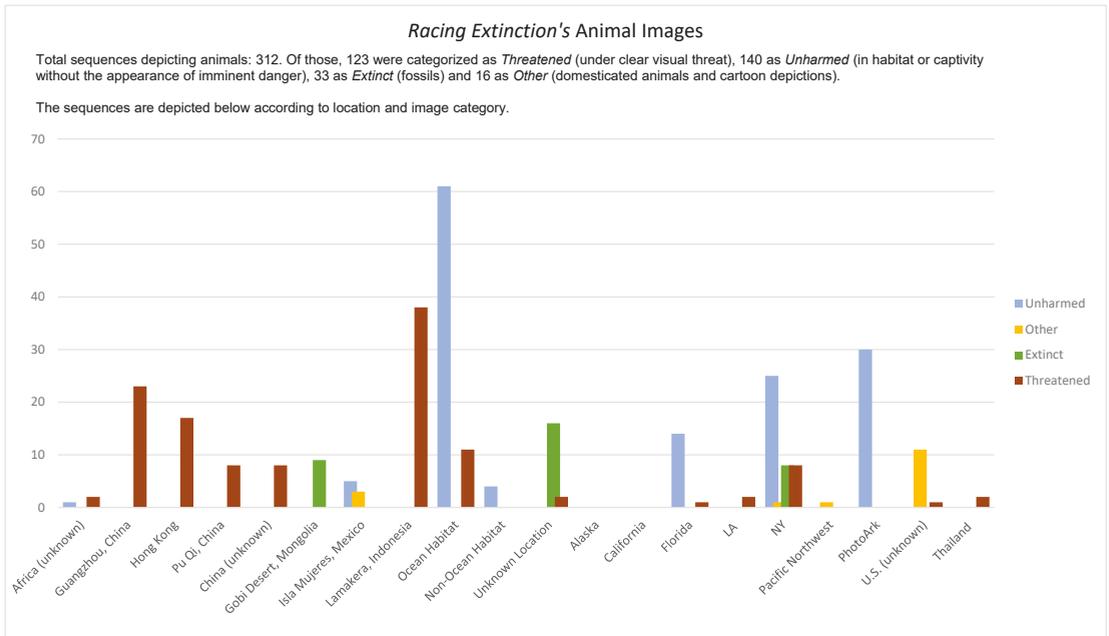


Figure 1. Racing Extinction's Animal Imagery.

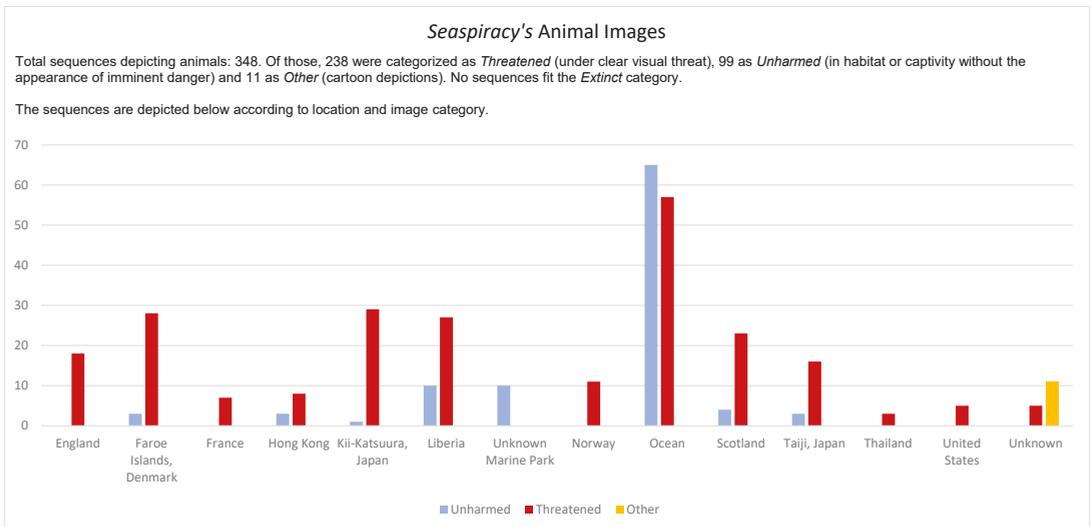


Figure 2. Seaspiracy's Animal Imagery.

### 5.1. Racing Extinction's Visuals

#### 5.1.1. Unharmed Wildlife

The U.S. was predominantly associated with unharmed wildlife, totaling 69 sequences (176 s and 49.28% of total sequences), surpassing the number of sequences (65, 431 s) associated with Natural Habitats (46.4% of total), the next highest location. The only other

unharméd wildlife imagery was five sequences (20 s) of whale sharks in Isla Mujeres (3.57% of total) and a single sequence (2 s) from news footage of an unknown country in Africa (0.71% of total).

Representations of wildlife in their natural habitats are paired with upbeat, happy music and a narration that affirms the importance of leaving these animals be. Imagery of unharméd wildlife in natural habitats was one of the most significant categories, encompassing 65 sequences and 431 s of footage—exceeded only by unharméd animals in the U.S. However, 69 sequences of unharméd wildlife in the U.S. only covered 176 s of footage, mostly within reserves or captivity—suggesting that footage of animals in their natural habitat featured long, extended shots of a broader environment.

#### 5.1.2. Extinct Animals

Extinct animals were most commonly associated with an unknown location (16 sequences, 27 s, 48.48% of all extinct sequences), followed by Mongolia's Gobi Desert (9 sequences, 24 s, 27.2%) and then the U.S. (8 sequences, 59 s, 24.2%).

#### 5.1.3. Threatened Animals

Threatened animals were mostly commonly shown within China with 56 distinct sequences (216 s), encompassing 45.5% of all threatened sequences. Lamakera was the second most frequent, with 38 sequences (169 s) or 30.9% of the total. Lamakera was followed by the U.S., with 12 sequences (33 s) or 9.75% of the total. The fourth most frequent location for threatened sequences was Natural Habitats, with 11 sequences (22 s) or 8.9% of the total. Finally, an unknown country in Africa featured on a news broadcast, the 2013 CITES meeting in Thailand and an Unknown Location each had two sequences (3 s) of threatened animals, or 1.6%, respectively. Notably, Lamakera and China were unique in *only* being associated with threatened animals. The 2013 CITES meeting in Thailand was also only associated with threatened animals, but this consisted of manta gills from Lamakera and footage of manta hunting by fishermen from Lamakera.

#### 5.1.4. Threatening Actors

The actors that threatened animals differed greatly by location. In China, the threatening actors only consisted of Chinese fishermen, workers and consumers who killed sharks or traded their body parts. In Lamakera, the only threatening actor shown was Lamakera villagers, who were shown hunting and carving up mantas. In the CITES meeting in Thailand, the threatening actor was also Lamakera villagers, as gills and footage from the manta hunt were shown during deliberations. In the news broadcast discussing the future of the Ivory Trade in Africa, an unknown person with a gun was the threatening actor to elephants. The most common threatening actor for the Natural Habitats location was Japanese fishing boats (7/11 sequences), followed by unknown actors (4/11 sequences).

Animals under threat in the U.S. were threatened by markedly distinct actors. For one, only a single sequence showed an immediate threat to animals clearly connected to human activity—a 6 s recording of fish swimming in polluted waters near a sewer pipe in Fort Lauderdale, Florida. Two sequences (5 s total) were of whale flesh purchased at The Hump, which the film connects with the Japanese whale-fishing industry. Eight sequences (totaling 20 s) consisted of projections of endangered animals onto buildings in New York City. These projections featured animal images (often of a single animal in the style of a portrait), with a general indication that these species were under threat. For example, several projections paired an endangered species (a Gray Wolf or Ocelot) with a population counter that rapidly fell to zero, before fading the animal image to black. For other species, such as the Florida Panther or the Francois' Langurs, as the population counter hit zero, the animal images disintegrated into pixels. The most explicit depiction of the threat facing endangered wildlife was a projection that transitioned images of lions, eagles and apes into

skulls, while the caption reads “In the next 100 years, we could lose 50% of all species on earth”.

Animals under threat in countries other than the U.S. were often showed being killed. Footage from Pu Qi featured extended footage of dozens of whale sharks being carved into pieces. Sequences affiliated with Natural Habitats primarily showed images of Japanese commercial whale fishing, spearing whales before hauling corpses onto ships or piling bloody sharks to be processed. Footage from Lamakera overwhelmingly showed villagers stabbing manta rays with machetes, dragging corpses to shore and removing organs.

#### 5.1.5. Other

Animals in the *Other* category included domesticated animals such as cows, oysters and images of animals (cartoons, etc.). *Other* animals were most commonly shown in the U.S., with 13 sequences (55 s), or 81.25% of the total. U.S. other animals included 11 sequences (50 s) of cows grazing under aerial shots and lighthearted music, 1 sequence (4 s) of oysters in a hatchery and 1 sequence (1 s) of a projection of a cow outside a McDonalds. Shark cartoons and statues in Isla Mujeres were three sequences (12 s) or 18.75% of the total.

### 5.2. *Seaspiracy's* Visuals

#### 5.2.1. Unharmful Wildlife

Unharmful wildlife was predominantly associated with unspecific locations in the Ocean, encompassing 65 sequences (279 s and 65.6% of unharmful wildlife sequences), surpassing that of an unspecified Marine Park (10 sequences, 47 s and 10.1% of total sequences), Liberia (10 sequences, 40 s and 10.1% of the total), Scotland (4 sequences, 11 s and 4% of the total), Faroe Islands (3 sequences, 25 s, 3%), Taiji, Japan (3 sequences, 14 s, 3%), Hong Kong (3 sequences, 13 s, 3%) and Kii-Katsuura, Japan (1 sequence, 3 s). In contrast to *Racing Extinction*, which associated unharmful wildlife primarily with the United States, unharmful wildlife could be found in most major regions in *Seaspiracy*.

#### 5.2.2. Threatened Animals

Threatened animals were shown in a roughly equal manner across many major locations. The most predominant location was the Ocean, with 57 sequences (221 s, 11.3% of total *Threatened* sequences), followed by Kii-Katsuura, Japan with 29 sequences (96 s, 12.2%), the Faroe Islands (Denmark) with 28 sequences (133 s, 11.8%), Liberia (27 sequences, 118 s, 11.3%), Scotland (23 sequences, 56 s, 9.6%), England (18 sequences, 53 s, 7.6%), Taiji, Japan (16 sequences, 34 s, 6.7%), Norway (11 sequences, 48 s, 4.6%), Hong Kong (8 sequences, 20 s, 3.4%), France (7 sequences, 27 s, 2.9%), The United States (5 sequences, 16 s, 2.1%), Unknown locations (5 sequences, 16 s, 2.1%) and finally Thailand (3 sequences, 13 s, 1.3%).

#### 5.2.3. Threatening Actors

The actors that threatened animals generally aligned with the location. In Taiji or Kii-Katsuura Japan, the threatening actor was usually Japanese workers and fishermen who killed dolphins, finned sharks or transported tuna. In the Faroe Islands, the Faroese were the only threatening actor to whales, which is mirrored in England, Hong Kong, France, The United States and Thailand, etc. The two exceptions to this were Liberia and the Ocean. In Liberia, the threatening actors were predominantly European and Chinese fishing vessels that had come to illegally fish in more abundant waters. In the Ocean, a variety of actors were shown threatening animals. For example, *Seaspiracy* highlighted the Japanese whaling industry, French bycatch of dolphins, turtles trapped in U.S. fishing gear, seals caught in English plastic waste and the general practice of bycatch by commercial fishing vessels internationally.

Unlike in *Racing Extinction*, animals in every location were shown being brutally killed by a variety of actors. Sequences from the Faroe Islands featured a prolonged and bloody hunt of pilot whales. In France, dead dolphins caught in nets accompanied revelations about abhorrent bycatch practices. In Scotland and England, beached whales, dead seal pups and sick salmon were connected to fishing gear and other waste. In Hong Kong and Japan, shark and tuna were shown first as dying individuals and then as products for sale. Indeed, one of the notable aspects of *Seaspiracy*'s animal imagery is its equal attention to the global harms of commercial fishing— as the number of threatening sequences in Scotland, Taiji, Kii-Katsuura, England, the Faroe Islands, Hong Kong and Norway are roughly similar.

## 6. Discussion

The use of nonhuman animal imagery in climate communication may be a valuable tool to facilitate greater concern and awareness for environmental harms and animal exploitation. Departing from a purely ecological focus, *Racing Extinction* portrays several commonly denigrated wildlife species as individuals worthy of concern and protection. In this way, the film is a significant rupture of hegemonic portrayals of species such as sharks within a “Jaws narrative” (Cermak 2021) and aligns with recommendations by Freeman and Merskin (2015) to represent animals in their natural habits and as individuals with their own interests and desires.

The film's narrative also supports a view that mantas, sharks and whales have value intrinsically, not just instrumentally. Narrating footage of a tawny nurse shark dying after her fins were amputated, Heinrichs calls the scene “horrific” as this “beautiful” shark was “trying to swim, but it couldn't swim. And it was heartbreaking”. Recalling the killing of a manta in Lamakera, Heinrich tears up, saying “I watched its soul just disappear in front of me”. In Hong Kong, a member of the film crew, Dr. Heather Rally, is overcome with emotion looking at the racks of shark fins, saying “Jesus” and looking away. As the camera pans over thousands of shark fins drying in racks, Psihoyos declares “I feel like this world is absolutely insane”. Before traveling to Lamakera, Heinrich is shown removing a fishing hook from a manta and looking at the manta in the eyes, before remarking in the voiceover, “you're gonna be okay” as he realized that “she knew I was trying to help her”. Discussing species extinction, Psihoyos is so overcome with emotion over the Baiji Dolphin that he has to temporarily stop speaking. As footage rolls of Lamakera villagers carving gills out of the bodies of dead mantas, Hilton remarks “It's just losing a bit of magic, you know? The world, without that species, to me, it's empty, you know?” Going beyond questions of the ecological sustainability of manta ray fishing, Heinrichs declares a mission of making it “socially unacceptable to consume these animals”.

However, *Racing Extinction* does not extend this consideration to other marine life. When the film exposes The Hump for serving whale, the crew discuss their other dishes; having ordered whale and horse and already eaten the flesh of cows (high-grade Kobe beef), codfish and shrimp. Of these various animals, only one (whale) serves as a spectacle for shock, inspiring protests and the film's condemnation of Japanese whale fishing. Indeed, only the whale flesh is visible to the viewer—the rest are discussed but not shown. This message is repeated in the film's positive regard of anti-whale environmental protestors outside The Hump, particularly the projector work of Adi Gil. The camera lingers over signs with messages such as “Japan stop slaughtering whales”, “whales don't belong on plates”, “stop the murder, stop the death”, “No Whale Sushi”, an image of a whale with the caption “Not 4 Sushi” and a sign reading “No Whale!” accompanied by an image of a person holding chopsticks. Of course, the irony of such a protest is that the business model of The Hump necessitated the murder of fish and other animals, far before whale flesh found its way to the film crew's table. As a result of this selective focus, *Racing Extinction* reproduces the disappearance of less charismatic animals—rendering them “absent referents” to the film's outcry against whaling. The distinction between acceptable consumption of shrimp, cows or other marine life (with their own environmental consequences, some discussed

in the film) and those that cross this threshold (whales, mantas, sharks) seems to reflect a Western intuition over which animals are consumable more than the avoidance of disparate environmental effects or genuine care for the well-being of nonhuman animals.

Similarly, when *Racing Extinction* tours several oyster hatcheries, the film does not explore the fate of oysters but limits this sequence to interviews with hatchery production managers, who describe how ocean acidification threatens food chains by killing oyster larvae. Oysters are only shown for a single sequence as a generalized mass, rather than as individuals. There is some controversy over the extent of a moral responsibility to oysters—popular vegans such as Peter Singer have deemed it acceptable (Cox 2010), claiming that oysters lack a complex central nervous system and thus process pain differently than other animals or not at all, but others have strongly criticized this perspective, arguing that oysters may feel pain (Feliz 2017), that moral responsibility to animals is not limited to pain (Bekoff 2010), and that there is a need to be precautionary in the face of uncertainty (Francione 2020, p. 147). In any case, *Racing Extinction* does not explore the possibility of oysters as beings rather than things for food, either narratively or visually.

Along with oysters, cows are only discussed in light of ecological harms. In sharp contrast to the marine life killed elsewhere, *Racing Extinction* does not show the killing of a cow, only a quick shot of flesh cooking on a grill—the violence inherent to the process of converting living cows into flesh for consumption occurs out of sight (Adams 2015a, 2015b). This contrasts the actions in Pu Qi, where the film crew releases photographs of dead sharks in what they label a “shark slaughterhouse”. The association stuck, and dozens of headlines by major news outlets featuring the term “shark slaughterhouse” flash by the viewer. Despite the willingness to use the term slaughterhouse, at no point is “slaughterhouse” associated with the meat or dairy industry. In this way, *Racing Extinction’s* heightened visibility of sharks killed in the Pu Qi slaughterhouse is juxtaposed to the invisibility of the slaughter of domesticated animals in the U.S.

Narratively, Psihoyos frames the killing of cows as a problem of inefficiency, not ethics—arguing “One cow is not a problem, but now we have 1.5 billion of them. And it’s an incredibly inefficient way of producing food”. Lester Brown, the founder of the Earth Policy Institute, also stresses ecological harms as “the more dependent we are on meat, milk, and eggs, the greater the CO<sub>2</sub> and methane emissions”. In the conclusion, a projection states “Eat more plants!” while the film quantifies the impact of meat and dairy reduction with the statement “if every American skipped meat and cheese just one day a week for a year, it would be like taking 7,600,000 cars off the road”. The conclusion features a projection of a cow wearing a methane-gathering bag next to a McDonalds, captioned “Got Methane?” The narration by Dr. J.E.N. Veron of the Australian Institute of Marine Science features a lighthearted plea for a new diet on ecological grounds: “It sounds a bit silly. Change your diet and save the planet, but if humans could become vegetarians now, you would make a massive difference”. Juxtaposed to Heinrichs’ campaign to absolutely ban manta consumption, *Racing Extinction* favors requests to simply moderate consumption of other animals. The difference in tone (one as suggestion, the other as punitive) reveals a differential relationship to animal individuality. As it is “easier to sell Americans on dolphin and whale protection because Americans don’t eat them”, the concern for manta rays, sharks or whales may be premised on the distinction between the intrinsic value of unfamiliar wildlife in distant places and more routine violence overlooked domestically (Freeman 2012, p. 112).

