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Taking a Look Through Walrus Cam

Every summer, thousands of Pacific walruses swarm the dark grey Arctic beaches of seven craggy islands in Alaska's northern Bristol Bay. Every year, from May through to August, tens of thousands of these tusked mammals heave their considerable bulk out of the ocean to sun themselves, groom themselves (backscratching is a perennially favourite pastime), and in general rest from their near-constant foraging for food – a set of walrus behaviours that biologists refer to as 'hauling out'. And every summer, thanks to Explore.org's Walrus Cam, tens of thousands of humans watch them do it.

In 1960, this small Alaskan archipelago was designated as the Walrus Islands State Game Sanctuary to protect walrus haulout areas by carefully controlling the area's land and sea traffic. There aren't any incorporated cities in the Bristol Bay borough, and as of the 2010 census it claimed only 997 residents spread out over almost 2,330km² (900mi²). Consequently, the sanctuary, surrounded by water and wilderness, is pretty much inaccessible to anyone other than field biologists and the most ardently determined of wildlife photographers. Though low in human residents, Round Island is the largest terrestrial walrus haulout site in the world, offering beachfront real estate for the walruses' summer repose in their migratory journey between Russia and Alaska, along the Bering Strait. During the summer months, thousands of gregarious walruses bask along the shorelines of Point Lay, day after summer day, crammed side-by-side, tusk to whiskered jowl, like one-ton sardines.

Formally known as *Odobenus rosmarus*, the scientific name for walruses roughly translates from its Scandinavian root as ‘tooth-walking sea horse’, and that’s not necessarily an inaccurate description of these pinnipeds. Walruses use their massive canine tusks to lever themselves in and out of the water on to ice floes during the winter months, when they are not near land. Palaeontologists can trace the evolutionary lineage of the modern walrus back 10 million years, as evidenced by a fossil of a tuskless ancestor found off the coast of Japan. Other fossils from the Pleistocene show that walruses and walrus-like ancestors have inhabited cold environs for the last million years, following global shifts in climate to stay in icy areas. Although modern, extant walruses are ecologically tied to their icy Arctic environments and have been for millennia, there is certainly a seasonal, annual dynamic to their behaviour.

That seasonal migration cycle is what brings the walruses to their annual haulout on the Round Island beach. Although the number of walruses that beach themselves varies day by day and year by year, the Alaska Department of Fish and Game reported that record numbers of walruses – 14,000, 10,000 and 30,000 – were counted on the Round Island beach in various daily censuses. CNN even reported that more than 35,000 were observed on 27 September 2014, based on aerial data from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. The summer of 2015 not only saw colossal numbers of walruses at Point Lay beach; it was also the summer that Walrus Cam turned back on.

Among wildlife biologists and conservationists, the Walrus Islands State Game Sanctuary offers space to study the delicate northern ecosystem, as well as opportunities for public education and outreach about climate change and its effects on the surrounding environment. Ten years earlier, the Alaska Department of Fish and Game had

established a live webcam feed with a camera pointed towards the walrus haulout on the beach. While the webcam was immensely popular with internet wildlife enthusiasts, the department lacked the technological infrastructure and funds to keep the livefeed going and the website that hosted the feed regularly crashed. (In 2005, YouTube was still in its internet infancy and wasn't the go-to resource for live video streaming that it would become a decade later; consequently, Fish and Game had attempted to host the feeds itself.) However, as the department learned, tens of thousands of humans tuning in to watch tens of thousands of walruses pushed the live-streaming capabilities of Walrus Cam well beyond what the department or its IT team could sustain, and Walrus Cam went into deep hibernation for the next 10 years.

Walrus Cam eventually turned back on due to the philanthropic efforts of Explore.org, a multimedia organisation that develops and finances projects devoted to exploration, especially projects that showcase wildlife and nature. (One of Explore.org's best-known projects is Bear Cam, a live-streaming feed trained on a small waterfall where Alaskan Brown Bears fish for salmon in the Canadian Brooks Falls area.) With Explore.org's financial backing, armchair wildlife enthusiasts have watched Pacific walruses haulout every summer since 2015, all from the comfort of their personal internet connections. The Alaska Department of Fish and Game maintains the two cameras and feeds over the island's summer season. The popularity of Walrus Cam is indisputable – in 2016 it drew more than 1.3 million views on various video-streaming and sharing sites.

Today, people watch the mottled pink and brown walruses of Walrus Cam's world slap each other with their flippers, tusk neighbours over space, and lurch in and out of the fixed camera frame. Walruses shuffle up and down their

beach, and even resting walruses offer drama to the feed as someone puts their flipper in someone else's eyes, someone has an itch that needs scratching, or a walrus gets a bit too close to someone else and the tusks are flashed to defend personal space. Waves crash in the background, tides come in, walruses waddle back out to the sea and, if viewers listen closely enough, there is the occasional bird squawk or walrus grunt piped through their internet connection. The bonhomie is palpable.

On its most basic level, Walrus Cam shows the everyday lives of everyday walruses going about the business of doing their everyday walrus things. With Walrus Cam, there isn't any script. There isn't an authoritative narrator to give viewers a story to go with what they're watching. There isn't any scientist explaining walrus behaviour to the non-expert viewer to help them understand subtleties and dynamics that an amateur nature watcher might miss. ('Over here, we see two walruses striving for dominance to be the alpha in their huddle.' 'That walrus is so tired from foraging that he hasn't joined the rest on the beach.' 'That's not actually a walrus, that's a rock with a bird on top of it.') There isn't any camera crew wading through animals to get the best footage. It is a completely unscripted way to watch animals in nature.