However, *Racing Extinction’s* selective recognition of animal individuality goes beyond species hierarchy. Contra Whitley and Kalof’s (2014) critique of animal imagery, *Racing Extinction* does not divorce humans from images of animal suffering. Showing nonhuman animals being killed and having fins and gills forcibly removed, *Racing Extinction* does not shy away from depicting graphic footage to garner sympathy for animals. Such moral shock footage may be a necessary disruption of hidden violence against animals (Fernández 2019, 2021; Taylor 2015), what Freeman and Tulloch (2013) have termed “a reverse panopticon” where an animal may look back at the human viewer (Derrida 2008). However, the film

problematically limits the causes of species extinction to a select group of people. Threatened animals were overwhelmingly shown in China and Lamakera, together encompassing more than 75% of all sequences of violence. For the vast majority of threatened animals, the threatening actors were Chinese fishermen, traders, consumers and Lamakeran villagers. In other locations threatening actors were either Japanese whaling (natural habitats) unknown (Africa, natural habitats, unknown location), Lamakera fishermen (Thailand) or the unknown Chef at the Hump (U.S.). These threatening actors were featured in graphic footage, such as mantas being killed in front of the camera (Lamakera), bloody shark bodies being piled on boats (Japan) and the carving up of sharks and mantas for fins and gills (China, Lamakera). Although the U.S. was associated with some threats, the threatening actors were diverse and not graphic: a sewer pipe, an unknown actor grilling cow flesh and projections of endangered animals.

In contrast to China and Lamakera, the U.S. was primarily connected to indirect forms of climate violence—visuals of past extinction events, fossil fuel emissions and barren wastelands. Projections in NYC show endangered species disintegrating into pixels, melting away or fading to black. However, at no point is the specific threat to these animals clear nor are they shown in a state of harm, which facilitates the impression that the effects of climate change are far off (Born 2019; Whitley and Kalof 2014). Images of industrial smokestacks adorned with the U.S. flag were overlaid with narration by Dr. Veron that focused on carbon dioxide spikes. This transitioned into footage of volcanoes erupting, but no animals or humans were shown. When discussing the environmental impacts of the Gulf Oil spill, footage of burning oil was shown, but no animals were depicted. Although the narration by Veron discussed mass marine death as the result of ocean acidification, the sequence showed only an empty ocean, with no marine life present. Visual representations of the Sixth Mass Extinction event—narratively associated with both wildlife fishing and GHGs—were abstract; raging fires and globes struck by asteroids. The absence of any animal images from these renditions of climate change suggests both that the harm to nonhuman animals is selectively erased in *Racing Extinction's* framing of species loss (Almiron and Faria 2019) and that images of animal suffering may generate a response distinct from that of general environmental catastrophe or narrative and sonic priming (Aaltola 2014).

Somewhat similar, a minor theme in *Racing Extinction* is the metaphorization of past extinction events to the present. In the introduction, the excited squeaks and clicks of dolphins overlay images of dinosaur skeletons, while the concluding scene shows endangered species melt into skulls. Footage of fossils being uncovered in the Gobi Desert is paired with sad or thrilling music, highlighting the threat posed to current endangered species. As Smail (2016) suggests, animals in documentary films resemble “that of animals already extinct” (p. 74), capturing a mythologized form of an endangered species disconnected from her embodied reality. As the cause of past extinction events is disconnected narratively from on-going species extinction, this metaphor also does not outline a clear sense of responsibility or actionable solution.

In total, there was *no* sequence in the film that showed an agent (a person, fishing vessel or environmental catastrophe such as oil spills) from the U.S. (or any other Western country) directly killing an animal. Although the film’s narration describes the threat climate change poses to life on the planet, there were no sequences that showed animals suffering direct harm clearly brought about by climate change. As images of suffering prime intense empathic responses, including potential ethnic bias (Hoffman 2001), this omission risks positing that endangered species, and marine biodiversity generally, are primarily under attack by Asian subjects—expanding the scope of the “Asian Super Consumer stereotype” from the wildlife trade to global ecosystem stability. Visually and narratively divorcing the West from its role in wildlife eradication, *Racing Extinction* reproduces a selective ignorance to the causes of species extinction by constraining the causal mechanisms to a limited set of actions and actors. In so doing, it reproduces a hierarchy of species and a racial hierarchy of responsibility that primarily locates violence against animals outside of the Western world.

This risks the scapegoating of non-White rulebreakers (Muller 2020), whitewashing the complicity of the U.S. in speciesist violence against marine life by juxtaposition.

Kim (2015) describes the problems of animal cruelty, racism, and ecological harm as single optic issues, leading to “mutual disavowal”, where each group centralizes its own focus and invalidates the justice claims of others (p. 181). Instead, she gestures towards an ethics of “mutual avowal”, which takes seriously the intersecting dimensions of domination, requiring a universal commitment to attend to the uncomfortable reality of animal oppression. An ethic of mutual avowal does not neglect criticism of how marginalized subjects can reproduce oppression against animals but seeks to critically situate concern for animals within a truly universal, non-ethnocentric lens. I offer *Seaspiracy* as an example of this ethic of mutual avowal, highlighting practical lessons on representing harm against nonhuman animals.

Although *Seaspiracy* has received criticism by fisheries scientists for potential distortion of evidence (McVeigh 2021) and advancing an anti-fishing perspective deemed Western (Belhabib 2021), *Seaspiracy*'s narrative and visual imagery are generally consistent with a CAMS perspective that challenges normalized violence against marine life. First, *Seaspiracy* situates the violence of the fishing industry as a global war against marine life, challenging the killing of charismatic marine animals and less charismatic fish consumed on a massive scale. *Seaspiracy*'s central message is that sustainable fishing is a myth—greenwashing environmental harm and inherently producing unacceptable violence to marine life. Interviews of activists, such as Sea Shepherd Conservation Society's Paul Watson, defend a “leave it alone” approach to the ocean, outlining a total rejection of fish consumption where possible. Referring to commercial fishing as “wildlife poaching on a mass scale”, the film collapses an easy distinction between controversial wildlife products featured in *Racing Extinction* and fishing generally. *Seaspiracy*'s ending concludes that even potentially sustainable fishing is a profound violation of the interests of individual fish. Importantly, the film does not displace issues of food access, critiquing the European Union's fishing practices that have left Liberian fishermen hungry and destitute, advancing a perspective similar to Freeman's (2014) that “hunting of wildlife may be necessary in limited survival circumstances” (p. 258).

Second, *Seaspiracy* situates the violence against marine life in relative terms, quantifying the causal relationships behind animal exploitation and species extinction, ascribing responsibility on a global scale. This avoids placing a myopic lens on shark, whale or dolphin fishing by Japan or China as *Racing Extinction* does but situates those industries within a broader continuum of violence against animals, rather than as aberrations from the norm. When Tabrizi heads to Taiji, Japan to observe its infamous dolphin hunt, the film connects the hunt to the demand for live dolphin performers in other countries and the eradication of competition for tuna sold globally. Lamy Essemli, a member of the Sea Shepherd Conservation Society, quantifies the global exploitation of dolphins further: “One of the recent discoveries that Sea Shepherd has made is that on Atlantic French coast, up to 10,000 dolphins are being killed every year by bycatch. So, this is ten times more than dolphins killed in Taiji and no one knew about it. This has been going on for at least 30 years, because the French government has been very effective in hiding the problem. People love dolphins, and most of them have no idea that when they eat fish, they're actually putting a death sentence on the dolphin population in France”. Similarly, when Tabrizi and his crew travel to Hong Kong to get a closer look at the epicenter of the shark-fin trade, they record graphic images—the removal of fins from recently killed sharks and a tremendous number of dead sharks and dried fins in major markets. Although the film exposes the brutal violence inherent to the shark-fin trade (calling it “Mafia-esque”), it is clear to contextualize the harms to sharks beyond this limited context—what it calls “following the shark story”. Paul de Gelder, a shark activist, remarks that “stopping shark fin soup is only half the picture. The problem is that eating fish is just as bad if not worse than the shark finning industry because the shark finning industry is strictly held in Asia whereas everyone around the world is eating fish”. Highlighting that half of all sharks

killed (50 million) are killed as bycatch by commercial fishing vessels, *Seaspiracy* transitions to a series of images of sharks dying painfully on commercial fishing vessels before being dumped overboard. Shining a light on the “invisible victims” of bycatch, marine conservation biologist Calum Roberts gives the example of an Iceland fishery that killed 269 porpoises, 900 seals and 5000 seabirds in a single month—asking the audience to consider those effects scaled up to global commercial fishing.

Third, *Seaspiracy* highlights a diversity of actors posing a threat to marine life. In contrast to *Racing Extinction*, *Seaspiracy* shows a broad range of actors harming animals, equally distributed around the world (as is seen in Figure 2). Captain Peter Hammarstedt of the Sea Shepherd Conservation Society even situates European commercial fishing near West Africa as a “continuation of a history of plundering the African continent” that drives food scarcity, piracy, riskier fishing and bushmeat foraging practices. One of the longer scenes of violence against animals is the grindadráp—the herding of whales and dolphins into shallow water to be killed—in the Faroe Islands, an autonomous nation within the Kingdom of Denmark. The grindadráp sequence features footage of White, Western subjects brutally stabbing and killing defenseless whales and dolphins to the shock of Tabrizi, a marked contrast from the violence shown in *Racing Extinction*.

As environmental issues may be both self-interested and altruistic (as climate change affects both humans and nonhuman animals) (Freeman 2014, pp. 172–74), a pertinent question for environmental messaging is whether self-interest or altruism is privileged above the other. The former might appeal to a wider audience but is unable to meet the “transformational” aim of raising the level of respect for nonhuman animals generally (Freeman 2014, p. 176). The analysis of *Racing Extinction* suggests that a form of partial altruism may emerge when the call to action does not challenge self-interest: emphasizing the intrinsic value of animals culturally and spatially distant from a likely viewer (e.g., a total moratorium on shark-fin soup and dolphin hunts for their profound violence), but returning to a predominantly self-interested perspective for more familiar animal exploitation (e.g., a partial reduction in meat consumption for environmental, not ethical, reasons).

## 7. Conclusions

As over one-third of chondrichthyans (sharks, rays and chimeras) are threatened with extinction (Dulvy et al. 2021) it is increasingly important for visual climate communication to find effective strategies to represent the harms they face. The primary driver of chondrichthyan mortality is bycatch (in one study, 99.6% of species), particularly as depleted species may be too rare to be the desired target of fishing operations, although habitat loss, coral bleaching and shifting water temperatures are also having a significant effect (Dulvy et al. 2021). As manta mortality in Lamakera has declined significantly (86%) from their addition to CITES Appendix II in 2013 to 2018, there is strong evidence that strict conservation efforts targeted at particular species can be effective (Booth et al. 2021). However, manta mortality in Lamakera has risen significantly since 2018—the result of bycatch and a parallel increase in devil ray catch used as a substitute for manta (Booth et al. 2021). This suggests that the threat to chondrichthyans may be diverse and interconnected with other forms of fishing, complicating a species-specific conservationist approach. Indeed, there is no form of fishing that is ecologically sustainable (McClanahan et al. 2021) or avoids brutal violence against marine life. As animal imagery can be a powerful means of inspiring climate concern and empathy for nonhuman animals, media makers concerned with particular species should also recognize that they have “the opportunity to help humans view all other animals, and the animal in themselves, more respectfully” (Freeman 2012, p. 105).

Animal imagery in visual climate communication has been criticized for disconnecting animal habitats from human harm, which displaces anthropogenic causes of ecological harm (Born 2019; Whitley and Kalof 2014). *Racing Extinction* follows this pattern for environmental harm associated with the U.S.—favoring images of globes, asteroid collisions

and desecrated environments lacking human or animal figures. However, *Racing Extinction* offers a challenge by showing graphic images of animal suffering almost exclusively in non-Western locations by non-Western subjects—primarily Chinese, Japanese and Indonesian actors. This focus reproduces a spatial hierarchy that invisibilizes the killing of marine life by Western commercial fishing and transforms domesticated animals into absent referents (Adams 2015a). Simultaneously, *Racing Extinction's* recognition of the individuality of large marine life such as manta rays and sharks does not extend to less charismatic marine life (fish, shrimp, etc.) or animals killed and consumed in the United States (oysters, cows, etc.), replicating a hierarchy of animal life that undercuts the film's central ethical challenge to shark-finning and manta hunting. I suggest that media representations of animal suffering could better address these problems with a universalistic ethic of mutual avowal (Kim 2015), exemplified by the 2021 film *Seaspiracy*. First, communicators should contextualize the scale of harm inflicted on endangered species and the connection to biodiversity loss and mass extinction. Using trusted sources and scientific expertise, media should situate specific practices within a larger practice of human exploitation of nature, which can avoid confusion over the relative impact of a given practice. Second, communicators should keep in mind the coverage of notorious industries (e.g., the Baiji hunt, the shark-fin trade) as they intersect with cultural unfamiliarity. It may be more productive to represent less visible forms of ecological harm that may be closer or more relevant to the targeted audience. Third, communicators should diversify depictions of actors that pose a visible threat to animals. Images of animal suffering are shocking and generate empathic distress that can inspire intense anger towards the perpetrator, including ethnic bias. It is particularly important to avoid primarily associating graphic imagery with non-White peoples from non-Western countries, which may inspire racial or nationalist bias and hide the ecological harm and animal exploitation carried out by the West.

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## Note

- <sup>1</sup> The use of the term “wildlife” is intended to represent nonhuman animals who are free-living (non-domesticated) and not meaning “wild” in a derogatory sense.

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Article

# Coyote Killing Contests: Persistence of Differences among Oregonians

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**Abstract:** Management practices of nonhuman animals in nature (“wildlife”) are globally controversial. In some places, individuals believe it should be up to individual landowners to “manage” wildlife. In others, wildlife is seen as belonging to everyone and should be respected, or least hunted ethically. Wildlife killing contests are legal in most U.S. states. Coyote killing contests take place in many of them and several states have enacted legislation to ban them. In Oregon, efforts have failed three times. This paper is a critical discourse analysis of testimonies in the 2021 Oregon hearings. Opposition to the bill is analyzed according to five psychological rationalizations to unpack the pro-contest arguments as an example of rural resistance. The findings suggest unpacking these as more productive for activist groups when creating strategies to counter pro-killing beliefs.

**Keywords:** coyotes; discourse; neutralization techniques; killing contests; wildlife management

## 1. Introduction

Whether it is killing individual animals or weekend mass killing contests, belief in the right to be left alone to manage one’s own interests without government interference is part of rural pride and identity and is carefully woven into the narrative of what it means to be self-sufficient. Sometimes, however, historical ways of “managing” wildlife<sup>1</sup> are found to conflict with contemporary scientific knowledge of animal behavior, biology, and ecological sustainability.

For three consecutive years (2019, 2020, 2021) those interested in ending coyote killing contests have worked to pass a bill in the Oregon legislature and senate. Each year the bill has failed at the senate level, largely due to powerful politicians and interests from Eastern Oregon representing constituents from an area with few residents (Harney County) but powerful voices. This paper is an analysis of arguments for and against 2021 House Bill 2728 to ascertain whether resistance to contest bans is a wildlife biology issue or a psychosociological one. Written testimonies/letters delivered on 9 February 2021, to the (Oregon) House Committee on Agriculture and Natural Resources are analyzed according to critical discourse analysis. Nearly 300 documents were reviewed for common themes amongst supporters and opponents of the bill. The findings discuss the oppositional arguments, look to what they might have in common, and situate pro-contest arguments within Sykes and Matza’s (1957, p. 667) five “techniques of normalization” as discussed by Pohja-Mykrä (2016a). The following sections describe the animal coyote, the concept of Coyote<sup>2</sup> in media and popular culture, contemporary attitudes and beliefs about the animal, followed by an analysis of testimony/letters, and a discussion of what might underlie defenses of the killing contests.

## 2. Literature Review

In Oregon, coyotes live in high desert sage to shrub-steppe to forests and even in urban areas. Classified as a furbearer (along with 16 others), they “may be trapped and hunted” (“Furbearer Management” n.d.), and are “a moderately social species”, who

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possess a “highly developed communication system that facilitates development and maintenance of long-term social relationships” (“Coyote” n.d.). They are also classified as an Unprotected Mammal and as Predatory Animals (which also includes feral swine, rabbits, rodents) “which are or may be destructive to agricultural products and activities” (Oregon Furbearer n.d., p. 7). There is no season as coyotes can be hunted 12 months of the year and there is no bag limit<sup>3</sup>—all that is required is a valid Oregon hunting license.

The number of coyotes killed in the United States each year is substantial. Government agencies, such as Wildlife Services and various departments of fish and wildlife, kill many deemed to be problem animals and as a preventative measure to keep them from killing “livestock” and “game animals” such as deer and antelope. “Many [are] shot to death from small planes and helicopters” (Worrall 2016). Despite nearly two centuries of eradication efforts, coyotes have survived and, in some places, thrived, much to the dismay of many farmers and ranchers. According to the Yale Environment newsletter “The sponsors of killing contests wrongly argue that these events help prevent coyotes from taking livestock and deer” (Williams 2018).