Walrus Cam, as its watchers can attest, fosters a feeling of connection between its pinnipeds and its humans. (Reader, I named a trio of walruses Brad, Thad and Chad while watching the Point Lay Beach feed one afternoon.) Without the narrative and storytelling that goes into formal wildlife and nature documentaries, Walrus Cam watchers are left to project what they see walruses doing based on whatever they happen to already know about walruses – and whatever factoids they glean while toggling between Walrus Cam, Wikipedia and Explore.org's forum questions.

Walrus Cam promises a nature – the Real Thing – that you would see, if you were only there.

Live-streaming nature through feeds like Walrus Cam is a uniquely twenty-first-century way to watch walruses, and with it come uniquely twenty-first-century expectations of realness, reality and authenticity about the nature that you are watching. It's both a reaction and an answer to decades of wildlife documentaries, and the audience expectations that have come with them. Wildlife documentaries have established themselves as *the* authoritative way to watch filmed nature, and that authority carries a lot of cultural cachet, as well as a price. Over the last six decades, wildlife films have come to be built out of expertise, whereas live-streaming tends towards unscripted work. One is driven by blockbuster sales, the other struggles to keep the cameras on. Both, however, hinge on audiences' belief that what they're seeing is authentic.

Although Walrus Cam brings in tens of thousands of viewers to the wildlife-laden beaches, it only does so during the summer months, when the walruses haulout on the beach, which also happens to be when audiences watch. The rest of the year the cameras are turned off and the footage for Walrus Cam via Explore.org simply cycles through 'best of' clips for anyone who loads the feed. Wildlife documentaries, however, aren't constrained by this sort of seasonality or logistical limitations. Wildlife films, the reasoning goes, exist for people to be able to watch them whenever and however they want, as long as they've paid to do so.

This on-demand availability reflects the cost and audience expectations that come with it. Bringing nature to viewers doesn't come cheaply, and as audience expectations for

wildlife documentaries have risen, so have their production costs. Explore.org might be able to get away with the relatively low costs associated with live-streaming in an Arctic ecosystem, but that laissez-faire approach doesn't work in the competitive and highly lucrative business of blockbuster personality-driven documentaries.

The cost of bringing wildlife films to audiences can be measured in time, effort and outlay of cash, and twenty-first-century blockbuster documentaries can boast spending all of these. When *Blue Planet II* was released in October 2017, it was said to have cost the BBC's Natural History Unit something like \$25 million to film, produce and distribute. Estimates put the landmark, genre-defining 2006 *Planet Earth* at costing around \$2–2.2 million per episode, over \$11 million in total. Both National Geographic and the Discovery Channel allocate at least \$400,000 per episode. *March of the Penguins* (distributed by Warner Pictures, 2005) boasted a budget of \$8 million. These are staggering sums.

More than just money, however, there is a considerable outlay in the time, effort and expertise devoted to securing the footage for the films. *Blue Planet II* (2017), for example, was able to boast four years of production running something like 125 expeditions, more than 6,000 hours of underwater dive footage and 1,000 hours of filming in submersibles. The sharp, crisp, spectacular footage in *Planet Earth II* (2016) is the result of incremental, steady improvements to camera technology made over the decade since the original filming of *Planet Earth* (2006). Audiences know that the studios have spent inordinate amounts of time and effort to make the films because the documentaries tell them that they have. All twenty-first-century landmark wildlife films feature a 'behind the scenes' tour that shows viewers the time and creativity needed to create the films in the first place. Such costs in effort and expertise have

come to define the film genre as much as the spectacular footage itself.

The pay-off for studios is the millions and millions of viewers who stream, watch and scrutinise filmed wildlife and pay for the privilege of doing so. *Planet Earth* (2006), for example, experienced record-breaking DVD sales and the series was ultimately broadcast in 130 countries with a total of 100 million viewers. Five years later, 48 per cent of the UK population watched at least 15 minutes of *Frozen Planet* (2011). When *Blue Planet II* aired in autumn 2017, the first episode in the series was watched by 14 million people, and it quickly became the most-watched programme on UK television for the year and the most popular natural history series in 15 years, beating the previous record holder, *Planet Earth II*, which could boast a 'mere' 13.1 million viewers. *Planet Earth II* was in fact able to brag that it had 1.7 million more viewers than any episode of celebrity dance-off *Strictly Come Dancing*. The sheer command of audience numbers is stunning.

Audiences expect exquisite footage from a traditional wildlife documentary, pulled together through expert filmmaking and emotional storytelling – all of which stick with audiences long after the show has finished. 'A whole generation of wildlife lovers was shaped by films they saw decades ago,' wildlife film producer Chris Palmer explains in his memoir, *Shooting the Wild: An Insider's Account of Making Movies in the Animal Kingdom*. 'Whether it was *Death of a Legend*, Jacques Cousteau's *The Silent World*, Marlin Perkins's *Wild Kingdom*, or a movie in the Disney *True-Life Adventures* series, images on a screen sparked a fascination with nature.'

On its most basic level, the entire genre of wildlife documentaries concentrates on introducing animals and plants in their natural habitats to audiences – offering stories, spectacle and science to pique interest. Ever since

Disney released the first of its *True-Life Adventures* in 1948, audiences have come to expect certain story elements from the wildlife films that they're watching, and twenty-first-century documentaries deliver on those historical assumptions about animal storytelling.

Cynics might argue that the ballooning costs of wildlife documentaries in the twenty-first century are simply a reflection of the capitalist exploitation of nature. They point out that because audiences have been conditioned to watch for great footage, filmmakers constantly need to look for the next big thing to keep pace, essentially commodifying the very animals and environments that they seek to document. 'In such broadcast climate,' science and technology studies scholar Eleanor Louson argues in an article about wildlife documentaries for the journal *Science in Context*, 'it is difficult for film producers to make money unless they first spend it, precisely to obtain the spectacular visuals.' Expectations about animals and how we see them, then, have become requirements for filmmakers to satisfy their audiences. As audiences, we have agreed to suspend our disbelief and to have faith in the authenticity of filmmakers' dramatisation of wildlife – we believe that what we are watching is genuine, true and real.

Curiously enough, what makes filmed footage 'real nature' – and the best way to convey that realness to audiences – changes over time. In other words, what was real for a Disney wildlife film in 1948 might not be real for the BBC in 2018. And if the history of documentary films is any indication, what is real for 2018 will change in the next 50 years. This flexible reality within wildlife filming begs the question of what's at stake and why it matters. While everyone, filmmakers, audiences and studios, might agree that these things – reality, truth and realness – underscore and legitimise what makes a good wildlife documentary, just what makes something authentic is a bit tricky to pin down.

First and foremost, according to Jeffery Bosall, a media theorist and producer at the BBC Natural History Unit from 1957 to 1987, two things delineate an authentic wildlife documentary: namely, that audiences are not deceived, and animals are not harmed in the making of the film. (Indeed, you would be hard-pressed to find a reputable wildlife film producer who thought that deceiving audiences and harming animals was acceptable.) Bosall later extended these criteria, advocating for on-screen disclaimers about what parts of the film were staged. Bosall's premises are easy enough to agree with, but often difficult, as it turns out, to consistently translate into practice. It's hard – it's really, really hard – to tell a story about animals that might be uncooperative, film a documentary under conditions that aren't conducive to getting necessary footage, or film something that might cause distress to animals. You might be violating the second, for example, by upholding the first.

And this is where filmmakers are engaged in a delicate tango of blending art and artifice into the world of storytelling in wildlife films – the balance of the two is under constant negotiation and subject to ever-changing and ever-evolving expectations.

Just as audiences expect authentic, ethical wildlife films with spectacular footage, they also expect those films to carry a compelling story. And the story of how those stories have been told has a history all its own.

In the late 1940s, the Walt Disney Company launched its influential and innovative *True-Life Adventure* films, kicking off the series with the release of *Seal Island* in 1948. Walt Disney himself was particularly intrigued with the idea of an Alaska travelogue, based on stories he had heard from

servicemen who had been stationed in Alaska during the Second World War. He pitched the idea to one of his company's minions that Alaska was, in his words, 'our last frontier, the last undeveloped place in the United States. We should have some photographers up there. Look into it.'

Disney hired filmographers Elma and Alfred Milotte to head up to Alaska and see what they could shoot over the year of 1947. The Milottes shipped 30,480m (100,000ft) of film back to Walt Disney Studios, much to the cost-conscious consternation of Disney's financial team. Their footage focused on people, animals and environments. (Walt's older brother Roy finally asked Ben Sharpsteen, the director of *Pinocchio*, 'What is Walt going to do with all that Alaska stuff?' 'Perhaps make some sort of glorified travelogue out of it?' was Sharpsteen's guess.) In fact, Sharpsteen himself would eventually direct that 'glorified travelogue'.

Although Walt was intrigued by the Milotte footage, it wasn't until he took his 10-year-old daughter up to Alaska that he could see how to build a story out of grand views and breathtaking scenery. That was the trip during which Walt found the seals. They were cute, personable, curious and utterly unfamiliar to Disney's audiences. Perhaps with enough backstory they could be the non-fiction counterparts to Bambi and other Disney animals, or so the internal logic went.

'Why don't we take what we have and build a story around the life cycle of the seals? Focus on them – don't show any humans at all,' Walt suggested. 'We'll plan this for a theatrical release, but don't worry about the length. Make it just as long as it needs to be so you can tell the story of the seals.'

The short film ran just 27 minutes in length. Walt was so thrilled with the result that he announced that *Seal Island* was the first in an entire series about nature. (Although he had no ideas about what else might be part of that series.)

Some studio executives balked at the entire notion of a film built around a group of seals, and Disney decided to demonstrate audience interest by taking the film directly to audiences. In December 1948, Walt persuaded Albert Levoy – who operated the Crown Theater in Pasadena – to book *Seal Island* in conjunction with a regular-length feature. Five thousand questionnaires were handed out to audiences and the results were outstanding: they preferred *Seal Island* to the feature itself. Not only did they prefer it to the feature film, they wanted more like it.

Seal Island won an Academy Award in 1949 for Best Short Subject, Two Reel. The opening credits for *Seal Island* boasted that the film was ‘unrehearsed and unstaged’, and it opened with animated sea mist brushed away by an animated paintbrush, revealing a live-action panorama behind the art. The narrator announced that on Seal Island, such that it was, ‘nature plays out one of her greatest dramas ...’ and that what will follow is ‘theater for the spectacle’. In other words, *Seal Island* was entertainment, yes, but it was also ‘authentic’.

Comprising 10 short and four feature-length films released in 1948–1960, the *True-Life Adventures* series defined the genre of wildlife films, according to media historian Morgan Richards. The series synthesised the then-familiar tropes of safari, scientific-education and ethology films that audiences were more than familiar with, and blended each with Disney’s already popular cartoon, comedy and Western genres. ‘Disney’s breakthrough lay in its ability to dramatize the natural world and bring wild animals and nature to life using full colour cinematography and lavish musical scores,’ Richards observed in a contributed chapter to *Environmental Conflict and the Media*. ‘It was their glossy finish and sense of drama, more than anything else, which essentially distinguished Disney’s films from other wildlife fare and gave them a

commercial edge, an edge that was further honed through Disney's monopoly over distribution.'