Much misunderstanding has fueled the hatred of this dog-like creature who is denied the admiration at times bestowed on their larger relative, the wolf. “Since the early 19th century, when Lewis and Clark first encountered them, coyotes have been subject to a pitiless war of extermination by ranchers and government agencies alike” (Worrall 2016). This is despite research that demonstrates killing coyotes isn’t actually the best way to control them (Edwards 2019; see also Shivik 2014), and in fact mass killing stresses the pack and results in more pups (Blejwas et al. 2002). “If you wipe out a pack of coyotes, it leaves a hole in the habitat, and nature dislikes a vacuum” (Monteith, qtd. in Edwards 2019). Yet, those who live most intimately with coyotes in places such as Eastern Oregon, firmly believe the opposite. “Predator hatred is hard-wired even in people who should know that predators make prey strong and fleet”, i.e., fast (Medwid 2018, qtd. in Williams 2018). What might explain this difference, a disregard for science, and insistence on killing as the best method of management?

From major metropolitan areas such as Los Angeles, Chicago, and San Francisco to remote open range areas in Utah, Colorado, and Oregon, coyotes are present. Coyotes are not new to many of these areas, in fact they were there long before modern human habitation. “Close encounters with coyotes have now become the country’s most common large-wildlife experience” (Flores 2016, p. 2). With colonization, however, just as many other species of wildlife were forced out of areas humans valued, so was the coyote. They have occupied the Americas for thousands of years and their ancient bones have been widely found in archeological sites of the Americas (O’Connor 2008).

Indigenous people from Central America in the south to Eastern Alaska in the north, have variations on Coyote tales (Lopez 1977):

Coyote stories were told all over North America—in Cheyenne tipis, Mandan earth lodges, Inupiak igloos, Navajo hogans and Sia pueblos—with much laughter and guffawing and with exclamations of surprise and awe. . . . [They] detailed tribal origins, they emphasized a world view thought to be a correct one; and they dramatized the value of proper behavior.

(pp. xvi–xvii)

As I am not indigenous and not a member of these nations, it is not for me to say what any of these stories might mean. What is significant, however, is that there exists a view of Coyote amongst indigenous peoples that varies considerably from that held by non-natives whose Coyote stories are most often told through media and popular culture. Therefore, the first step toward excavating the meaning of coyotes is to examine who Coyote is in the mainstream imagination.

### 2.1. Coyote in Cultures

What is it about Coyote that so unnerves and yet appeals to us? Is it their intelligence, the “prairie wolf’s” unique mannerisms, bark, and skills? Or Coyote’s ability to flourish when many other species cannot? Is the reason more symbolic, more psychological, as Carl Jung found studying the Coyote-as-deity, being “a faithful copy of an absolutely undifferentiated human consciousness . . . a forerunner of the savior, and like him, God, man, and animal at once? He is both subhuman and superhuman, a bestial and divine being”. Or, as long recognized amongst indigenous people, is the Coyote a type of human, “he preserves a tail, sharp muzzle, and erect ears, but he stands and walks upright, has a wife and family, and displays normal human fixations on status, food, fun, and lust” (Flores 2016, p. 36)? Coyote shares with humans the ability to be both solitary and social, known as “fissure-fusion”, which is not all that common among beings (p. 36). This flexibility has given them the ability to survive just about everything humans throw at them in terms of extermination efforts. Coyote is a shape shifter, joker, trickster, and is truly wild, not domesticated as are dogs.

Coyotes are real and symbolic outliers to the activities and interests of human beings. Lacking the familiarity of dogs and the dangerous glamour of wolves, coyotes figuratively and literally live somewhere in between in terms of size and image. These relatives do the dirty work of cleaning up carrion after other predators have left kills and they hunt the small rodents often reviled by ranchers and farmers. Coyote has a significant place in indigenous belief systems through the animal’s range. They are clever, industrious, intelligent survivors who have lived around and amongst human beings for thousands of years. Opportunistic hunters, they will feed upon what they find, hunt small rodents, fish, frogs, insects, grass, berries, and unfortunately, sometimes pets and small livestock. Coyotes are found throughout North America, as far south as Mexico and Panama and north in New England and Eastern Alaska (Arizona-Sonora Desert Museum 2008). They sometimes hunt in packs and raise their young in dens where they also sleep. They are known for their “songs”, their calls, which are used to keep track of family members and communicate with other coyotes.

If the only way someone knew of Coyote was through re-presentations in media and popular culture, what would they believe? Their intelligence, keenness, adaptability, and their shrewd problem-solving skills have made them subjects of curiosity as well as targets of violence. As are human beings, coyotes are a predator species, animals who hunt (prey on) other animals.<sup>4</sup> We share a deep history with other predators, one not so long ago that was filled with danger even to humans who were not top of the food chain because we did not control the food chain. We were also prey. Not to coyotes but to others who represented darkness, wilderness, and the unknown. The manifestations of those fears remain part of our collective unconscious. “To confront a predator is to stand before the dual-faced god from our deep past. That is why we look longer, more intently, with more studied fascination at predators than at other kinds of animals” (Flores 2016, p. 13). Additionally, perhaps this is why we target predator species as a threat to our declared supremacy in the order of things, and competition for animals we consider our property, not theirs.

Early attitudes toward coyotes (that infused media portrayals) were informed less by personal experience, at least initially, and more by accounts of explorers and writers who shared their impressions with a curious public. Given that coyotes do not live in Europe, for example, experiences with and descriptions of these animals who lived in the mysterious western United States, were open entirely to interpretations. Records of the “prairie wolf”/coyote were kept by Thomas Say, a scientist, who, in 1819, described the animal in detail, noting that they are unlikely to be successful on their own killing large prey, such as a deer, rather “the exertion of their utmost swiftness and cunning, are so often unavailing, that they are sometimes reduced to the necessity of eating wild plums, and other fruits, to them almost indigestible, in order to distend the stomach, and appease in a degree the cravings of hunger” (Mussulman n.d.).<sup>5</sup> Josiah Gregg (1844) described coyote

sounds “like ventriloquists, a pair of these [coyotes] will represent a dozen distinct voices in such succession—will bark, chatter, yelp, whine, and howl in such variety of note, that one would fancy a score of them at hand” (p. 225).

Mark Twain (1872) gave a negative appraisal of the animal, which no doubt influenced much of the reading public, stating coyote is “spiritless and cowardly” (qtd. in Flores 2016, p. 77). As more writers and reporters journeyed west, they also wrote accounts that contributed to if not an evil image, certainly one of a less than desirable animal. Horace Greely described the animal as “a sneaking, cowardly little wretch”. In popular magazines such as *Overland Monthly* (1908) and *Popular Science Monthly* (1887), writers called coyotes “contemptible”, “perverse”, said that they were lacking “higher morals”, and were “cowardly to the last degree”. Ingersoll (1887) said:

Such is the coyote—genus loci of the plains; an Ishmaelite of the desert; a consort of rattlesnake and vulture; the tyrant of his inferiors; jackal to the puma; a bushwhacker upon the flanks of the buffalo armies; the pariah of his own race, and despised by mankind.

In a 1920 article in *Scientific American* (von Blon 1920), subtitled “How a Beast That Was Not Worth Powder to Shoot Them Has Become a Valuable Source of Revenue”, the author calls them “that despised howling pariah of the animal kingdom”, “a hungry, skulking roamer”, and “the original Bolshevik” (p. 246), and as such equates killing coyotes as a near patriotic duty. Kellert’s (1984, 1996) ongoing study of American attitudes toward animals have consistently revealed preference for pets/domestic animals such as dogs and horses and “relatively negative views of the coyote” (1984, p. 191) “who were represented in the bottom half of the ranked animals” (1996, p. 101). Factors that contribute to like/dislike include attributes such as size and aesthetics, but also, as relate to coyotes, “danger to humans”, “likelihood of inflicting property damage”, “predatory tendencies”, “relationship to human society” (pet or pest), and “cultural and historical relationships” (p. 191). When wildlife fall into the category of “predators”, attitudes are often mixed particularly when it comes to the public who oppose “indiscriminate population reductions” and lethal means and “livestock” producers who are in favor of lethal control strategies (p. 194). Kellert et al. (1996, p. 978) note that “creatures such as snakes, rats, coyotes, and bats were frequently viewed as intrinsically unworthy” by Euro-American settlers and the killing of predators such as wolves and by extension coyotes, “attested to one’s belief in community and God as much as to practical threats to livestock and person” (p. 978). They were regarded as “hateful creatures” and “tended to be viewed from the perch of this morality play as intrinsically evil” (p. 104). These historical and cultural beliefs form the underlying context for the persistence of many negative beliefs about coyotes still present in ranching and farming communities that persist today.

Modern day re-presentations drew on these accounts. Some versions are comic, such as *Looney Tunes’* Wile E. Coyote, Calamity Coyote, the video game *Fire & Ice* (featuring Cool Coyote), and the Hanna-Barbera feature film *The Adventures of Don Coyote and Sancho Panda* (Alvarez 1947). A more mysterious Coyote was featured in the book version of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* titled “Coyote Moon” (Vornholt 1998), wherein Buffy believes a sudden influx of coyotes to Sunnydale might be the source of evil. The term “coyote ugly” (the title of a 2000 film by the same name) refers to an unattractive one-night stand partner. “Popular etymology suggests that it drew inspiration from actual coyotes, as they tend to be so desperate to escape from traps that they chew their own limbs off” (“Coyote Ugly” 2018).

In *The Predator Paradox*, Shivik (2014) calls the killing of bears, coyotes, cougars, and wolves a “war”. Flores (2016, p. vii) similarly calls it a “war on wild things”. Animal activist groups use the alliteration to frame campaigns such as those by Wild Earth Guardians, Predator Defense, and World Animal Foundation. However, is that the right term when one group is attacked by another? Wars typically have to do with armed conflicts and battles between opposing sides. Animals are not armed and were they ever at war with us? “Coyotes are political”, states Flores (2016, p. 15) in *Coyote America*. Like many who

write about killing wolves and other predator species, Flores details what he views as a war on wildlife (see also: Amory 1974; Keefover-Ring 2009). Wars are political; they are motivated by and fought for many reasons but often include economics, identity, and fear. The implication of the term “war”, however, is that there are at least two sides engaging in a fight. Is it a war when only one side inflicts violence on the other? Coyotes have been and remain squarely in the crosshairs of the rural community spotting scope in terms of in land, animals-as-property, and perhaps most of all, autonomy. The freedom to kill coyotes in whatever manner one wishes, to “manage” the land and wildlife without imposition of urban interests and/or governmental regulation, is part of a rural sense of self-determination.

## 2.2. Political Coyotes

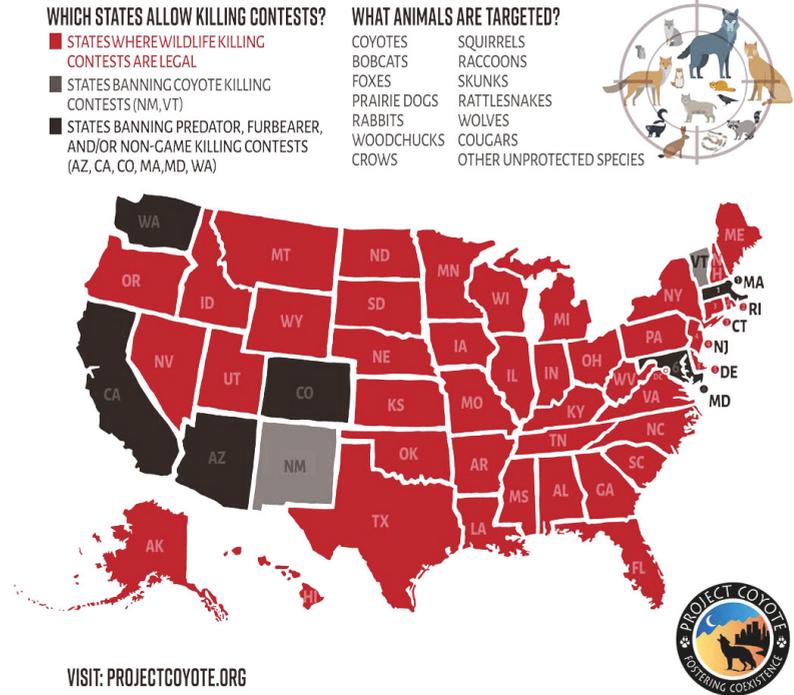
Without a doubt, “coyotes are political” (Flores 2016, p. 15). In the early 2020s, it is no surprise that coyotes are a focus of those who see any tightening of hunting rules as an attempt to limit their hunting, as a slippery slope toward gun control, and as interference by urban interests. Redirecting aggression toward wildlife is not new. It was evident in eradication efforts on western wildlife, and indigenous peoples, as part of Manifest Destiny. More recently, in the United States in the 1990s, the wolf was brought back as an emblem of wildness, admired for beauty, vacillating in and out of protected status. Then, with the destruction of the World Trade Center in 2001, sentiment turned once again against the animals. Years of progress to bring them back were undone. Aerial gunning resumed. For some Americans, the enemy was here. “It’s hard to escape a sense that coyotes have joined religion, the Iraq War, Obamacare, and climate change as one more thing the culture warriors in American have to disagree about” (p. 16). Add to this the politicization of science with the onset of COVID-19 and Trump-era politics, arguments grounded in academic research were not likely to win against the lived experiences of rural residents.

Targeting of predator species as expressions of rural autonomy and resistance to outsiders and change is evident outside the U.S. as well. Research in Finland related to “rural identity and way of life” as defenses of current “management” practices as they pertain to wildlife and strategies concerning killing of large carnivores is applicable in the case of Oregon’s coyotes (Pohja-Mykrä 2016a, p. 439). Pohja-Mykrä’s (2016a) was a study of the narratives of hunting violators (p. 231) who stave off shame and stigma from illegal hunting practices by rationalizing them in terms of the rural protest of and resistance to conservation policies and practices. These function psychologically as “neutralization techniques” (p. 441). While it was a study of illegal killing of carnivores and techniques “to increase compliance with conservation regimes” (p. 231), the underlying issues of identity, biosecurity, the value of local knowledge, perceptions of the legitimacy of regulations, and dynamics between locals and authorities are relevant to the current study.

Animal killing contests have a long history in the United States and whether formally organized as public events or transpiring in underground worlds such as with dog and cock fighting, wildlife killing contests are legal in 40 states (Figure 1). In these highly organized events, some taking place on public land some on private land, contestants compete for cash and prizes such as hunting equipment. “Depending on the rules of the contest, competitors target predator species, such as bobcats, coyotes, pumas and foxes” (Somvichian-Clausen 2021).

Hundreds of varmint killing competitions take place across the country with names like Southern Illinois Predator Challenge, Oklahoma’s Cast & Bang State Predator Championship, Park County (Wyoming), Predator Palooza, Iowa Coyote Classic, Idaho Varmint Hunters Blast from the Past, Michigan’s Dog Down Coyote Tournament, Minnesota’s Save the Birds Coyote Hunting Tournament, and the Great Lakes Region Predator Challenge.

(Williams 2018)



**Figure 1.** States Allowing Wildlife Killing Contests. Source: Project Coyote. <http://www.projectcoyote.org/endkillingcontests/> (accessed on 31 March 2022).

In Texas alone, there are more than 600 wildlife killing contests. Coyotes are the most targeted.

A single contest can result in more than 1000 animal deaths within the span of a single night, and a lack of fair chase principles mean that the predators being stalked for slaughter can be lured by distress calls and the promise of food. It is estimated that in the U.S. alone, more than half a million coyotes are killed by humans each year—about one per minute. The animals are easy to bring in. All that is needed is the sound of a distressed pup or of a dying animal and as curious beings, they will come right to the hunters. Flores (2016) calls it “the battlefield”, the places where human interests collide with the lifeways of those who were here before us, the animals. With high-powered weapons, state-of-the-art calling devices, and sophisticated camouflage techniques, it is not a contest between willing foes, nor between equally armed enemies, it is a one-directional assault on predators.

How does one kill to exterminate, kill to create piles of bodies, kill period? In *A Human Being Died that Night* Gobodo-Madikizela (2004) writes: “a broad consensus exists in the literature that in order to torture, kill, and maim, perpetrators must first exclude their victims from the moral obligations they feel toward the world in general and, in particular, toward those with whom they are socially and politically connected” (p. 128). Thus, the victim must become Other, not worthy of moral inclusion or consideration. Additionally, “the construction of ‘otherness’ is an essential step on the path toward the destruction of victims” p. 154, n. 1). Amongst human beings, terms such as “terrorists”, “enemies of the state”, and others function to mark entire groups. Social identity theory posits this as the psychological process of labeling with terms such as “pests”, “invasive species”, that similarly mark and treat all members of a species as the same. Language from *Popular*

*Science* referenced earlier demonstrates the groundwork upon which the enmification of coyotes was built:

The fact that in his hunting he frequently becomes a rival, his incorrigible thieveries, and his unmanly deportment in hanging about like a conscious felon, cause him to be despised by both hunter and ranchman, who take every means to kill him, save by the honorable use of gunpowder. Yet there are times when he makes himself respected and feared.

(Ingersoll 1887)

The same aspects of psychology that apply to objectification and Othering of human beings by human beings also applies to projection on to other species. The psychoanalytic theory of projective identification operation functions similarly when the target is not human.

Projection, as used by Jung drawing on Freud, is when “a piece of one’s own personality is transferred to or relocated to an outer object” or being (von Franz 1978, p. 31). When this happens “there is a loss [of] critical moral reflection. There is loss of ability to think rationally. This becomes “heightened in the context of a violent group”, such as those who engage in these mass killing activities” (Gobodo-Madikizela 2004, p. 154). Writing about wolf hatred, Ferris (2013) notes that “hate and intolerance are the underlying themes of the philosophies and motivations anti-wolf folks exhibit”. Studies have repeatedly linked animal abuse to child and partner abuse as well as more psychopathic killing later in life (Arluke et al. 1999). They are part of a syndrome evident in violence and bigotry against humans as well as against other animal species. In Ferris’ (2013) analysis of anti-wolf Facebook posts they note:

We also find that they are mostly high school educated or hold undergraduate degrees in fields little relevant to understanding the complex mechanisms of predator-prey relationships, trophic cascades, gene-flow, experimental design and the subtleties of concepts such as niches, hyper-volumes, biological potential, carrying capacity, and compensatory versus additive predation. In fact, they tend to hold those educated in the field in low regard calling them “eggspurts”.

Thus, conservation plans, scientific data, and other arguments are not considered legitimate. Rural defiance takes form in support for mass hunts but go “underground” with practices by, for example, not advertising the contests widely and going private in social media groups. Studies of rural resistance, human-wildlife conflict, and resistance to change document these tensions not only in the United States (Bonnie et al. 2020) but also in Nordic nations (von Essen and Allen 2017), Sweden (Dalerum 2021), and Finland (Pohja-Mykrä 2016a, 2016b).

This paper builds Pohja-Mykrä’s (2016a) “Community Power Over Conservation” study in Finland and similarly draws on Sykes and Matza’s (1957) conception of “techniques of neutralization” (p. 667) as a framework for unpacking opposition testimony. While Sykes and Matza (1957) write of delinquency and law breaking, some of the fundamental concepts apply in the current study when considering the process of rationalization that accompanies an act that departs not only from norms of many people in general, but in particular to hunting community participants they claim to be part of. “The delinquent represents not a radical opposition to law-abiding society but something like an apologetic failure, often more sinned against than sinning in his own eyes” (p. 667). The urban versus rural divide mentioned by both supporters to and opponents of the bill are examples of this sense. Opponents of the bill report feeling misunderstood, different, and even invisible to more populated, urban parts of the state. Supporters of the content ban write that this bill is not indicative of the divide while opponents argue that it is. They write:

It is our argument that much delinquency is based on what is essentially an unrecognized extension of defenses to crimes, in the form of justifications for

deviance that are seen as valid by the delinquent but not by the legal system or society at large.

(p. 665)

### 3. Method

In the case of these mass killing efforts, wildlife biologists and scientific studies demonstrate “in the case of endemic species predator hunting . . . [this] isn’t an effective way to control predators” (Somvichian-Clausen 2021; Blejwas et al. 2002). Yet, despite or perhaps because of what scientists say, report, present, and otherwise argue before legislators and citizens, the belief that these contests are effective means of predator control persists.

The research was brought before Oregon’s state legislature and senate three times. Each session a ban on the contests succeeded at the legislative level but failed at the Senate. In 2020 it passed the Senate (17–12) but was attached to a larger environmental bill that included cap and trade, and, as it was during the final hours of the session, it failed on the floor vote because many Oregon Republic senators staged a walk-out rather than vote on the bill (Stennes 2019). In 2021 the bill was brought back with the following language:

Prohibits person from conducting or participating in contest, competition, tournament or derby that has objective of taking coyotes for cash or prizes.

(Oregon State Legislature 2021)

To understand the arguments of defenders of the contests and to put them in the context of theory, all testimony available on the Oregon Legislature web page for House Bill 2728, the 2021 version of a bill, was analyzed. The result was 227 letters advocating for passage of the bill and 66 against. The findings are presented below and then interpreted according to Fairclough’s ([1995] 2013) critical discourse analysis (CDA).

### 4. Analysis

CDA, as conceptualized by Fairclough ([1995] 2013, p. 3), has three “basic properties”: relational, dialectical, and transdisciplinary: (1) It is a relational form of research in the sense that its primary focus is not on entities or individuals . . . but on social relations” which are “layered” including “relations between relations”. Part of the relationality is between communicators and “objects” and others, such, as I argue, with non-human animals and what these animals represent. Discourse thus has “both its ‘internal’ and its ‘external’ relations with other such ‘objects’”. (2) It is also dialectical, not fully apart from nor part of, other speech acts or “objects”. As such, it is intimately connected with power and control. Those who have power in a society or culture determine what is accessible in discourse, what is not, and what remains beyond description through language/image. (3) A CDA cannot and should not be contained within a particular discipline, rather, it crosses boundaries in terms of theories, methods, and objects of analysis. As such, it is “a recognition that the natural and social worlds differ” and that the social world “depend(s) upon human action for its existence and is ‘socially constructed’” (p. 4).

In terms of the actual analysis, Fairclough ([1995] 2013) suggests the methodology (using this term versus method to be inclusive of theory) be equally transdisciplinary, emphasizing themes that present themselves to us. This allows for “various points of entry” (p. 5) never relying solely on the discourse but also on the context within which it occurs. This is consistent with media studies approaches that emphasize the lived circumstances and historical conditions (context) within which the speech act occurs (whether it be verbal or visual).

Multiple themes arose in the discourse of bill proponents and Bill 2728. Table 1 shows the most common arguments made by bill advocates (supporters of the ban) and those against the ban/bill. These are summarized below followed by illustrative comments drawn from the testimonies.

**Table 1.** Arguments Supporting and Opposing Bill.

Supporting	Opposing
<p>Cruel, inhumane, violent. Unethical. Casts hunters in a bad light. Animal killing should not be for competition and cash prizes. Animals should be respected. Science does not support it as population control. Throws off pack dynamics. Interferes with balance of nature. Wasteful. Encourages disrespect for all life. Teaches children to disrespect animal life and disregard suffering. Violation of state duty to care for wildlife. Not used for food.</p>	<p>Predator control. Keeps mule deer population alive. Attempts to kill hunting heritage. Too much government interference already. Affects livelihood. Brings revenue to rural communities. Should be able to manage own affairs. Contests have gone on for decades and population still strong. Keeps children and pets safe. Provides an event for enthusiasts (such as Portland Marathon). Teaches future generations.</p>

4.1. *Advocates of Ban/Pro 2728*

In total, 228 letters/testimonies were posted for supporters of 2728. After removing 1 duplicate this left 227 for analysis. Letters in support came from a variety of individuals including self-identified hikers, a fly-fisherman, hunters, several wildlife biologists, and a 4th generation rural Oregonian. Professional association endorsements came from President and CEO of Oregon Humane Society; President, Coalition Advocating for Animals; Co-founder of and advisor to Benton County; Agriculture and Wildlife Protection Program (AWPP), Central Oregon Land Watch, a Clinical Professor of Law, Lewis and Clark Law School, the Humane Society of the U.S. (who co-signed a letter with 20 other groups), and Project Coyote.

Four primary themes arose amongst supporters of the bill: Cruelty, Ethics, Science, and Identity.

1. Cruelty.

Multiple letters used terms such as “blood fests”, “torture”, “heinous”, “barbaric”, “cruel”, “brutal”, and “inhumane”. One writer stated: “making a fun sport out of slaughtering them and then taking macho photos with piles of dead coyotes is sick. It is celebrating the ugliest, basest, most barbaric impulses humans can experience” and another “having contests to kill as many as possible to win prizes and satisfy one’s testosterone is inhumane and abhorrent”.

A former fur farm worker wrote: “The cruelty that we build industries from, like the fur industry, does not stop with animals, but extends to human beings as well”.

2. Ethics.

Several letter-writers, some of whom are hunters, see the contests as unethical, the ethics being that of ethical hunting practices. For example, the contests are “antithetical to hunting practices and scientifically based wildlife management practices” and are a “Bad light [on] ethical hunters”. Another wrote, “Wanton killing of coyotes tarnish the reputation of people who engage in ethical hunting practices” and compared the contests with dog and cock fighting.

Additionally, another wrote:

“Participants cowardly lure coyotes out in the open for an easy kill using a high-tech electronic device that mimics coyote pups in distress. I cannot rid myself of the image of a man holding a corpse of a nursing coyote mother. Her pups would inevitably starve. This is not sportsmanship”.

Ethics also included the often-mentioned lesson the contests might be teaching to children as “future generation’s loss”, “rewards killing behavior”, and “children learn to disregard the welfare of wildlife”. Another bill proponent saw owned animal deaths as an individual’s responsibility: “I have lost my fair share of animals to them (from cats to chickens and geese) but each case was a result of my own failure to keep my animals confined”. A retired U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service employee wrote: “A society that condones unlimited killing of any species for fun and prizes is morally bankrupt”.

### 3. Science.

Letters that drew on research came from everyday folks to experienced wildlife biologists, long term hunters, and county officials. Several supporters mentioned an op-ed written by conservationist, hunter, and former Oregon Fish and Wildlife chair Mike Finley (2021), who stated that the contests “are inconsistent with sound, science-based wildlife management and antithetical to the concepts of sportsmanship and fair chase”. Others referenced an article from *Small Farm News*:

Killing coyotes is kind of like mowing the lawn, it stimulates vigorous new growth” via increased reproduction and immigration”. Additionally, “Well behaved coyotes can actually prevent livestock losses by defending a territory that may include sheep”.

Science also includes the importance of coyotes to healthy ecosystems. The culturally constructed stereotype of coyotes along with the vital role they play is contained in the following:

An unfounded stereotype that holds them up as nasty beasts, animals who compete with hunters for game, nuisance animals that kill livestock, and as a result are treated as living clay targets for blood sport thrill seekers, when they are in fact sentient beings with pack families who contribute to a healthy and biodiverse ecosystem.

Additionally, “The science is in ... coyote killing does NOT solve the ranching losses problems”.

Finally, mass killings “Increas[e] “rogue” coyote numbers which are significantly more likely to cause issues with livestock and house pets”. Many of the letters cited academic research to support the science arguments as did researchers and biologists who wrote to support the bill.

### 4. Identity.

As noted in other parts of this paper, bill supporters did not see a rural/urban divide around this issue and, furthermore, believe the contests reflect badly on the state as a whole and “Slaughter for fun is an embarrassment to Oregon”. Multiple testimonies included statements such as “this is not who Oregon is”, and “a red stain on our state. ... a bloody practice”. Another wrote that Oregon should “Join other states”, that the contests “benefi[t] only a small number of people” and “are grossly out of step with modern, science-based wildlife management, and Oregon’s ethical and conservation-centered values”.

Classist stereotypes were present in one letter writer who described coyotes as “welcome neighbors who do not deserve Elmer Fudd shooting at them”. Additionally, “this is something ignorant pioneers did in the 1800’s, not science educated people in 2021”. Others also see the contests as a violation of the state’s duty and as threats to public safety.

Finally, this testimonial, from a multi-generational rural Oregon family sums up many of the points made by others:

Participants in the killing contests slaughter indiscriminately without credible justification. They’re not protecting calves. They’re not targeting certain areas with poor deer or elk recruitment. They’re just out there killing for the joy of it, and they use every modern device to up the count: electronic calls mimicking

distressed pups, silencers, range finders, teams, and at least once a helicopter. These events are about as unsporting as possible.

Coyote-killing contests express deep contempt for wildlife and an even deeper contempt for Oregonians with conservation values, and that means most of us.

#### 4.2. *Opponents of Ban/Anti 2278*

Sixty-seven letters were posted opposing the bill banning the contests. Removing one duplicate, 66 were included in the analysis. Letters came from ranchers, farmers, hunters, a former government wildlife trapper, and a wildlife biologist. Baker County Commission Chair, Columbia County Board of Commissioners Chair, a Harney County Commissioner, a representative of HammerDownOutdoors and Harney County Coyote Classic, and a head volunteer of the coyote “derby”. Amongst these testimonies, four primary themes arose amongst opponents of the bill: Predator control, Revenue, Identity, and Freedom from Interference.

##### 1. Predator Control.

There were multiple examples of this argument. For example, “Humans are one of the only natural predators to a Coyote. Without hunting them they would decimate the deer and antelope fawn population”.

##### 2. Revenue.

Testimonies in this category ranged from something as simple as “I strongly oppose this bill, for it will effect [sic] my lively hood greathly [sic]”, to “These events further support the struggling rural economies in the communities which host them by promoting recreational hunting opportunities, and the dollars that are brought in associated with them”.

##### 3. Identity.

Pride in rural identity is a hallmark of these letters, which includes a sense of history: Similar to events such as the Portland Marathon, these derby’s [sic] provide an organized event for hunting enthusiasts to participate in. In an era where generations are becoming less and less involved in natural resources, such events provide a platform and opportunity for hunters to stay connected to their heritage. Coyote derbies are a family affair. Parents take their kids out and teach them how and the importance of predator management.

This bill is framed as a bill against holding contests for wildlife killing. It is not. The bill simply is another effort by people who do not understand hunting or want to stop hunting altogether to “kill” our hunting heritage using any means possible. In this case, using the idea of a “killing contest” to discredit legal hunting methods and tug on the emotional heartstrings of unknowing publics. There is NO wildlife management harm in coyote hunting via a “contest” or not. What’s the difference between a coyote contest and a fishing derby? There is none should be the obvious answer. When will kids’ fishing derbies become the target? Too soon if bills like SB2728 pass in our state.

This bill takes absolutely nothing away from Portland, Eugene, or even the coast, but it very much impacts people on the east side, or those from the west side that value personal freedom. supporting this, as it is just a heavy handed [sic] attempt to nibble away at the freedoms of Oregonians who enjoy hunting and fishing.

Yet one more attack on rural Oregon and ranchers by people in the city who know nothing of such things. This bill is yet another attack on our way of life that is hated by the lefties in the legislature.

#### 4. Freedom from Interference.

Examples here include freedom from state government involvement (other than ODFW) and from those viewed as outsiders without any presumed experience in the eastern part of the state:

This bill is a slap in the face to all the livestock producers in the state. we should have freedom to manage predators as we see fit.

I feel this Bill was established out of somebody's personal beliefs and has no scientific value to it all.

It is not the role of this legislative body to determine how citizens are able to manage that problem and doing so will likely lead to unintended consequences.

Most people who oppose this bill have never been to eastern Oregon or have never experienced a coyote killing their livelihood. I oppose this bill and you should too.

A related response is many mentions of the bill being emotion driven. The following quote is a representative summary of many of the themes:

As ranchers, it is our duty to protect our livestock and one of the biggest issues we have as far as predators go is coyotes. A lot of people that are supporting HB 2728 are using emotion as the primary reason to pass this bill. As ranchers, we feel the emotion in an opposite way when we go out and find coyotes eating our calves alive or killing a cow that got down and can't get up. Coyotes are a dangerous predator to our cattle, horses, other livestock, and even to our dogs and cats. They do not discriminate in what they choose to eat for dinner, and we have to use lethal force against them to protect our animals that cannot protect themselves. Female coyotes have 4–6 pups a year on average and are procreating at a faster rate than we would take them, even with contests. These contests help us to keep the coyote numbers down to a decent amount. Coyotes do have benefits such as rodent control in our hay fields and as ranchers/conservationists, we can recognize that. We do not wish to abolish the species, just to keep them at a limited number that will help us to protect our animals.

Others include:

[The ban is] "an attempt to prohibit legal activity (hunting Coyotes) by emotionally attacking the taking of Coyotes".

There is no science telling us the hunting of coyotes either for recreation or protection of property has any negative effects on the highly resilient coyote populations.

#### 5. Results

Fairclough's (1989, [1995] 2013) model for CDA calls for three types of analysis: textual (description), processing (interpretation), and social (explanation). This fits well with neutralization techniques as means of contextualizing the arguments. The persistence among contest defenders is consistent with what Pohja-Mykrä (2016a, p. 442) describes as a form of "rural protest". The contests are not illegal, as in the Finnish farmer study, but they are, according to supporters of the ban, unethical. Neutralization techniques, including appealing to higher loyalties, claims of normality, denial of responsibility, and other justifications are evident in the discourse of those who believe contests should continue and are present in the testimonies and letters in the ways opponents justify this hunting contest. That the contest represents tradition, offers lessons to youth, and fulfills a small community's interests are examples of acceptance learned within this culture and/or sub-culture. The contests, by statements of wildlife officials, biologists, and those who consider themselves ethical hunters, are by their standards unethical (See Katzner et al. 2020).

Sykes and Matza (1957, p. 667) identify five types of denials or rationalizations those behaving or believing in ways contrary to norms use to justify their positions involving denial and condemnation. They typically precede the act and then, following “the deviant behavior” function “to protec[t] the individual from self-blame and the blame of others after the act”.

In this sense, the delinquent both has his cake and eats it too, for he remains committed to the dominant normative system and yet so qualifies its imperatives that violations are “acceptable” if not “right”. Even those who are aware of the so-called delinquent’s aberrant behavior will often support and even celebrate them.