True-Life Adventures were set in all sorts of American wilderness. From *Seal Island's* Arctic Alaska to Florida's Everglades, from Arizona's deserts to Oregon's prairies, the animals and their habitats enchanted audiences. The films followed all sorts of charismatic animals, and in 1953 the release of *Bear Country* received a glowing review in *The New York Times*. 'As for "Bear Country," it follows in the excellent series of nature films that have been produced by the Disney studio ...' Bosley Crowther raved in his review. 'This one studies the environment and habits of American wild bears to reveal both the sturdiness and cunning of these amiable-looking animals. The most amusing sequence in the picture is a montage of bears scratching themselves, done to a deft bolero rhythm. It's a case of trick editing, but it's fun.' (Fourteen years later, audiences would re-encounter that very bear back-scratching in choreography of Baloo the bear, singing 'The Bear Necessities' in Disney's animated film *The Jungle Book*.) This was the American wilderness as encountered, explained, packaged and anthropomorphised through Disney.

At its core, the success of *True-Life Adventures* was the sentimental and sanitised vision of nature that it offered its audiences. Nature might not be harmonious, Disney films went, but it could be neatly moralised into an easily digestible story for its audience. In *Seal Island*, bull seals are called 'beach masters' and females are 'brides' – at one point, the musical score actually kicks into a spritely rendition of 'Here Comes The Bride!'

According to philosopher Derek Bousé in *Wildlife Films*, 'The portrayal in wildlife films of the animal's family and social relations present a kind of vast Rorschach pattern in which culturally preferred notions of masculinity, femininity, romantic love, monogamous marriage, responsible parenting,

communal spirit ... can all be read.' In the decades after *True-Life Adventures*, successful nature films followed Disney's formula: feature classic megafauna (big cats, primates, elephants, predators); situate animals in 'primeval wilderness'; maintain dramatic and suspenseful storylines; and, in general, avoid science, politics and anything controversial.

Disney was hardly the first to sculpt nature into parables for general living. From Aesop's counselling that 'slow and steady wins the race' in his fable 'The Tortoise and the Hare', to Jack London's twentieth-century incarnation of pure nature in *White Fang*, humans have been making animals in their image for millennia. What made *True-Life Adventures* different, however, was that it set the stage for every wildlife film produced after it.

Although such morally steered megafauna was a decades-long sure bet for successful storytelling, several film studios began to subtly challenge the classic Disney formula in the latter half of the twentieth century. While studios like Discovery and National Geographic continued to create Disney-esque films (called 'blue-chip documentaries' in the industry), other studios – in particular the BBC – began to explore other ways of introducing audiences to nature, and of negotiating the boundary between humans and the environment that such filmed entertainment offered. Several of these studios offered a neat, crisp lecture-type of show, where a tweed-wearing naturalist in a room back-dropped with books and stuffed specimens would take viewers through the lives of various animals. This is the era that iconised the dulcet narrative tones of Sir David Attenborough in the BBC's *Life on Earth* series, which kicked off in 1979.

In October 1996, BBC1 introduced a new wildlife series that featured the lives of big cats in East Africa – *Big Cat Diary*. The footage used in the series was shaky, incomplete and less than perfectly polished compared with what Disney

had produced over the decades. The idea behind *Big Cat Diary* was that audiences would watch the crew film the everyday lives of big cats (a lion pride, a cheetah family and a leopard family) on a Kenyan game reserve. 'This is the Masai Mara in Kenya, one of the best places on Earth for watching wildlife,' *Big Cat Diary* presenter Simon King stated. 'But in this series we are going to be looking at it in an entirely new way. Over the next six weeks we are going to be following in intimate detail the lives of Africa's big cats, sending back a weekly report, a diary of their hardships and good fortunes as they happen.'

This was reality television come to nature. This was raw, this was edgy and this was *real*. Even the title sequence that opened each of the 76 episodes illustrated this new aesthetic. Lions pawed at each other, cheetahs chased down their prey, iconic animals came in and out of frame, and camera crews meandered down bumpy grassland roads – all against the backdrop of Masai vocals and drum beats. The final scene cut to the *Big Cat Diary* logo on the front door of one of the field jeeps, spattered with mud. It was as if the crew had just stepped off its savannah adventures to stop and show you footage of all the amazing things that big cats do. It was, in film industry parlance, a docusoap.

Although it is easy to dismiss *Big Cat Diary* as simply reality television with lions in lieu of Kardashians, the BBC1 series forced a new aesthetic on viewers about what it meant to watch nature. It required viewers to – consciously or not – decide if what they were seeing was true in a way that earlier, classic *True-Life*-esque films did not. Earlier wildlife films were true because the story and narrator led audiences to think that they were true. In *Big Cat Diary* the film was true because audiences could see it being filmed and cut together. Even if the cats spent days on end doing 'uninteresting' things, well, that was what the cats did, so that's what audiences would see.

To that end, the narrators for *Big Cat Diary* weren't omniscient, removed figures who talked over footage and explained nature to audiences from a comfortable distance of the third person. (Disney's early narrators, like Rex Allen and Winston Hibler, quickly became iconic mid-century Americana – voices remembered and associated with the wilderness they talked about.) *Big Cat Diary* introduced a nature programme in which the narration and storytelling derive from a personality presenter. Personality-driven wildlife films become immensely popular across a plethora of late-twentieth- and early twenty-first-century series, (Steve Irwin's *The Crocodile Hunter Diaries*, for example.) But this type of presentation was – is – a double-edged sword. It means that the film, at its core, isn't about the animals; it's about the presenter. The presenter has to carry the story, because the animals aren't scripted to do so. Critics scorned the lot of them as 'brash showboating'. And these reality-driven films blurred the line between real and not in ways that earlier films had not.