1. The Denial of Responsibility. This can appear as being in a situation with no other choice but to act, compelled by external forces beyond one’s control. “From a psychodynamic viewpoint this orientation toward one’s own actions may represent a profound alienation from self” (p. 667). Thus, opponents of the ban on the contest might see themselves as acting because of the perception of a coyote problem, one that outsiders of Eastern Oregon cannot or will not understand, and thus justifies the support and even participation as being “acted upon” by conditions of life in that part of the state. Pohja-Mykrä (2016a, p. 442) refers to this as “a billiard ball conception of themselves”, as one is “helplessly propelled into situations”. In this case, by outsiders who do not understand life in Eastern Oregon and by the coyotes who are seen as a threat to livelihoods.
2. The Denial of Injury. This technique of neutralization is related to injury or harm. If the one engaged in what might be viewed as deviant behavior, the killing contests, sees no harm being done, they might argue, as many do who are opposed to end them, that the act is helpful, as in pest control, there is not likely to be a sense of wrongdoing. Here, the distinction is made between wrongfulness of acts that might be immoral but not illegal by justifying them and by denying harm. This is related to the third justification/rationalization.
3. The Denial of the Victim. In this case, the participants remove themselves from responsibility for harm by seeing the victim (the coyotes) as wrong doers. The response is not injuring a living being per se but is “a form of rightful retaliation or punishment”, in fact in the contest, the contestants are seen as working for the greater good. “Attacks on [those] who are said to have gotten ‘out of place,’” such as the perceived over-population of coyotes, or over predation on deer and other ungulates, is seen as justification for violence against them. In fact, this is viewed as an intentional transgression against humans thus deserving what happens. Furthermore Robin Hood, and his latter-day derivatives such as the tough detective seeking justice outside the law, still capture the popular imagination, and the delinquent may view his acts as part of a similar role.
4. The condemnation of the condemners. This is a “rejection of the rejectors” as the focus is moved from the act that deviates from what is considered ethical hunting to “the motives and behavior of those who disapprove of his violations” (p. 668). The focus here shifts from the contest acts to those who they feel are judging them for doing what they must do and in fact see those who criticize as “hypocrites or are driven by personal spite”. Rural Oregonians who oppose the hunting contest ban see those from outside the area as being, at the least misinformed and “emotional”. Particularly in current political times where any restriction on activities that involve weaponry, organizing, and localized events are seen as an entrance ramp to the slippery slope of government interference and regulation. This redirecting violence is central to the killing contests. Ending them is viewed as oppression of rural Oregonians, and part of misunderstandings of lifeways. As a result, “the wrong-fulness of his own behavior is more easily repressed or lost to view” (p. 668). One opponent wrote “This bill is a slap in the face to all the livestock producers in the state. we should have freedom to manage predators as we see fit”.

5. The appeal to higher loyalties. In this final technique, “internal and external social controls may be neutralized by sacrificing the demands of the larger society for the demands of the smaller social groups to which the delinquent belongs” (669). This protection of the smaller, rural community including its economic interests, is viewed as superseding those of the larger interests outside the geographic area and may in fact serve as “justification for violation of society’s norms”, by helping the locals. Feeling “picked on” by urbanites and politicians who do not understand the conditions of life in Eastern Oregon is another aspect of this rationalization. The smaller group, in this case, the mostly Harney contest supporters, does not entirely reject larger society and values, or even of hunters in general, but rather is viewed as serving the greater good.

[Pohja-Mykrä \(2016a, p. 443\)](#) identifies five additional types of neutralization that can be added as ways of explaining the positions of contest defenders.

1. Claim of normality. Here, is a “transfer of responsibility from offender to a large, often vaguely defined group to which he/she belongs”.
2. Denial of the necessity of the law. One violates laws and ethics that are deemed unjust, unfair, or I argue, unrepresentative of the rural area and culture in which this contest takes place.
3. Metaphor of the ledger. “Offenders’ good qualities make up for their illegal acts”. This includes father/son bonding and economics of the community.
4. Defense based on necessity. Important goals for survival, such as economics, are used as justification.
5. Claim of entitlement. This is getting one’s fair share, the income, the self-rule, the lifeway.

According to the former president of the California Fish and Game Commission “Awarding prizes for wildlife killing contests is both unethical and inconsistent with our current understanding of natural systems” (qtd. in [Williams 2018](#)). Neutralization is used to rationalize the contests as effective predator pest control despite scientific evidence to the contrary, even to the point where some opponents say supporter arguments are not based in science, rather on emotions. Furthermore, evident in the testimonies, “hunting violators defend a particular rural identity and way of life, thus expressing rural protest” ([Pohja-Mykrä 2016a, p. 442](#)). This is exemplified by opponents stating a rural/urban divide is at play whereas ban supporters state the opposite.

The results of this study suggest that this core group, including contest officials, hold attitudes and beliefs that are consistent with resistance to change, to perceived government interference, lack of understanding or appreciation coming from state government, and feelings of victimization by urban area citizens. Changes are needed, including economic alternatives, to make the contests financially replaceable while respecting identities and interests of rural Oregonians. A former rural Chamber of Commerce director wrote: “From skeet shooting to chainsaw contests, there are many events that are less cruel, and more appealing to a broader audience, that could effectively bring guests to Harney County in postpandemic [sic]”. In a letter supporting the contest ban, a co-founder and advisor to the Benton County Agriculture and Wildlife Protection Program described “a county program [that] provides grant funds to farmers for the purchase of wildlife deterrents such as livestock guardian animals, electrified fencing, scare devices, and protective housing”. In terms of coyote deterrents, a horse owner wrote: “Use dogs, llamas and donkeys and keep them in the pasture with the sheep. The coyotes shy away from herds with any of these animals included”.

This study reveals that appealing to killing contest defenders based on how inhumane the contests are, or even the science behind their ineffectiveness, is unlikely to change their positions. Rather contest ban advocate needs to address the sociological and psychological issues that underly resistance rather than employ ecological and biological arguments. Further research is needed to study where contests have been banned and what strategies worked including if alternative events or economic opportunities were offered in exchange for ending the contests.

While the focus of this study has been coyote killing contests, the fate of other animals is also at stake. Wolf recovery conservation efforts face similar challenges when it comes to dynamics of farmed and ranched animals, free range implications, and livelihoods. In terms of coyotes, urban coyotes face their own challenges with those who fear the song dog for reasons similar and different from ranchers and farmers: “over the ages, fear and loathing of all predators has become as natural to us as growing food has” (Shivik 2014, p. 8).

## 6. Conclusions

If you kill one coyote, two will come to its funeral. Trapper saying.

Despite the efforts of animal activist groups and hardworking legislators, it is evident that trying to change attitudes of ranchers, farmers, and many rural folks about the animal killing contests via scientific arguments about animal cruelty, and data about reproductive behavior of the animals and their importance to the ecosystem does not necessarily work. This is a sociological and a political problem. Those who support the contests often claim to care about animals but clearly are operating from a place of feeling marginalized and misunderstood.

Despite wide distribution of referred studies on the impact of mass hunting on coyote populations and behavior, resisters insist a ban is not science based. Some of this opinion likely reflects a general conservative distrust of science that has been amplified in the last five or more years, despite the use of agricultural science in farming and ranching (Oreskes 2021). The economics of the contests are difficult to assess. That they are an important part of livelihoods seems unlikely as a ban supporter and former rural director of a Chamber of Commerce wrote that the contests do not appear on any community calendars, and it is unfair to paint the whole county as supporting them. That predation on cattle and sheep is a significant loss (despite government compensations) and that the contests are significant cultural sources of bonding and entertainment, was a repeated argument for the contests.

While the work of activist groups is crucial to creating public awareness of these activities, from an analysis of these letters, change among rural communities will not happen based on an appeal to the right thing to do for animals, for the ecosystem, or for the planet. These arguments and defenses are consistent with Sykes and Matza’s (1957) theory of neutralization techniques contest proponents use as well as Pohja-Mykrä’s (2016a) additional claims and metaphors that function to maintain the status quo. Arguments that address how *not* holding contests are consistent with hunting ethics, rural values, self-determination, and local views are most likely to succeed. As in other cases where animals are killed, and economics is the justification for maintaining the practice, alternatives need to be created. In Harney County Oregon, the site of one of the main contests, there is an annual migratory bird event that brings in hundreds of people (<https://www.migratorybirdfestival.com/>, accessed on 31 March 2022). This type of gathering could serve as a model for, for example, a wildlife appreciation event, rather than killing contests. An area of future inquiry is what worked to get contests legally banned in states that have succeeded? Were the issues different in the seven states or what alternatives or concessions were offered to opponents that might work in Oregon for those wishing to pursue this direction?

This analysis of the testimonies of defenders of coyote killing contests and advocates for a ban of the contests reveals disregard for science, despite declarations of bill proponents not following research. Proponents state the issue is not a rural/urban divide, while opponents claim the opposite to be true. For example:

This is NOT a RURAL vs. URBAN issue. Killing coyotes does not work! The science supports this. Biologically when coyotes lose an alpha male or female, breeding increases. Indiscriminate kills give the opposite unintended result. Stop catering to special interests’ group—it’s enough already. Oregon state needs to run the state responsibly based on scientific facts from experts and create a plan that makes sense.

Power, it seems, is as usual at the root of this debate: who has it, who does not, who perceives someone else to have it. Weil (2000, p. 413) wrote, drawing on Thucydides, “everyone commands wherever he has power to do so”. From this study while (mostly) urban and rural populations differ in perspectives on coyotes, on science, and on government involvement, they all care about these issues. However, “rural residents also have an outsized political voice in national environmental policy thanks to representation of rural states in the U.S. Senate” (Bonnie et al. 2020, p. 7). Thus, future campaigns dedicated to conserving wildlife and science-based arguments for changes in predator management practices need to focus less on the animals and more on the attitudes about rural people’s lived experiences if they wish to succeed in enacting changes.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Terminology note: When used by the author, the term “wildlife” means nonhuman animals in nature or those who are free-living (non-domesticated), not meaning ‘wild’ in a derogatory sense.
- <sup>2</sup> Coyote with a capital “C” is used to describe the cultural concept whereas lower case “c” refers to the biological animal.
- <sup>3</sup> “Bag limit, legal definition, means the maximum number of game animals, game birds, or game fish which may be taken, caught, killed, or possessed by a person, as specified by rule of the commission for a particular period of time, or as to size, sex, or species” (“Bag limit” n.d.).
- <sup>4</sup> Human beings are omnivorous and not all prey on other species. Ancient humans were foragers who routinely ate nuts, seeds, and plants (Mason [1993] 2021, p. 49), “the hunting component has been exaggerated” (p. 45).
- <sup>5</sup> In actuality the coyote diet is varied. They are “versatile and opportunistic predators that eat a variety of items (live animal and carrion, plant, and inanimate objects” (Bekoff and Wells 1986, p. 23).

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## Article

# “The Unbearable Green Demon”: A Critical Analysis of Press Representation around the Extermination of Monk Parakeets in Madrid

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**Abstract:** We examine the press representation of monk parakeets (*Myiopsitta monachus*) and their population management in Madrid city. To do this, we analyze mentions of this species in six Spanish newspapers for the case of Madrid. We apply a mixed methodology composed of framing, text analysis, and sentiment analysis. This multi-method approach allows us to further examine the framing and word choice of the newspapers, concluding that the press representation of monk parakeets has been biased and non-ethically led. We discuss this outcome by proposing a media representation guided by non-speciesist ethical framings and avoiding the objectification of nonhuman animals.

**Keywords:** monk parakeet; Madrid; press representation; invasive species; conservationism; control methods; speciesism; framing analysis; text analysis; sentiment analysis

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## 1. Introduction

The monk parakeet (*Myiopsitta monachus*) is an avian species of parrot originally from South America (Ministerio de Agricultura, Alimentación y Medio Ambiente 2013). Due to the international pet trade, individuals of this species were captured from the wild and introduced into Europe, with the first record of their presence in Spain in 1975 (Edelaar et al. 2015) and in Madrid in January 1985, with monk parakeet nests and offspring first spotted in 1989 in a eucalyptus (*Eucalyptus*) at Canillejas (Carrasco Núñez 2014).

Since this species’ introduction, records have shown exponential growth in Mediterranean countries (Postigo et al. 2019) and in Madrid city in particular (Martín Pajares 2006). The scientific evidence on monk population size and distribution indicates that “Spain alone hosts 84% of the EU monk parakeet population” (Postigo et al. 2019, p. 919), with 6702 estimated monk parakeets in Madrid and around 5000 in Barcelona in 2019 (around 50% of those in the EU in both municipalities) (Postigo et al. 2019, p. 919).

The first monk parakeet census in Madrid was taken in 1998 (p. 123). The estimated population in 2000 was around 1000 (De Ayala 2002). Nowadays, the number is not clear, with estimates from 6702 (Postigo et al. 2019, p. 919) to more than 10,000, as argued by the Madrid City Council (EFE 2020a).

Years after its introduction, this species of parrots has been able to adapt and survive in urban environments after its deliberate or accidental liberation and escape (Souviron-Priego et al. 2018). The monk parakeet species (*Myiopsitta monachus*) was included in the Spanish Catalog of Invasive Exotic Species in 2013 in Royal Decree 630/2013 (Carrasco Núñez 2014). The Madrid City Council, encouraged and supported by the Spanish Ornithological Society SEO/Birdlife, has determined that the monk parakeet population needs to be controlled due to the potential damage this species causes to ecosystems, human economies, and health. The main damages presumably caused by parakeets are the noise, the potential damage if their nests fall on people, agricultural damages (Senar et al. 2016), potential disease

transmission, and, most importantly, alleged environmental competition with native birds (SEO Birdlife 2017) (hereinafter, the “problem/s”). As a response to these problems, the Madrid City Council approved services using lethal methods that involve slaying the parrots, as per the guidelines proposed by the Spanish Ministry for the Ecological Transition and the Demographic Challenge, or MITECO (Ministerio para la Transición Ecológica y el Reto Demográfico), for exotic invasive species (Orueta 2007).

Previous literature on human responses to introduced species and the control strategies adopted for their populations underlines the importance of analyzing social perceptions and attitudes toward these nonhuman animals before planning an intervention (Berthier et al. 2017; Ribeiro et al. 2021; Perry and Perry 2008). Scientists and political authorities need to consider the existence of previous social manifestations of ethical concerns regarding eradication plans, as is the case with activist campaigns and public dissent against the slaying of monk parakeets that has already taken place in other parts of the world (Seymour 2013; Crowley et al. 2019). Media professionals have the ethical duty of amplifying the voices of affected stakeholders, including nonhuman animals, in situations in which they are primarily affected (Freeman and Merskin 2016; Animals and Media 2016; UPF-CAE 2016).

It is well known that the media has a great influence on shaping human views, attitudes, and relations with other nonhuman animals (Molloy 2011; Almiron et al. 2016). This potential impact must therefore be handled with professionalism and moral responsibility to include nonhuman animals with whom humans share the environment. Ethical guidelines on journalism and nonhuman animals point out the need to (a) provide continuous coverage of situations that affect nonhuman individuals, as well as the work of animal advocacy organizations; (b) avoid anthropocentric perspectives and speciesist bias when covering nonhuman animal issues; and (c) select appropriate terminology to avoid the denigration, devaluation, and misrepresentation of other animals (Freeman and Merskin 2016; Animals and Media 2016; UPF-CAE 2016). Although nonhuman animals do not literally have a voice in terms of human language, they do communicate and have specific needs and interests of their own (Freeman et al. 2011). Ethical journalism needs to listen, and responsibly represent these nonhuman animal voices and perspectives, particularly in a speciesist, human-dominated world (Freeman et al. 2011; Almiron and Tafalla 2019).

Accordingly, we are interested in examining how this problem is presented by Spanish newspapers and how this representation is related to the material lives of these birds and the social attitudes towards them. This is important because the presence of monk parakeets in Madrid city urban areas have been framed as a problem on the grounds of the conservation biology field. However, we suspect that this evidence, if not ethically framed, can help to promote a view where monk parakeets’ lives and interests are overlooked.

We conducted research to examine how monk parakeets were represented in six Spanish newspapers for a six-year period (2015–2021) when the Madrid City Council decided on population management. Our main research objectives were to examine (1) whether and how the press represented the “problem” with the monk parakeet (*Myiopsitta monachus*) population in Madrid and its origin, (2) which political organizations and institutions were presented as responsible for managing this “problem”, (3) the management solutions that were suggested for solving this “problem”, (4) who the media gave voice to and whether it was for or against the killing, and (5) which keywords and sentiments were associated with the news covering monk parakeets in the examined Spanish newspapers. For this goal, we used the framing, keyword, and sentiment analysis methodologies. This paper aims to contribute to the existent literature on critical animal and media studies, journalism studies, and press representation by covering an under-studied case: the representation of monk parakeet population management in the city of Madrid.

This paper is structured as follows: Firstly, we present a literature review organized into three main sections: (1) “The Monk Parakeet”, with basic information about these birds, their introduction into Spain, and their current status; (2) “Exotic, Invasive, Pest”, where we explore the categorization of monk parakeets and question their status as an exotic invasive species or pests from a non-anthropocentric and anti-speciesist ethical view; and (3) “Press

Representation of Nonhuman Animals”, where we explore previous literature on this topic, with special attention to liminal nonhuman animals considered invasive or pests. Secondly, we present the methodologies of our research, namely, framing, keyword, and sentiment analysis. Lastly, we provide our main results, and we discuss them in conversation with existing literature on the topic.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. The Monk Parakeet (*Myiopsitta monachus*)

Monk parakeets are sentient and intelligent individuals that belong to an avian species of the family *Psittacidae* and are originally from South America (Martín Pajares 2006). Monk parakeets can be recognized by their green color, greyish chest, and bluish remiges (Muñoz Gallego 2019) (Figure 1). They are medium size, 28–29 cm long, weigh between 90 and 140 g (Muñoz Gallego 2019), and do not have sexual dimorphism (Muñoz Gallego 2019). In Spanish urban areas, monk parakeets usually live in urban parks or gardens (Carrasco Núñez 2014), and in the case of Madrid, most of their nests are found in cedars (*Cedrus* spp.) and Oriental planes (*Platanus × acerifolia* (Aiton) Willd) (Martín Pajares 2006).



**Figure 1.** Three monk parakeets on the grass in Rome, Italy. Source: Vito Giaccari/Pexels.

They are generally monogamous, “so quite a few monk parakeets stay together in a pair but some change, often after their pair mate had disappeared—dead or dispersed” (Dawson-Pell 2021). Monk parakeets are highly social birds (Muñoz and Real 2006) that have a sedentary lifestyle, a broad diet (Appelt et al. 2016), and gregarious behavior (Di Santo et al. 2013).

A unique characteristic of the monk parakeet is that it is the only species in its family to build its own nest with twigs, sometimes using existing cavities (Hernández-Brito et al. 2021). Its preferred place to build its nests is at the top of trees, 12.3 m high on average (Carrasco Núñez 2014). They generally prefer to stay on tree perches to reduce predation risks, prevent overheating due to high summer temperatures during the day, and be able to rest (Di Santo et al. 2013). However, larger clusters can be observed on the ground, especially for feeding purposes (Di Santo et al. 2013). Di Santo et al. (2013) also argued that they come together on the ground, where they are more vulnerable, probably to reduce the risks of predation or potential attacks (p. 280), which speaks to the social nature of monk parakeet behavior.

Another piece of evidence of their social behavior, even beyond their species, is that they live in communal nests, and each nest has a variable number of brooding chambers that are used year-round (Carrasco Núñez 2014). During the breeding season, each chamber is inhabited by a pair of breeding adults, and in non-breeding periods each chamber can accommodate three or four individuals (Fresia Martín 1989). Their clutch has four to eight eggs (Carrasco Núñez 2014) that are deposited every two days (Aramburú 1991). Some studies detected cohabitation in the same monk parakeets' nests by different species of birds, such as the Italian sparrow (*Passer italiae*) (Moltoni 1945) and the Spanish sparrow (*Passer hispaniolensis*) (Lorenzo Gutiérrez 1993). Monk parakeets' nests' chambers are therefore frequently used by other avian species to avoid predators (Wagner 2012), and these nests provide a substrate for breeding, offering a thermoregulated environment that determines avian reproductive success (Hernández-Brito et al. 2021). Monk parakeets' facilitation of other species' development through their nests has made them earn the qualification of "ecosystem engineers", meaning that monk parakeets create a "nest web" that provides a resource to several birds who nest in secondary cavities (Hernández-Brito et al. 2021).

Even FCC, the company in charge of the monk parakeet slaying in Madrid, recognized in their report about the same situation in Zaragoza that monk parakeets cohabit and share nests with white storks (*Ciconia ciconia*), western jackdaws (*Coloeus monedula*), rock doves (*Columba livia*), common wood pigeons (*Columba palumbus*), Eurasian collared doves (*Streptopelia decaocto*), and house sparrows (*Passer domesticus*), and that co-feeding is also peaceful between monk parakeets and several avian urban species (Esteban 2016).

Regarding their global distribution, this species can adapt to different urban and non-urban environments both in its original habitat and where it has been introduced (Martín Pajares 2006), being among the most successfully introduced and established parrots worldwide (Appelt et al. 2016). Most monk parakeets have been caught from the wild and moved from South America to pet shops and homes in different countries around the globe (Edelaar et al. 2015). According to CITES records, 84.20% of individuals were traded for commercial purposes and unreported purposes in 14.62% of cases (Calzada Preston et al. 2021, p. 704). Spain is among the top three countries importing monk parakeets (along with Mexico and the US) (Calzada Preston et al. 2021, pp. 705–6); however, since 2005 the imports have been reduced, after the European Union passed the Wild Bird Declaration and prohibited the export of wild-caught birds (Grupo de Aves Exóticas, SEO/Birdlife 2012 in Calzada Preston et al. (2021, pp. 706–9).

Monk parakeets were therefore brought to Spain because of legal and illegal wildlife and pet trade, and they were able to adapt to urban ecosystems after release or escape (Martín Pajares 2006; Edelaar et al. 2015; Abellán et al. 2016; Souviron-Priego et al. 2018; Calzada Preston et al. 2021). The dimension of the global problem of human export of non-human animals is huge, and the case of monk parakeets is good evidence of it. Nowadays, there are records of these birds being established and/or bred on five continents and in multiple countries, including Europe (Austria, Belgium, Czech Republic, Denmark, France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Portugal, Slovakia, Spain, and the United Kingdom), America (Brazil, Canada, Caiman Islands, Chile, Dominican Republic, Guadeloupe, Mexico, Puerto Rico, Venezuela, and the US—including the Virgin Islands), Asia (Israel and Japan), Africa (Kenya), and Oceania (Australia) (Calzada Preston et al. 2021, pp. 706–9).

## 2.2. Exotic, Invasive, Pest

Special attention has been paid to the language used to talk about nonhuman animals, their characteristics and activities, and how certain terminology reproduces speciesism and helps normalize violence towards them (Dunayer 2001; Stibbe 2012; Freeman and Merskin 2016; Animals and Media 2016; UPF-CAE 2016). We present in this section an explanation of several terms used to describe and label monk parakeets and their implications from an ethical point of view<sup>1</sup>.

When an animal or plant species is described as exotic, it refers to “any species, including its larvae, seeds, eggs, spores, or other biological material capable of propagating the species, which is not native to that ecosystem (Beck et al. 2008). An exotic species does not necessarily cause economic or environmental harm to an ecosystem” (Barros 2016, pp. 311–12). In the case of terrestrial vertebrate nonhuman animals, most of those established in Europe were introduced as commodities by animal exploitation industries such as the pet trade, the live food trade, or the fur industry (Keller et al. 2011). Even if not all species moved beyond their native range can establish at a certain territory, research shows that their presence implies global biodiversity loss and damage to human economies and health (Keller et al. 2011).

A non-native species is termed an “introduced” species when it “enters” a new environment or geographic location, intentionally or accidentally by several “introduction pathways” (the various processes and mechanisms of entrance) (Jeschke et al. 2021). Non-human animals can spread naturally from a neighboring region where the species is not autochthonous (Jeschke et al. 2021) or be displaced by direct or indirect human intervention and transportation (Keller et al. 2011). This introduction can be deliberate (for instance, for fishing or hunting purposes) or accidental (in the case of escapes of nonhuman animals kept as pets). The introduced species has been considered a “casual” species if it cannot self-sustain but is found beyond human breeding or cultivation, or an “invasive” species when “it spreads widely and causes measurable environmental, economic, or human health impacts” (Keller et al. 2011, p. 2). The Spanish Official State Gazette considers that the term “invasion” describes the negative impact a species has upon its non-native ecosystem due to its rapid spreading and population growth (Boletín Oficial del Estado 2011).

The invasive nature of a species is frequently debatable among the scientific community because many factors that are not necessarily predictable when it is introduced are at stake (Álvarez Halcón 2014). The success of a certain species to becoming established in a given area depends on multiple factors—the similarity with its original environment; the size of the initial population (propagule) and how often it is introduced; the presence of predators, parasites, diseases, food resources, and/or potential competitors; the species’ own biological characteristics; the type and complexity of the new ecosystem; and the size of the new area, among other unpredictable environmental factors (Álvarez Romero et al. 2008). In the case of exotic birds in Spain and Portugal, most introductions were the result of accidental escapes of traded birds around the world, of which a large proportion escaped from public zoological parks (Abellán et al. 2016). Approximately 8% of introduced bird species successfully establish breeding populations in the wild, which is aligned with the tens rule<sup>2</sup> (Abellán et al. 2016, p. 269). Wild-caught birds are more able to survive in new environments, which contributes to their establishment success (Abellán et al. 2017, p. 9388). In the spread stage, “success seems to be mainly influenced by the extent to which climatic conditions in this region resemble those from the species’ native range” (Abellán et al. 2017, p. 9388). In Spain, the organism responsible for the inclusion or exclusion of a given species on the Spanish Catalog of Invasive Exotic Species is the Ministry for the Ecological Transition and the Demographic Challenge (Herrero Puncernau et al. 2012). This catalog includes species “susceptible of becoming a serious threat by competing with native wild species and altering their genetic purity or ecological balance, as well as potentially invasive exotic species” (Herrero Puncernau et al. 2012, pp. 12–13<sup>3</sup>). The monk parakeet (*Myiopsitta monachus*) was cataloged as an invasive exotic species in Spain in 2013.

Monk parakeets have also been associated with the terms “pest” and “plague”, which are also used for introduced species that can potentially damage ecosystems. However, there are no objective criteria to define a particular species as a pest, which is a completely anthropic concept that human animals apply to any species they regard as unpleasant (Alguazas Martínez 2017). This sense of being unpleasant is generally motivated by its perception as existing in huge and growing populations. In the case of the urban co-

habitation with nonhuman animals labeled as pests, this perception is also related to the separation humans socially create between the city and nature (Borsellino 2015).

When referring to so-called exotic or invasive nonhuman animals, xenophobic references and war metaphors—similar to those used for human migrants and refugees—are abundant (Subramaniam 2001; Khazaal and Almiron 2021). This language provokes a sense of otherness and negative emotions such as fear and revulsion that easily legitimize their persecution and eradication (Inglis 2020, pp. 300–2). In Meera Iona Inglis' words:

“Animals which have been labelled ‘invasive species’ are the great villains of the wildlife conservation world. They are represented, both by the popular media and within academic discourse, as marauders, aliens, killers and monsters (Strayer and Waldman 2013). As a result, the public is encouraged to perceive these animals, not as valuable members of the biotic community, but as a threat that needs to be met with deadly force” (Inglis 2020, p. 299).

Although there is evidence of the potential damage certain nonhuman animals can cause to ecosystems and human economies or health, this categorization is not neutral (Subramaniam 2001) and its use faces the problem of promoting wrongful species discrimination (Abbate and Fischer 2019) and devaluing the lives of nonhuman animals, which cannot be ethically justified (Inglis 2020, p. 300). On the one hand, a more nuanced understanding of the interaction of different species is needed, particularly in the context of fast environmental transformations and the climate emergency (Pearce 2015). On the other hand, Inglis' proposal (2020) is to avoid these simplistic and demonizing terms, using “potential problem species” instead (Inglis 2020, p. 309). Inglis is convinced that changing the way we describe, speak about, and appreciate nonhuman animals can influence public policy and how the problems associated with them are managed (Inglis 2020, p. 300). Other alternative terms we collect and suggest would be, simply, “introduced nonhuman animals”, “allochthonous species”, “displaced nonhuman animals”, or “nonhuman animal migrants” (Khazaal and Almiron 2021).

Furthermore, the construction of nonhuman animals as invaders or pests hides a human supremacist, speciesist, and anthropocentric worldview. In this case, the slaying of monk parakeets has been justified with the hypothetical greater good of maintaining habitat balances rather than individual lives, while focusing much less on the human responsibility in monk parakeets' transportation for business purposes (Almiron and Tafalla 2019). It is important to bear in mind that eradication plans and management of exotic species “are situated within complex social and political contexts that certainly cannot be understood by focusing solely on the amount of damage done to the physical environment; if that were the case, farmed animals would be the first to be targeted” (Reis 2014, p. 304). In fact, under this environmental logic and considering Earth's history, humans are one of the most invasive species of all (Inglis 2020, p. 311). However, the culling of human animals will, of course, never be ethically justified for environmental or ecosystemic reasons, which confirms the centrality of humans in comparison to “second-class sentient beings toward whom compassion and cruelty are applied differently” (Almiron and Tafalla 2019, p. 8).

Because monk parakeets are labeled as an exotic invasive species by law, their management is depicted as a must. Various methods of monitoring, controlling, and eradicating the parrots are applied in different contexts. The Spanish ministry guidelines suggest the following methods for the slaying of monk parakeets: nest destruction, the use of traps, shooting, the use of toxic products, biological control, intimidation, and live capture, with the latter being the most recommended method (Orueta 2007). More recent research argues for shooting as the most effective and cost-efficient method to eradicate the monk parakeet population (Senar et al. 2021, p. 471).

The scientific literature does not generally emphasize monk parakeets as sentient, valuable individuals that deserve moral consideration (Subramaniam 2001; Abbate and Fischer 2019; Inglis 2020). In addition, human ethical responsibility for the problems created by displaced species is overlooked when discussing the proposed methods of the control or

eradication of certain species (Almiron and Tafalla 2019). What is worse, the main source of the problem (the global transportation and trade of exotic birds) remains active and not well controlled, therefore giving room to potential release, escape, and settlement of other introduced birds in the future (Souviron-Priego et al. 2018; Eurogroup for Animals 2020).

### 2.3. Press Representation of Nonhuman Animals

Studying the press discourse around nonhuman animals “can provide insight into social attitudes toward other species” (Herzog and Galvin 1992, p. 77). Moreover, the press can play a relevant role in turning the public’s attention to particular issues and frames (Freeman 2009) through the agenda-setting effect (McCombs and Shaw 1972). The press is not only helpful in understanding social attitudes toward certain nonhuman animals, but also crucial in building them. This process is related to a social constructionist view that Freeman (2009) addresses by referring to Hall’s (1997) idea: “the meanings humans associate with anything are not derived from nature; they are social constructions created through human language” (Freeman 2009, p. 83).

In this regard, framing this type of nonhuman animals as a plague, pest, or similar metaphor can contribute to undermining their moral status, so their welfare seems unimportant (van Gerwen et al. 2020). As argued in the previous section, “words such as ‘invaders’, ‘foreigners’ and ‘aliens’ are frequently used to create a sense of otherness, making the persecution of non-native animals seem justifiable” (Inglis 2020, p. 301). Furthermore, the liminal status<sup>4</sup> of the parakeets must be considered, as the discussions about animal treatment, welfare, and rights do not usually concern these types of nonhuman animals or human obligations toward them (Donaldson and Kymlicka 2011; van Gerwen et al. 2020). On top of that, the speciesist mainstream perspective in the press discourse does not include nonhuman animals’ voices, as Freeman understands them: “a description of the animals’ response to their situation or through allowing humans to speak on behalf of the nonhumans’ interests” (Freeman 2009, p. 85).

By analyzing the media representation of the Asian carp (an invasive species in the United States), Mando and Stack observed a rhetorical methodology that combines strategies “such as the invocation of proximization, spectacle, and anti-immigration rhetoric to achieve a specific negative response” (Mando and Stack 2018, p. 1). Proximization is a “discourse strategy of presenting physically and temporally distant events and states of affairs (including ‘distant’ adversarial ideologies) as increasingly and negatively consequential to the speaker and her addressee” (Cap 2014, p. 190). Cap’s proximization theory is, to him, “arguably the most viable model to capture the us vs. them opposition and conflict” (Cap 2018, p. 382). These strategies are used when representing invasive species to create a sense of threat and fear through this kind of proximization discourse (Mando and Stack 2018).

A study on the representation of seagulls in the British press underlines the alarmist, sensationalist, and inaccurate coverage of seagulls and their relations with human animals in urban areas (Carr and Reyes-Galindo 2017). The authors found two main frames to depict seagulls: “pest-as-annoyance” and “pestilence-as-harmful” (Carr and Reyes-Galindo 2017, p. 156). Both frames denote that the seagulls are seen as unpleasant, dirty, and problematic beings that do not belong in the city and should therefore be culled. Events related to seagull attacks were given continuity, creating a sense of repetition that presented the problem as a constant (p. 165). The relations between seagulls and humans were very much mediated by the problematic sharing of a space, where human urban coexistence with liminal seagulls underlined human supremacist notions of belonging (Carr and Reyes-Galindo 2017, p. 154). Carr and Reyes-Galindo argued that “When animals transgress the cultural boundaries of what is perceived as ‘appropriate’ living spaces, the relevance of cultural stereotyping in the definition of a ‘pest’ comes to the fore even more clearly” (Carr and Reyes-Galindo 2017, p. 156). Seagull–human proximity was presented as a cause for fear, disgust, and danger, with the potential to shape people’s attitudes toward these birds

and public policies that involve the extermination of the pests (Carr and Reyes-Galindo 2017, p. 148).

Previously, Stewart and Cole (2016) examined the press representation of urban foxes in the UK before and after a fox attacked two nine-year-old twins in 2010. Stewart and Cole argue that the depiction of foxes changed after the incident, as urban foxes started gaining attention in the media. The way foxes were portrayed shifted from “loveable characters”, “totems of nature”, and “pseudo-‘pets’” to “vermin” and “transgressive, unclean and mysterious killers” (Stewart and Cole 2016). Press representation of foxes’ transgressions reshaped the relations between human and nonhuman animals, justifying violence toward foxes and revealing “the precariousness of the benevolent toleration on non-human others in human-defined urban milieu, with lethal consequences” (Stewart and Cole 2016, p. 136).

Press representation of possums in New Zealand reveals similar mechanisms, including speciesist and patriotic references and war metaphors. In 2009, Potts detected two predominant portrayals of possums in the press: “foreign threat narrative” and “revenge narrative”. These frames are devised by a polarization of kiwis (perceived as the national symbol and a beloved animal) against possums (alien invaders). Both portrayals perpetuate speciesism by demonizing and blaming possums, conveying the idea that they intentionally and maliciously attack, destroy, or invade New Zealand, and ignoring human responsibility in their past releases and the fact that “they are as much victims of human colonization and exploitation as the native animals of Aotearoa” (Potts 2009, pp. 17–18). McCrow-Young et al. (2015) identified three main themes in their later analysis: “the techniques and updates on the War on Possums”, “possum killing as sport/a game”, and “victims versus enemies”, with kiwis again being framed as the possums’ victims. In this case, too, press representation helps portray the possum as an invader, pest, and national threat, fabricating a discourse that legitimizes its extermination and obscures the sentient, living creature behind this construction.

Possums are often presented as “cute, but ... lethal”. Potts highlights that “This rhetoric is employed when trying to combat sentimentalism that may arise from the obvious aesthetic appeal of the possum” (2009, p. 3). Similarly, monk parakeets are socially regarded as beautiful, charismatic birds (Berthier et al. 2017; Ribeiro et al. 2021). The positive perception of monk parakeets implies that population management tactics may find opposition and resistance (Seymour 2013; Crowley et al. 2019; Ribeiro et al. 2021).

### 3. Materials and Methods

#### 3.1. Aim and Sample

This research aimed to examine the representation of monk parakeets in Spanish newspapers, specifically regarding the execution campaign started by the City Council of Madrid. To do that, we selected three of the major printed newspapers in terms of audience (AIMC 2021) with regional or local sections in Madrid: *El País*, *El Mundo*, and *ABC*. These newspapers represent the mainstream press in Spain. In general terms, whereas *El País* has an editorial line closer to social democracy, *El Mundo* is more associated with economic liberalism, and *ABC* with conservatism. To enrich the sample, we added online newspapers—*elDiario.es* and *Público*—that, albeit not the most read or influential, have proven interesting for the study of critical animal standpoints in previous research (Moreno and Almiron 2021). We also added *El Español*, the leader in digital audiences, to provide a similar online-only newspaper with a more liberal editorial line than its two online-only counterparts (*El Español* 2021).