Big Cat Diary offered an authenticity – or, at least, a perceived authenticity – to viewers because audiences could watch how the films were made. Audiences could see the difficulties in getting certain shots, and could observe the long periods of waiting that come with making a wildlife film. This, reality docusoaps promised, was real nature the way nature intended it, and it was true because you were there to see it, thanks to BBC1. While earlier wildlife films deliberately took humans out of the picture, in reality-docussoap films humans were there, front and centre. The watcher had become the watched – the crew and filmmakers were openly acknowledged to be part of the story of wildlife films.

'In *Big Cat Diary*, the lives of wild animals were being framed and edited in a new way,' Morgan Richards offers in a scholarly reivew about docusoaps. 'Viewers were being

offered a vision of wildlife that was intimate, personal, and self-consciously rough edged.'

Successful wildlife documentaries have continued to advance in their craft and technology, drawing heavily on the historical legacy of Disney combined with the cachet of audience buy-in for wildlife docusoaps. Today, efficacious wildlife films are blockbuster extravaganzas, with all of the plaudits and expectations that go with hitting it big. Twenty-first-century documentaries like *Planet Earth I* and *II*, *The Blue Planet I* and *II* and *Frozen Planet* – to name a few – boast huge budgets, big-name stars, dramatic storylines, behind-the-scenes footage, award-winning scores, sequels and even spoilers.

In the media world, a blockbuster is more than just a financially successful film. It's a production that has mass marketing behind it. It has stuffed animals, soundtracks and more behind-the-scenes footage than a non-blockbuster. (Several colleagues swear by the *Blue Planet* soundtrack as their favourite film soundtrack.) Studios spend inordinate amounts of money filming, writing, producing and distributing the film – why not find every way possible to squeeze out more money from audiences?

To that end, blockbuster films trade on the cachet of spectacle and are built on the expectations that what audiences are seeing is, well, spectacular. In a world dominated by YouTube, why would audiences pay to watch animals on film when they can do it for free? Paying audiences won't tolerate grainy footage or boring narratives – blockbuster audiences want to see something that they couldn't see anywhere else and be told a story that they haven't heard before. Blockbuster nature films fit that bill.

The blockbuster model for wildlife films can be traced to Alastair Fothergill, his time as director of the Natural History Unit at the BBC, and the release of the original *The Blue Planet* series in 2001. Fothergill convinced the studio to take the series, costing the BBC £6.7 million (\$10 million) and seven years of time. This sort of investment of both time and money was unprecedented in the world of wildlife films, but Fothergill's gamble paid off – more than 12 million people tuned in to the series, and it sold in over 50 countries, regularly achieved an audience share of 30 per cent, and won both Emmy and BAFTA awards. In 2003, the series was recut and repackaged into a single 90-minute self-contained film, then the entire thing went on theatrical tour (*The Blue Planet Live!*) in 2006–2008. This was truly spectacle.

Spectacle, however, is complicated. Nature has been viewed, watched and observed as spectacle for centuries. Long before Disney was filming seals or *Planet Earth II* offered viewers the epic saga of an iguana outrunning a writhing ball of racer snakes, enthusiasts – amateur and professional alike – were connected to the natural world via the feelings of awe and wonder fostered through natural-history dioramas, cabinets of curiosities, and vividly painted landscapes and specimens. Artists used vibrant colours, bookbinders created large-format folios to outsize regular books, taxidermists stuffed only the most regal of dead animals and collectors vied for the most attention-grabbing of specimens.

Nature, the logic went, was meant to inspire majesty and wonder, and the medium to do so must be equally matched. Contemporary wildlife documentaries continue that centuries-old ethos of showing audiences nature as a wondrous and awe-inspiring thing. With contemporary documentaries, then, the power and attraction of spectacle continue. Here, viewers are spectators – active participants in the very process of looking at nature – thus coming full circle back to the spectacle that they're watching. 'The

spectacular footage present in contemporary wildlife filmmaking is continuous with these traditional forms of visual natural history,' Eleanor Louson suggests in her study of contemporary wildlife filmmaking, 'each designed in order to elicit wonder and awe, and reiterate longstanding trends of visual reasoning, collection and display.'

While *Planet Earth* codified the wildlife film as a blockbuster, there have been aches and pains along the way in making these landmark series 'good'. For example, although few would dispute the visual spectacle of these films, the balance between spectacle, science and storytelling has been slowly tipping in favour of more drama in recent documentaries. Audience anticipation and reaction, queued through the visual pictures set out in front of it, would seem to trump building a nuanced, sophisticated story. 'Nature documentaries have been limited by the same technology that makes them so compelling. When you can get beautiful, high-definition, slow-motion, ground-level shots of an animal, it's not enough to just show it and start talking. You need build-up,' science journalist Ed Yong suggests in *The Atlantic*. 'The storytelling language of wildlife documentaries has become more cinematic, and every vignette becomes longer. That necessarily reduces the amount of material you can get through in a given hour.'

In addition to spectacular footage, contemporary audiences assume – expect, even – that wildlife documentaries play an important role in public understanding of science and environmental issues and, certainly, these films carry an awful lot of cultural cachet to legitimise conservation and environmental narratives.

However, wildlife films have not always gathered their authority from the scientific community, and most of the earliest twentieth-century films were firmly centred on the business of entertaining audiences and the profits that came with that. When the final episode of the BBC's *Frozen*

Planet series discussed the environmental impacts and reality of climate change, the Discovery channel entertained the idea of not airing that ‘environmental’ episode to American audiences, who by all accounts would be more reticent to watch it than their British counterparts. Discovery, it would seem, just wanted polar bears without the uncomfortable science that goes into understanding the changes in polar bear ecosystems and the role humans play in those changes. Amid international outrage, Discovery relented and aired the ‘climate-change’ episode to American audiences. The outcome? Discovery made money and the Arctic continues to melt – so business as usual.

Introducing environmental science is, interestingly enough, a rather recent and somewhat still-fraught way to frame storytelling about nature. In other words, we’re a long way from folksy naturalists explaining how animals live in their environments, or perhaps even a long way from the nominal educational value of *True-Life Adventures*. As each wildlife blockbuster tries to outdo its predecessor, the visuals remain spectacular, but it becomes easier for the story – and the science – to become more obscure. It’s almost as if it’s become spectacle for the sake of spectacle. Many wildlife film enthusiasts argue that the most recent series released by the BBC’s Natural History Unit has struck a better balance of message and spectacle in *Blue Planet II*. ‘Where previous series felt like they sacrificed the storytelling craft and educational density for technical wizardry and emotional punch *Blue Planet II* finally marries all of that together,’ Yong stated in his review of *Blue Planet II* in *The Atlantic*.

We might be watching the wildlife-film pendulum start to swing to a place where spectacle in and of itself no longer meets all audience expectations.

All of this brings us back, however, to the question of how and why we believe what we watch. The very success of wildlife films hinges on their ability to show audiences the spectacular reality of nature – aka the authenticity of nature and all of its wildlife trappings. We believe that wildlife films are true, that we're watching something with a little more cultural credibility than grainy Bigfoot footage. We believe wildlife documentaries are true because we're expressly told that they are, or we believe it because we believe the stories around the films that result in what we're watching. We think that what we're seeing is real. And if it's real, then it must be authentic. Disney, remember, expressly claimed that its *True-Life Adventures* were 'completely authentic, unstaged and unrehearsed'.

The question of authenticity in wildlife films circles back to arguments about wildlife film ethics and best practices, which brings us, again, to Jeffery Bosall's argument that an authentic wildlife documentary doesn't deceive audiences and doesn't harm animals – and it's easy to think that simply following these two rules of best practice automatically translates into an authentic documentary. Fundamentally, however, the relationship between filmmaker and audience is built on trust – if audiences feel manipulated or deceived about what they're watching, the documentary loses its claim to authenticity. 'The history of wildlife filmmaking,' Eleanor Louison suggests 'is like that of the discipline of natural history itself – one of tension between authenticity and artifice in the display of nature.' But between these two pillars of best practices is a lot of negligible grey space filled with tricks of stagecraft and storytelling. It's walking this line of artifice and authenticity that makes wildlife documentaries such a curious way to view real animals in their real wildernesses.

On the artifice side of wildlife documentaries, there is a plethora of ways in which filmmakers can deceive their audiences. For example, if filmmakers introduced animals that don't normally interact (say, a walrus and a wildebeest), that wouldn't be natural. Or if they encouraged animals into a certain sort of behaviour (for instance forcing a confrontation between predators or scaring a bird off a nest), this would be real, but unnatural. Also considered egregiously fake? Sentimentalising, exaggerating or overdramatising animals. These are all ways that filmmakers build an unnatural story out of real parts. On the other hand, certain kinds of artifice are necessary to create an ethical wildlife documentary. To procure certain kinds of footage, filmmakers will often splice in footage of tame or captive animals from wildlife farms or zoos to illustrate part of an animal's story. Digitally manipulating footage after it is shot can help to cover less than ideal materials. CGI is at the burgeoning cusp of being able to help cut filmmaking costs, with the possibility of computer-aided wizardry being employed for future documentaries.

Staging a scene for a wildlife documentary offers a way for filmmakers to alleviate danger to themselves and animals. In many instances, it enables them to capture certain aspects of behaviour that wouldn't be available to film under 'normal' circumstances. Using everything from tame or captured animals at game farms to digitally altering footage is part of the trade-offs filmmakers use to mitigate their presence in the wilderness. There's a bit of an irony to the practice. The end documentary is a real narrative with scientific authority – the means and methods might employ some artifice and fakery to get there.

'I try to approach these complex issues in both practical and ethical terms,' wildlife filmmaker Chris Palmer said of

his own work in his memoir. 'Let's say I'm trying to film an isolated detail of animal behaviour such as lobsters spawning. Following a noncaptive lobster around underwater, waiting for the right moment and right light, wouldn't be practical, so I would film lobsters spawning in a tank. With larger animals such as bears, ethical and safety issues become paramount: it's dangerous to get too close and imprudent to habituate wild bears to humans, so it makes sense to use captive, tame bears. It's a paradox, but captive animals make responsible wildlife films possible – so long as certain principles are honored.'

'Filmmakers tend to justify their staging practices by appealing to the underlying reality, educational value, or scientific truth of their footage,' Eleanor Louson expands on the principle that Palmer describes. 'Their justifications generally rely on arguments that appropriate "natural history artifice" was employed to generate an experience for viewers that is "more real" than could be found by viewers in real life, or to produce footage that, for reasons of cost, pragmatism, or efficiency, could not have been obtained otherwise.'