To gather the sample of texts we used the Factiva database for *El País*, *El Mundo*, and *ABC*, and the newspapers’ advanced search engines for *elDiario.es*, *Público*, and *El Español*. We looked for texts containing the keywords “*cotorras*” (monk parakeets) and “Madrid” between 1 January 2015, and 31 May 2021. The Spanish term *cotorras* could refer to either monk parakeets or rose-ringed parakeets (*Psittacula krameri*). Since in Madrid there is an inferior population of rose-ringed parakeets than monk parakeets, these species are related

to very different effects on the environment, and since population management in Madrid city is more directed towards monk parakeets, we decided to focus only on this species for our analysis and assumed that the *cotorras* mentioned during this period in the press were monk parakeets unless the contrary was specified. We discarded wrong mentions or texts that did not address the situation of parrots in Madrid. This resulted in a sample of 64 texts.

### 3.2. Framing Analysis

To frame is to define a problem or situation based on a part of reality, i.e., to explain a complex issue from a particular point of view (Entman 1993). In communication studies, it allows the researcher to identify how a certain issue is portrayed by the media, and which definitions, solutions, or interpretations are discussed to comprehend reality's nuances. Framing has been largely used in communication research, including research within the field of critical animal and media studies (i.e., Freeman 2014; Khazaal and Almiron 2014; Moreno and Almiron 2021; Fernández 2021).

We took framing as a tool to qualitatively detect descriptions, responsibilities, and solutions concerning the problem. Specifically, to answer objectives 1 (problem and origin) and 4 (critical discourses), we conducted a qualitative analysis of these frames after reading all the texts. For objectives 2 (responsibilities) and 3 (solutions), we opted for quantitative analysis of the texts. The frames of analysis of objective 2 were inductively elaborated, coding the entities referred to as responsible for the problem and grouping them. For the frame analysis of objective 3, we inductively coded the following pre-established categories from the review of press articles: (1) extermination, (2) reproductive control, (3) nest destruction, and (4) other solutions. We searched the sample for these frames, counting "yes" or "no" for each one of them in all the texts.

### 3.3. Keyword and Sentiment Analysis in R

Computational techniques for text analysis are a promising methodology in communication studies, despite their hard implementation in academic routines due to the steep learning curve of these tools (Arcila-Calderón et al. 2016). This paper includes two computational analyses that complement the abovementioned framing analysis.

On the one hand, we analyzed the most frequent keywords using R. To do that, we collected a sample of mentions by taking the paragraphs mentioning parakeets (if the text was not centered on them) or the whole text (if that was the theme of the piece). Then, we processed this sample in R: We converted the text into token words to be analyzed, excluded useless stop words in Spanish, counted the words, and represented the result in plots with the graphic package *ggplot2*. Later, we reviewed the word sample manually to delete ambiguous terms or connectors and translated the most frequent words into English. This basic analysis provided us with an overview of the most common words the press is using to talk about monk parakeets.

On the other hand, we conducted a sentiment analysis, a text-analysis technique that compares the words used with their associated sentiments gathered in a dictionary. For this analysis, we used the translation of the *{tidytext}* dictionaries and instructions provided by Fradejas Rueda (2020). The sentiment analysis was conducted with two dictionaries: *ncr*, which includes a wide variety of emotions (Negative, Positive, Fear, Trust, Anger, Sadness, Disgust, Premonition, Joy, and Astonishment), and *bing*, which only includes Positive and Negative emotions. The same sample of token words used for the word counting in the previous step was used here.

## 4. Results

### 4.1. Monk Parakeets' Presence: Framing the "Problem"

The press portrays the presence of monk parakeets in Madrid as a problem, as shown in the qualitative assessment that follows. The problems caused by monk parakeets that the media emphasize include those related to their invasive status, such as the biodiversity

threat and the species extinction (Aunión 2016). They are presented as competing with local species, particularly house sparrows (*Passer domesticus*) (Domingo 2021), and damaging certain trees, such as cedars (*Cedrus* spp.), by eating their sprouts and affecting trees and the whole ecosystem (Domingo 2021; Tena 2020). Monk parakeets are very frequently described as plagues or pests (Rivas 2018; Lantigua 2018; Gallelo 2020; Domingo 2020c; Barcala 2021; Domingo 2021): “the worst invasive plague of the city” (Rivas 2018) whose presence has “serious consequences” (Pinedo 2015). The problem is centrally related to the number of them (Planelles 2015), their aggressiveness (Merino 2015; Tena 2020), that they “invade Spain” (El País 2016a), and that they bother citizens and neighbors with their “deafening noise” (Barcala 2021) or “strident trills” (Gallelo 2020). Probably the most blatant example of the rhetoric analyzed here is the one that gives a title to this paper. *El Español* refers to the monk parakeet in the title of a news piece as “Monk Parakeet: the unbearable green demon spreading out of control in Madrid” (Fava and Barreno 2018).

Their nests are presented as a risk in the city because of potential falls onto people (Rivas 2018; EFE 2020b). They are also considered vectors of diseases such as salmonellosis, psittacosis, or avian influenza (EFE 2017; Domingo 2019; Domingo 2020b). To a lesser extent, monk parakeet presence is said to be degrading urban furniture (Barcala 2021; Reyero 2018). Monk parakeets are also presented as being in ecological competition with other avian species such as the house sparrow, as stated by Borja Carabante, a local delegate for Environment and Mobility:

“We need to understand that not all the environment is the same and that there are good and evil. Those who come from elsewhere aggressively, unfortunately, must not be here—they do not have the same ecological right to life as we all have. They are where they should not be and they are hurting us” (El Español 2019).

Most texts do not mention the origin of the overpopulation of monk parakeets in urban areas (the legal and illegal trade of bird species for human purposes). However, some press articles point out that “this species came to Spain because people bought parrots as pets” and that monk parakeets have been “victims of commercialization” (Pérez Mendoza 2020) and victims of “human negligence” who “now pay the consequences in their own flesh” (Ferrero 2019).

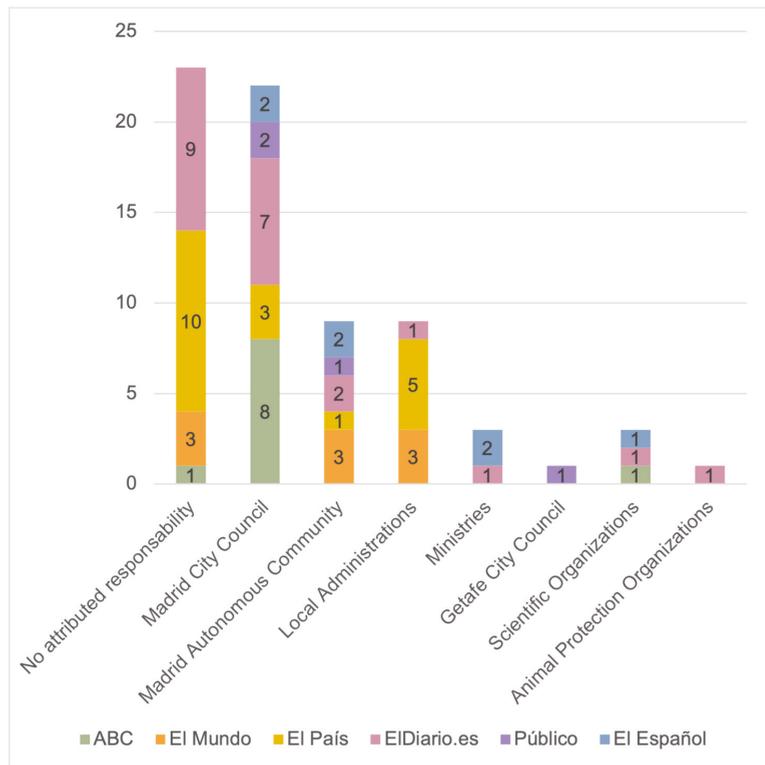
#### 4.2. Political Organizations' and Institutions' Responsibility in the Management

Given that the presence of monk parakeets in Madrid urban areas is considered a problem that needs to be managed, we explored to whom the analyzed newspapers attributed the responsibility of the control/eradication campaign. In 23 articles, no political personalities or institutions are presented as responsible for managing this problem. In 22 cases, the responsibility is attributed to the Madrid City Council, and in one case it is attributed specifically to the Getafe City Council, in an article where the management of parakeets in that municipality was specifically being discussed (Público 2019). In nine articles, the political powers of the autonomous community of Madrid are considered responsible, and in nine cases the responsibility is attributed to local administrations in general. The Spanish ministries are mentioned in three cases (particularly, the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries, and Food in two cases and the Ministry for the Ecological Transition and the Demographic Challenge in one case). Natural scientists and scientific organizations are explicitly considered in three cases, in one case the author explicitly mentions the Spanish Ornithological Society SEO/Birdlife (Rivas 2018), and finally, animal protection organizations are only mentioned in one case, namely, the FEPA (Spanish Federation of Animal Protection), composed of nine animal protection entities in coordination (González 2018) (see Figure 2 for an extension of the attribution of responsibility by the newspaper).

News articles often refer to the legal framework when framing which institutions have the responsibility of addressing the situation. An example that reflects this argument is the following:

“This need to remove invasive exotic birds is regulated by a Royal Decree from 2013. The removal is the regional government’s competence. However, according to sources from the Madrid Regional Ministry of the Environment it is up to the local council to locate the problem and get the regional government’s authorization to eliminate them. Madrid City Council claims to have the authorization to remove the nests from the municipality. When these are located in private areas, it is the landlord who must request authorization” (El País 2016b).

In an article from *El Español*, explicit coordination of the political powers is recommended: “There should be a coordination of the three levels of administration, starting with the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries, Food and Environment with a National Plan because the parrots do not understand territorial limits” (Fava and Barreno 2018).



**Figure 2.** Attributed responsibility for population management of monk parakeets in the analyzed articles. Source: Own elaboration from texts from *El País*, *El Mundo*, *ABC*, *elDiario.es*, *Público*, and *El Español*.

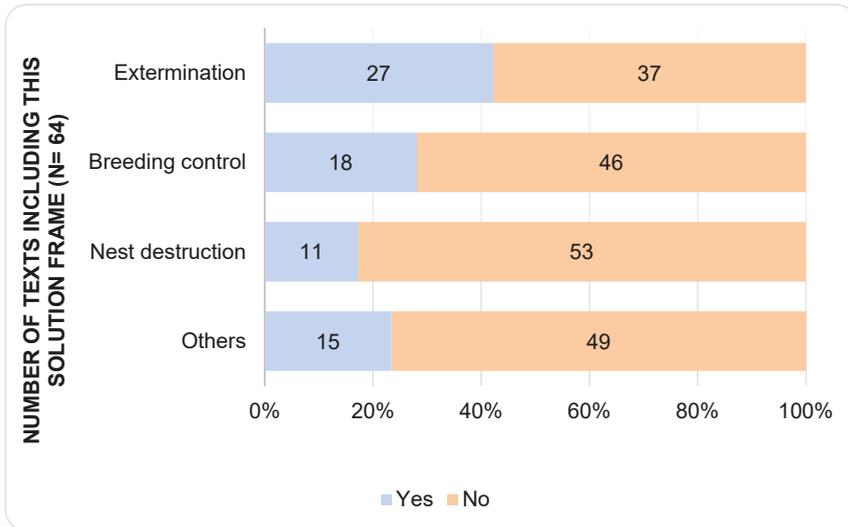
#### 4.3. Proposed Methods for Monk Parakeet Population Management

We codified four main frames of solutions offered by the press to manage monk parakeet populations in Madrid: (1) extermination, (2) reproductive control, (3) nest destruction, and (4) other solutions; however, extermination results in the most present frame.

The proposed solutions for managing the problem of the monk parakeet population focus on exterminating them (as suggested in 42.19% of the texts). Solutions such as the reproductive control of this species appear in 28.13% of the texts, and destroying the nests is a suggestion included in 17.19% of the texts. Other solutions are present in 23.44% of

the texts. Some of these include creating a census to assess the magnitude of the alleged problem, to ban the commerce of this species, to move them to other areas, to capture them, to avoid releasing them when they are held as pets, to extract them from natural areas, to ethically control their spread; or to ethically design a plan for them (see Figure 3 for the frequency of each frame in the examined sample).

The unwillingness to seek non-lethal alternatives is palpable in the press, as *El País* argues when an interviewee states that the nests being removed will only make parakeets go elsewhere and keep breeding: “slaying them is the only way to get rid of them” (Ramos Aísa 2019). An *ABC* article also holds that “From SEO/Birdlife they remind that the national legislation establishes the complete elimination” (Domingo 2021). This portrayal of the extermination is accompanied by information on the economic cost of the extermination, as can be read in *El Mundo*: “PSOE<sup>5</sup> council member Alfredo González described as ‘absurd’ an operation that costs 260 euros per specimen to be exterminated” (Roces 2020). Solutions along the lines of reproductive control are usually mentioned together or as a complement to extermination: “adult specimens will be hunted using different methods such as cage traps, nets, or compressed air carbines. At the same time, the egg clutches will be sterilized and controlled. The nests shall also be removed” (Domingo 2020a).



**Figure 3.** Proportion of each frame within the analyzed texts. Source: Own elaboration from texts from *El País*, *El Mundo*, *ABC*, *elDiario.es*, *Público*, and *El Español*.

#### 4.4. Representation of Animal Advocacy Discourses Critical to the Slaying

The representation of alternative discourses in opposition to the extermination of monk parakeets is anecdotal in comparison with those supporting the slaying, mostly based on biological conservation arguments but also presumed urban co-habitation risks and conflicts with the parrots.

News articles mostly omit citizen sensitivities against extermination and animal advocacy positions in search of ethical management strategies or solutions. These discourses are sometimes framed as well intentioned, but they are delegitimized because of the unfeasibility of alternative control and eradication methods. For instance, in *ABC* the extermination is said to be “hard and painful” (Domingo 2017), but the text underlines that there are no other options. In an article from *El Español*, the pressure of animal advocacy organizations to stop the shooting of parakeets in Seville is presented, only to later argue that cruelty-free

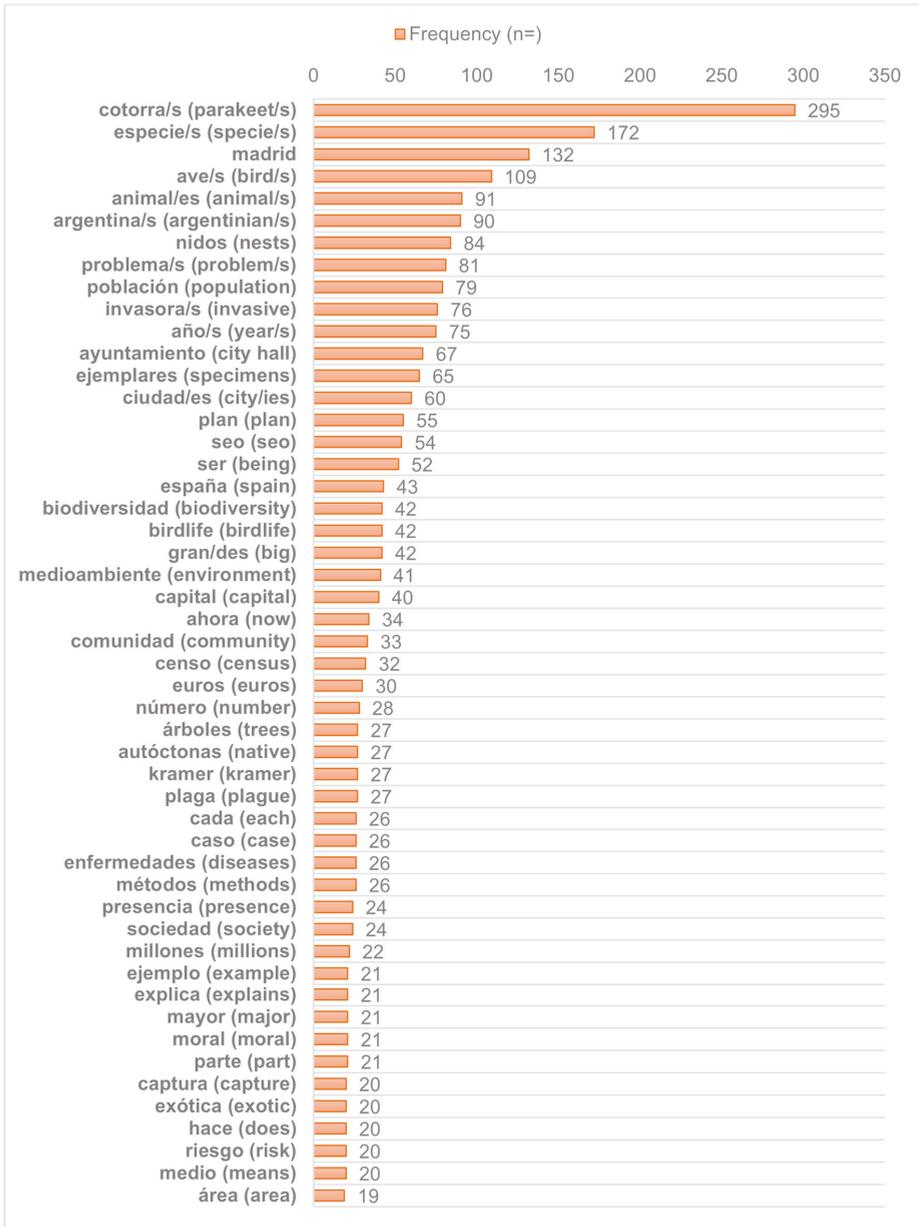
measures are unviable (Fava and Barreno 2018). The search for ethical possibilities for monk parakeet population management is considered a concern of sensitive people. For example, Emilia Landaluce wrote in *El Mundo*: “It is evident that monk parakeets should be eliminated. The challenge is to do it without hurting citizen sentimentality” (Landaluce 2019). This argument reflects an anthropocentric view in which the interests of the nonhuman animal are neglected, and only the human interests matter. A headline from an *ABC* article presents the animal advocacy organizations as “the opposition”: “The City Council estimates the existing invasive birds at 13,000 and wants to reduce them to 10% while the opposition calls for a new census after the snowfall” (Barcala 2021).