But this is a slippery slope of a way to tell stories and make films, because it's using artifice to achieve a narrative arc in its story. It's easy for audiences to feel deceived or cheated. When a documentary crosses the line – and sacrifices authenticity through artifice – the public backlash is vehement and impressive. One of the most-cited examples of ethically egregious fakery in nature films is the infamous 'lemming scene' in Walt Disney's 1958 *White Wilderness*, part of the *True-Life Adventures*. *White Wilderness* filmed everything from walruses to polar bears to narwhals. But it was footage of thousands of tiny lemmings swarming over a cliff's edge into the Arctic Ocean, with the implication that they were committing suicide on their migration path, which has really left its

mark in the documentary film world as well as in popular culture. It looked as if the lemmings were simply jumping off of a cliff into the ocean – nature’s convenient parable for the 1950s about the dangers of conformity and groupthink.

Although long debunked, ‘lemming suicide’ has reached such a pervasive place in pop culture that the Alaska Department of Fish and Game has a webpage devoted to dispelling the lemming myth. ‘According to a 1983 investigation by Canadian Broadcasting Corporation producer Brian Vallee, the lemming scenes were faked,’ Riley Woodford articulates on Alaska’s Fish and Game webpage. ‘The lemmings supposedly committing mass suicide by leaping into the ocean were actually thrown off a cliff by the Disney filmmakers. The epic ‘lemming migration’ was staged using careful editing, tight camera angles and a few dozen lemmings running on a snow covered lazy-Susan style turntable.’

But, as biologists point out and have for decades, this is simply not what lemmings do. The lemming scene has become infamous in its egregious and cruel use of animals to obtain footage of animals that wasn’t even real to begin with.

More recent public backlash against the artifice of animal staging in documentaries came from the BBC’s *Frozen Planet*. When the film debuted in 2011, viewers watched a pregnant polar bear traipse across the Arctic wilderness to find a den to give birth to her cubs. What viewers assumed to be the polar bear den in the Arctic – where the mother polar bear snuggled with her two-day-old polar bear cubs – was in fact a man-made den in a German animal park that was constructed to offer the best filmed footage of polar bear births and early den life possible. When viewers found out about the staged polar bear birth, they were outraged. This was the second time that the

authenticity of Attenborough's work with the Arctic had come under fire – an earlier documentary from 1997 also showed a zoo-based polar bear birth that Attenborough and the filmmakers let audiences think was in a wilderness setting. The trust that the audience had in the authenticity of *Frozen Planet* was broken because audiences felt that they had been duped. Viewers thought they were seeing the real thing.

Many filmmakers argue that transparency in the process is the best way to invest audiences in the accuracy and authenticity of what they're watching. Simply telling audiences what is staged and what is not, and how certain footage was captured, invests audiences in the documentary. Jeffery Bosall has argued that on-screen disclaimers were the most ethical way to explain to audiences what has been staged and what has not. They would understand how the story was put together – and would not be expecting one thing and then be forced to grapple with another.

It's not so much that viewers object to polar bear cubs in a zoo – they object to thinking that they're seeing polar bear cubs in the pristine Arctic wilderness, then finding out that the scene was staged through investigative reporting, not through the filmmaker. And most twenty-first-century wildlife filmmakers would argue that this honesty – this transparency about the process – is what fundamentally constitutes best practices and invests audiences in a film's credibility and, especially, in its authenticity. Part of the attraction, then, of the wildlife cams is the transparency and honesty of what audiences assume they're looking at.

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In contrast to the messiness of scripting a documentary about walruses, Point Lay's beaches provide a natural, easy

viewing spectacle for internet enthusiasts, and audiences count down the days between migrations until their blubbery pinnipeds haul themselves out of the ocean and on to the Alaskan beaches for summer snoozing. But this still leaves open the question of how viewers make sense of the animals they're watching – animals that are far outside their everyday lives and experiences. For walruses, this question has been asked and answered, and asked again, for more than a millennium.

Historically, hauling out was how European hunters encountered these walruses, these creatures so curious and mythical and unknown in European circles. It ought to go without saying that just because the walrus was unknown to Europeans, this doesn't mean that the animals were unknown to indigenous populations in the Arctic regions. For at least 6,000 years, indigenous peoples have hunted walruses – walrus meat provided something like 60–80 per cent of their everyday diet, walrus ivory and bones were used for tools and weapons, and walrus skins provided covers for boats and dwellings.

Not only did walruses feature strongly in myths and other stories, but names for places in indigenous Arctic geography culturally triangulated to walruses. Today, scientists work with indigenous hunters to better understand walrus behaviour, because indigenous hunters have millennia of knowledge about the animals and their behaviour. Originally known to Europeans as *rosmarus* and *walrusch*, depending on the Dutch or Scandinavian source – probably derived from the Old Norse *hvalross*, meaning hairy whale – the animal was mostly unknown to Europeans for centuries.

In 1555, Olaus Magnus, the Swedish writer and archbishop of Uppsala, published *Historia de Gentibus Septentrionalibus* (A History of the Northern Peoples) while he was living at the St Brigitta monastery in

Rome. The book was a patriotic written testament of Sweden's folklore and natural history, eventually translated into four languages, reprinted and abridged six times, and it quickly became the text that defined Scandinavia to the rest of Europe's intelligentsia for centuries. Of the many oddities and curiosities in Magnus's book (and there were many!), his description of the *morse* – a hairy, carnivorous, walrus-like creature reported to sleep on cliffs while hanging by its teeth – is one of the most spectacular.

'To the far north, on the coast of Norway, there lives a mighty creature, as big as an elephant, called the walrus or *morse*, perhaps so named for its sharp bite; for if it glimpses a man on the seashore and can catch him, it jumps on him swiftly, rends him with its teeth, and kills him in an instant,' Olaus Magnus described the creatures. 'Using their tusks, these animals clamber right up to the cliff-tops, as if they were going up a ladder, in order to crop the sweet, dew-moistened grass, and then roll back down into the sea again, unless, in the meantime, they have been overcome with a heavy drowsiness and fall asleep as they cling to the rocks.'

According to Olaus Magnus, and as shown in the woodcut illustration in *Historia de Gentibus Septentrionalibus*, walrus hunters would creep up behind the animals and attach ropes to their tails. From a safe distance, hunters would rain rocks down on to the creatures, until they flung themselves into the ocean. Hunters would strip them of their valuable skins and the creatures would die.

But Olaus Magnus had never seen this hunting practice himself and, more to the point, he had never seen a real *morse*. (He was from inland southern Sweden himself, and never travelled to places where walruses actually lived.) More to the point, no one in the intelligentsia of sixteenth-century Europe had seen a walrus in its natural

habitat either, so any zoological description or entry in a catalogue of natural history wouldn't depend on the author's own observations – the empirical *autopsia* so critical to later natural history. Rather, descriptions of the walrus would teeter somewhere between folklore and myth, as European intellectual circles became more and more convinced of the curious strangeness of the animals that inhabited the icy environs at the edge of their known world.

One of the earliest mentions of walruses, historian of science Natalie Lawrence notes, comes in 1250, when the German Catholic bishop Albertus Magnus described them in his *De Animalibus* as 'hairy whales' with 'the longest tusks' that they use to 'hang from the rocks of cliffs when they sleep'. The then-contemporary Polish diplomat and scholar Maciej Miechowita described these animals as being able to climb cliffs with their long teeth. The famous sixteenth-century Swiss naturalist Conrad Gessner, when not writing about fossils, included a description of a walrus in his *Historiae Animalium* (vol. IV), published in 1558. Although Gessner was sceptical about the sensationalised tales published by earlier authors, his walrus description was pulled together from a plethora of secondary sources including extrapolations of walruses based on a stuffed head on display in Strasbourg town hall, rather than his own experiences. Although some hunters published first-hand accounts of their encounters with walruses over the centuries, few made it into scholarly circles and fewer still were believed.

There's a bit of irony here in the way that Europe used walruses, but never knew them as an animal. For centuries, Nordic peoples used walrus tusks for chess pieces and shield decorations. Other walrus bits showed up in European apothecaries, and some were used as inlay for combs and brushes. Blubber was burned in lamps and made into soap,

while tusks were sold off as unicorn horns and used as a traditional cure-all for poison. Only the indigenous Arctic hunters knew walrus before the animals were translated into dismembered parts for European commodities. The natural history of the walrus – what readers thought was real – hinged on the history that went into walrus myth-making.

Mainland Europe saw its first real live walrus in 1612, when a walrus pup was brought to Amsterdam, along with the stuffed skin of its mother. Dr Everhard Vorstius, of Leiden University, described how the pup ‘raged like a boar’, was soothed when placed in a barrel of water and ate mashed oats. (He then described walrus fat as tasting rather ‘toothsome.’) Confronted with such a curiosity and wonder of the natural world, it would appear that Renaissance Europe poked, prodded, then consumed the thing that it didn’t comprehend, in what is perhaps the least subtle metaphor imaginable.

When it comes to the filming at Walrus Island Sanctuary, audiences who tune in to Walrus Cam are left with a bit of a conundrum perhaps not all that different from the question posed by Olaus Magnus, Conrad Gessner and Renaissance Europe. Most audience members have never seen a real live walrus before, and fewer still have seen it in its natural habitat. While viewers use their own powers of observation to take in the walrus-filled haulouts, there is still a bit of a gap in knowing just what those walruses are doing. Audiences fill in the missing story – perhaps it’s similar to the walrus myth-making from centuries past – then project what sort of story they think they’re seeing. The Real Walruses of Walrus Cam still need a guiding narrative to translate their real-ness into an authentic bit of nature and wilderness.

Wilderness, then, is nominally what Walrus Cam has set out to stream to its internet audiences, and what wildlife

films from the BBC to Walt Disney have wanted to bring to viewers. Most twenty-first-century audiences watch scripted and live-streamed nature because such untouched, unexplored wilderness is exotic and inaccessible in their everyday lives. The desire to connect with the idea of nature underscores the very cachet that drives the popularity of wildlife films, and certainly wildlife camera feeds like Bear Cam and Walrus Cam. ‘Longing for the authentic, nostalgic for an innocent past, we are drawn to the spectacle of wildlife untainted by human intervention and will,’ historian of science Gregg Mitman suggests in *Reel Nature*. ‘Yet, we cannot observe this world of nature without such intervention. The camera lens must impose itself, select its subject, and frame its vision.’ Consequently, for people to look at nature (or Nature, with a capital letter) – whether through their own outdoor activities or through the world of documentaries – is a series of trade-offs is involved about the authenticity of the nature or wilderness under debate. ‘Cultural values, technology, and nature itself have supplied the raw materials from which wilderness as artifact has been forged,’ Mitman argues.

So where does that leave us in the ways that we watch wilderness and nature and whether we think such watching is authentically real?

If the point of nature documentaries is to introduce audiences to well, nature, in a more scripted, curated form than Walrus Cam, what are the acceptable ways of doing so? Add to that the business – the commodification of animals and natural wilderness, that is – and the issue of parsing what is genuinely fake nature is no small feat. The end goal of both seems to be the same – but the means and methods of authentic viewing are incredibly different.

Back on the Round Island beach, the walruses don’t seem to care whether audiences watch them *Frozen Planet*-style or through Explore.org’s Walrus Cam; the migrating

pinnipeds will continue to waddle around their haulout over the summer months, then head back out to sea for their winter foraging. How we – their audience – watch, think about and understand those walruses in their natural world, however, depends on the lens that we use to watch them.