The solutions found in the texts for the most part do not take into account moral determinants or the parrots’ interests. Only a few texts do consider it, especially those on the animalist blog *El Caballo de Nietzsche* (“Nietzsche’s Horse”), on *elDiario.es*. For example, this blog covers the creation of the Spanish Federation for Animal Protection (Federación Española de Protección Animal, FEPA), which is working on ethical management alternatives for parakeets (González 2018), and an interview with Sergio Barbero, a veterinarian expert in exotic nonhuman animals who talks about how unethical and inefficient the current control methods are (Asamblea Antiespecista de Madrid 2021). The later article (Asamblea Antiespecista de Madrid 2021) is also the only one in which the “Son Nuestras Vecinas” (“They Are Our Neighbors”) campaign against the extermination is mentioned. This campaign includes street protests, demonstrations, organized calls, emails to the business in charge of the slaying, sticking posters on the streets, and sharing among neighbors the online petition for more ethical management of monk parakeet populations in Madrid.<sup>6</sup> The campaign represents parakeets as community members and as part of a marginalized population, as documented in previous campaigns against the slaying of monk parakeets in New York City (Seymour 2013).

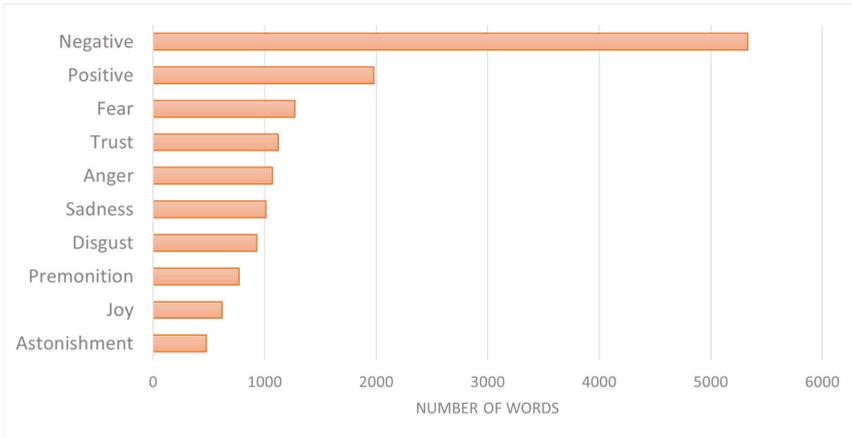
#### 4.5. Terminology Used to Describe Monk Parakeets and Sentiments Evoked by the News

Our keyword analysis using R showed an insightful list of top words. Among the most common words in the press, *nidos* (nests) stands out, which points out the importance of these structures, often criticized by their weight and size. *Ejemplares* (“specimens”) is a frequently used word, whose implicit meaning leads to the reification of these individuals in terms of numbers. *Problema/s* (“problem/s”) is also common, which implies a negative portrayal of the parakeets’ existence. It is important to highlight that *invasora/s* (“invader/s”) is also present on this list, which portrays this species as a threat to other local species and ecosystems. This image is emphasized with words such as *plaga* (“plague”), with a harder pejorative meaning. In addition, *enfermedades* (“diseases”) is present on this list, as parakeets are alleged suspects of carrying and potentially transmitting diseases to human animals (Figure 4). The presence of the word *Kramer* in this sample is also highlighted, referring to rose-ringed parakeets, since that species is a minority in Madrid compared to monk parakeets. This happens because of the unclear language used by the press to broadly refer to both species (monk parakeet and rose-ringed parakeet).

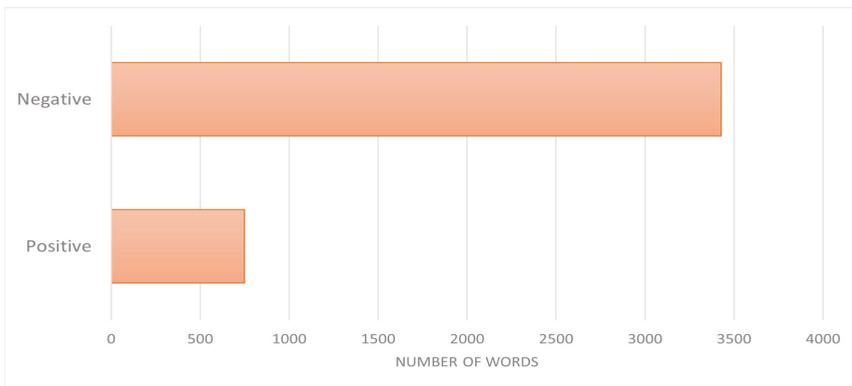
The sentiment analysis using the *ncr* dictionary showed that the words used in the mentions for parakeets were categorized mainly as negative words (Figure 5). In addition, other emotions, such as fear, anger, and sadness, have a certain presence in the texts, whereas joy is not as present. Further analysis with the *bing* dictionary confirmed that negative words are almost six times more used than positive words in this sample (Figure 6).



**Figure 4.** The 50 most frequent words. Source: Own elaboration from texts from *El País*, *El Mundo*, *ABC*, *elDiario.es*, *Público*, and *El Español*.



**Figure 5.** Sentiment analysis using the *ncr* dictionary. Source: Own elaboration from texts from *El País*, *El Mundo*, *ABC*, *elDiario.es*, *Público*, and *El Español*.



**Figure 6.** Sentiment analysis using the *Bing* dictionary. Source: Own elaboration from texts from *El País*, *El Mundo*, *ABC*, *elDiario.es*, *Público*, and *El Español*.

**5. Discussion and Conclusions**

Our analysis revealed that the representation in the Spanish press regarding the situation of monk parakeets in Madrid has been biased and has not taken ethical aspects into account. The issue has been described without much emphasis on the human origin of the problem, namely, the legal and illegal international trade of nonhuman animals. The presence of monk parakeet (*Myiopsitta monachus*) populations in Madrid is presented as problematic. This could be mainly due to the invasive status of the species, the noise they create with their tweets, or the potential risk of nest falls and disease transmission. In addition to the alarmist and disgust-driven tone of these alleged risks, important information on the sentience, social life, history, and characteristics of these individuals is omitted. The political responsibility for the management of the problem is not clear and not always presented: In most of the cases, any institutions are presented as responsible for managing the monk parakeet population (23 articles), and in the articles accounting for the responsibility it is mostly attributed to the Madrid City Council (22 cases). This demonstrates the lack of clarity in communicating to the public which institutions and organizations have taken part in the process of deciding this policy, which does not facilitate

the democratic exercise of political participation in decisions involving coexistence with nonhuman animals.

Among the frames used to suggest solutions for the problem of displaced allochthonous monk parakeets, the press highlights the extermination of these parrots, and this is aggravated by the poor representation of the critical discourses on the slaying proposed by animal advocacy organizations. These discourses are almost absent, and when present, they are mainly framed in a way that ridiculed or delegitimized the ethical concerns (with few but important exceptions, such as those articles from the section *El Caballo de Nietzsche* at *elDiario.es*). The most present words in the texts reflect a speciesist use of language and objectification of the individuals of this species. Finally, the sentiment analysis showed a very negative emotional charge in the chosen words. This, together with a lack of discussion on moral dilemmas and potential non-lethal paths to solve this ethically controversial situation, makes the role of the press in reporting the situation of the parakeets in Madrid poor and ethically weak.

Our results show that most of the analyzed texts (42.19%) include a frame of extermination as a management tactic to eradicate the monk parakeet population in Madrid, and non-lethal population management tactics are much less represented. Although various non-lethal methods such as audio, chemical, and visual deterrents have been tested and proven ineffective (Avery and Lindsay 2016), contraception with chemical DiazaCon™ “is a promising contraceptive tool for monk parakeets and is associated with no ill health effects at a dose less than 50 mg kg<sup>-1</sup>” (Yoder et al. 2007, p. 12). The effects are reversible, and its efficacy has been proven by a reduction of 68.4% relative to the sites not exposed to DiazaCon™ in field studies in the US (Avery et al. 2008, p. 1450). This contraceptive has not been recommended as an effective population management strategy due to its possible effect on non-target native species (Senar et al. 2021). However, its refinement through the presentation of permanent bait sites for parakeets to be fed with DiazaCon™-treated bait will minimize potential exposure to non-target species and will broaden its usefulness (Avery et al. 2008, p. 1451). This contraception has been shown to be an effective non-lethal method for reducing monk parakeet reproduction, and safe for non-target species (Yoder 2011; Avery and Shiels 2018, p. 341). Other long-term measures to prevent potential problems related to allochthonous species is to plan interventions to prevent and regulate the possession and trade of displaced nonhuman animals as pets. As environmental and animal defense organizations argue, the creation of a positive list would be more effective than the current negative list (CITES 2021), because it would only include species whose sale and trade are legal, making possession of all other species illegal (Eurogroup for Animals 2020). Although this measure is not enough to stop the whole pet trade, it would be an important step in reducing both the exploitation of nonhuman animals and the potential damages derived from the escape or release of displaced nonhuman animals. Importantly, global wild animal trade regulation and abolition is a constructive common ground goal for both conservation biologists’ and animal rights groups’ efforts (Perry and Perry 2008).

This framing of the issue, where monk parakeets have attributed responsibility and are portrayed as purposely destroying ecosystems or damaging human economies and health, is also unfair and misleading to the fact that monk parakeets are themselves victims and survivors of the global wildlife trade. The focus on monk parakeet demonization (e.g., by being described as aggressive birds (Merino 2015; Tena 2020)) silences the human origin of this alleged problem and overlooks our collective responsibility to find ethical solutions to address it while not damaging these sentient and intelligent birds. It also reveals the tremendous anthropocentric, speciesist, and profit-oriented character of these management tactics. The same policy is not applied to introduced nonhuman animals if humans can benefit from their exploitation—e.g., despite its invasive status, the rainbow trout’s release is permitted by the Spanish Congress, so fishermen can kill them for sport or business (Rejón 2018). Other than framing, language also makes the role of newspapers in representing the issue around parakeets crucial, as noted by critical animal-studies researchers and nonhuman animals-inclusive journalism ethical guidelines in order to

avoid denigration, devaluation, and misrepresentation of nonhuman individuals (Dunayer 2001; Stibbe 2012; Freeman and Merskin 2016; Animals and Media 2016; UPF-CAE 2016). Thus, we have observed that word choice contributes to setting the framing described above. It is important to analyze the language used by the press because it contributes to limiting the debate on the management methods used. This results in only contemplating measures that are simpler to implement or economically more convenient, but that do not usually coincide with the most ethical methods.

The language used by the press has proven to be a challenge for this analysis. In this sense, the term *cotorra* is sometimes used ambivalently for monk parakeets and rose-ringed parakeets. We have taken this imprecision into account in the framing analysis by analyzing these framings and considering the solutions and liabilities for the Madrid case regardless of whether the rose-ringed parakeet (*cotorra de Kramer*) is mentioned. In the quantitative analysis of keywords, this word was not excluded in order to understand to what extent it appears in the texts. Thus, we discovered that the problems attributed to the rose-ringed parakeet, which is present in other parts of Spain, are sometimes mixed with the problems attributed to the monk parakeet in Madrid. This results in an argument that lumps both species together to argue for the unethical solutions identified (despite the Madrid problem involving primarily monk parakeets).

Furthermore, speciesist concepts such as *ejemplares* (“specimens”) are used to refer to nonhuman sentient individuals. This objectifies them and omits the referent of the flesh-and-blood individuals (Animals and Media 2016; UPF-CAE 2016). We also see at play the “cute, but...lethal” rhetoric (Potts 2009), which counteracts and punishes the compassionate human feelings and positive social attitudes toward monk parakeets. The language used to refer to monk parakeets includes terms such as “exotic”, “invaders”, “pests”, “demons”, “aggressive birds”, or “threats”, provoking emotions like the fear that helps legitimize the idea of an enemy or threat that has to be fought (Subramaniam 2001; Inglis 2020). At the same time, as we observed in the sentiment analysis, the word choice in the press coverage is clearly related to negative emotions. In addition, the *ncr* dictionary showed that fear, along with anger, is the most present emotion. This type of language is based on “us versus them” rhetoric, as described by Cap (2018). “Exotic” alludes to an outsider that is not local. These kinds of dichotomies and binary concepts are also seen in anti-migration speeches, as observed by Mando and Stack (2018) regarding Asian carp in the United States. This discourse also shares characteristics with the one used to criminalize human migrants and perpetuate a “good and evil” and “us vs them” xenophobic rhetoric (Subramaniam 2001; McCrow-Young et al. 2015; Inglis 2020; Khazaal and Almiron 2021). The nationalist and patriotic rhetoric featuring “competition between species” (introduced species vs. native) used in the representation of possums and kiwis in New Zealand (Potts 2009) is also present—although less frequently and intense—in the interactions between monk parakeets (“alien invaders”, “threat”) and house sparrows (“small”, “lovely”, “local species”).

Our research has certain limitations. For instance, we could have selected a broader sample and included other important Spanish newspapers, or even examined other media like television or social media. We could also have improved our differentiation of monk parakeets and rose-ringed parakeets in our analysis and broader developed the problems of the local authorities, control management services, and the press mixing both cases and species altogether. In addition, we could have included a visual analysis of press photographs of the analyzed articles, given that “visual messages often make a deeper impression on the collective imaginary than the written word” (Fernández 2021, p. 344) and influence the readers’ interpretation of the written text. Future studies in this line of research could also be aimed at analyzing activist discourses and how campaigns and solutions proposed by animal advocacy movements are articulated. Likewise, the conservationist rhetoric used to justify the extermination of species considered invasive and limit the exploration of non-lethal paths to population management and the search for common ground among conservation biologists and animal advocates (Perry and

Perry 2008) (e.g., the monk parakeet case or others) can be an interesting object of study, especially for traditions such as critical discourse analysis and cultural studies. Extending the focus to other geographical contexts for comparative studies would also be relevant. Finally, computational analysis of the lexicon used and sentiment analysis could be equally extended to other species and situations as well as to other contexts, as these quantitative methods have great potential in the communication field.

Despite our limitations, this research covered a gap of knowledge regarding press representation of liminal, introduced nonhuman animals, an under-studied, controversial, and highly relevant topic in our climate deadlock context (Almiron and Tafalla 2019). Our results are aligned with previous research on the press representation of nonhuman animals that points to the need for an ethical improvement in the press coverage of nonhuman animal-related issues (e.g., Freeman 2009; Khazaal and Almiron 2014; Moreno and Almiron 2021). This research thus joins the contributions of critical animal studies, a newly created and growing field of study that addresses human-nonhuman animal relations from an interdisciplinary, ethically engaged, non-speciesist, and critical perspective on interconnected systems of oppression (Best et al. 2007).

Spanish newspapers have mainly contributed through their coverage and biased representation to advocating for the extermination of monk parakeets in Madrid, ignoring their voices (Freeman et al. 2011), omitting the human- and profit-driven cause of the monk parakeets' presence in Madrid urban areas and reproducing anthropocentric and speciesist arguments to justify their extermination, therefore slowing down the social efforts to find other possible, and more ethical, solutions. For us, on a hopeful note, this can only be a good starting point to take up the challenge of bringing about a radical, more inclusive, and compassionate change in the media representation of monk parakeets and other nonhuman animals and their complex realities.

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**Data Availability Statement:** The data presented in this study are available in this paper. Further information on the sample and datasets are available on request from the corresponding author.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The authors declare no conflict of interest.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Our critical approach to language comes from the critical tradition within the communication field in general, and our critical animal and media studies approach in particular. Concepts such as “exotic” and “invasive” might be perceived as neutral or isolated from social meanings in scientific disciplines such as conservation biology. However, for us, it is important to examine this terminology linked to its historical meanings and implicit ideologies, which can better inform social interpretations and question ethical neutrality. More specifically on language and “exotic, invasive” species, see Subramaniam (2001) and Inglis (2020).
- <sup>2</sup> “The tens rule [...] holds that approximately 10% of transported species gain access to the wild, 10% of those will succeed in becoming established, and 10% of those will become invasive” (Abellán et al. 2016, p. 269).
- <sup>3</sup> Every literal quote from Spanish articles is translated by the authors of this paper.

- <sup>4</sup> “Liminal” is a term coined by Sue Donaldson and Will Kymlicka in their book *Zoopolis* (2011) to refer to nonhuman animals than can be located beyond the domestic/wild dichotomy, therefore underlying their “in-between status” (p. 210). They refer to “the vast numbers of wild animals who live amongst us, even in the heart of the city: squirrels, raccoons, rats, starlings, sparrows, gulls, peregrine falcons, and mice, just to name a few. If we add in suburban animals, such as deer, coyotes, foxes, skunks, and countless others, it becomes clear that we are not dealing with a few anomalous species here, but rather a large variety of non-domesticated species who have adapted to life amongst humans. Wild animals live, and always have lived, amongst us” (p. 210).
- <sup>5</sup> This refers to the Partido Socialista Obrero Español (Spanish left-wing political party)
- <sup>6</sup> The petition is available at <https://chng.it/YF2xjPpJyW> (accessed on 15 June 2022) and the campaign “Son Nuestras Vecinas” (“They Are Our Neighbors”) is available at <https://sonnuestrasvecinas.noblogs.org> (accessed on 18 June 2022).

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