

## **Iconic or Polarizing? An Ideological Criticism of National Geographic's**

### **Viral Polar Bear Video**

On October 8, 2018, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) released a special report on the impacts of global warming of 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels. The report explored the impacts of global warming of 1.5°C in order to warn policymakers and individuals of the consequences of climate change. The IPCC found that humans have already caused approximately 1°C of warming and, if we are to continue emitting greenhouse gases at the same rate, will cause an additional .5°C of warming between 2030 and 2052 (IPCC, 2018). 1.5°C of global warming will have numerous effects on Earth, including sea level rise, Arctic ice loss, and increased likelihood of extreme weather patterns (IPCC, 2018). Consequently, humans will face increased risks to health, food security, and water supply (IPCC, 2018). All of these issues will only worsen as global warming increases beyond 1.5°C.

While it is technically possible to limit global warming to 1.5°C, scientists estimate that humanity would need to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 100 percent from 2010 levels by 2050 (Davenport, 2018). This would require a mass overhaul of the world economy and a rapid transition to renewable energy (Davenport, 2018). Such a reversal in emissions necessitates political and societal change around the world. For this reason, many scientists, activists, and media professionals are trying to change the tide of global warming through communication.

One organization known for their environmental communication is National Geographic. The magazine frequently utilizes photographs and videos to depict the impacts of climate change. One example is a viral polar bear video from 2017 entitled "Heart-Wrenching Video: Starving Polar Bear on Iceless Land." Given the IPCC's new report, few topics seem as timely as the relationship between climate change communication and public attitudes. By analyzing the

National Geographic video, I will argue that the use of the polar bear as a climate change icon perpetuates the ideology that humans have a moral obligation to prevent climate change in order to protect nature-- rather than ourselves.

### **The Polar Bear as a Climate Change Icon**

The growing body of research on climate change in the late twentieth century called for the growth of environmental communication (Doyle, 2009). This expanding field favored imagery, particularly photography, to communicate climate change (Doyle, 2009). Since the turn of the century, the development of digital media has transformed climate change communication while often maintaining its reliance on imagery (Wang, Corner, Chapman, & Markowitz, 2017). For example, digitalization of magazines such as National Geographic allows traditionally print media companies to incorporate mediums such as videos and interactive graphics into their climate change communication (Wang et al., 2017).

While climate change communication thrives on imagery, some images are more potent than others. Chapman, Corner, Webster, and Markowitz (2016) found that images depicting the impact of climate change (such as polar bears on melting ice caps) were more effective in garnering emotional responses and motivating individuals than images that showed climate change solutions (such as solar panel fields). It is likely that the success of the images of the impact was due to our sense of connection and empathy for other species. Furthermore, non-expert icons like images of wildlife were more engaging than expert icons like maps and graphs (O'Neill & Hulme, 2009). Such empathy and engagement with wildlife icons plays a key role in the prevalence of polar bears in climate change communication.

Of the images utilized in climate change communication, few are as iconic as the polar bear. One of the leaders in environmental journalism, National Geographic, helped cement the polar bear as the face of climate change over the course of a decade. According to Born (2018), this iconization was a three-step process that began with the anthropomorphism of the polar bear to cultivate an emotional connection between viewers and the bear. Over several years, National Geographic widened the lens to incorporate the spatial context of the Arctic, thus creating a sense of place (Born, 2018). Finally, National Geographic began to depict bears in danger to tie them to the greater issue of global warming (Born, 2018). National Geographic's increasing use of the polar bear as the face of climate change both reflects and reinforces Western society's climate change narratives (Born, 2018).

While O'Neill and Hulme (2009) found polar bears to be the best-understood climate change icon and highly engaging, polar bears are also problematic as climate change icons on several levels. In the same study, participants ranked the polar bear as the least relevant of climate change icons (O'Neill & Hulme, 2009). While Chapman et al. (2016) also found a strong association between climate change and polar bears, the polar bear's prevalence in climate change discourse led to dulled responses and cynicism from the participants. Doyle (2009) even argued that the very nature of photographic images to communicate climate change is problematic since photography represents what is or what has been, and therefore can only capture images of climate change effects that have already occurred.

#### **Heart-Wrenching Video: Starving Polar Bear on Iceless Land**

One of the most widespread examples of the polar bear as a climate change icon is a video that was published by National Geographic to their website on December 7, 2017. The

video, entitled “Heart-Wrenching Video: Starving Polar Bear on Iceless Land,” depicts an emaciated polar bear on an iceless tundra with text at the bottom of the screen that describes the impact of climate change on polar bears. It explicitly establishes the polar bear as the face of climate change with the opening line, which reads “This is what climate change looks like” (National Geographic, 2017). The video, which lasts 1 minute and 23 seconds, has no sound apart from somber piano music. The video follows the bear as it hobbles through the snowless landscape. At times, it seems to collapse, but forces itself to keep moving. The video shows the bear rooting through a rusty barrel for food to no avail. Finally, the video cuts to a shot of the bear laying in the scraggly grass as it slowly closes its eyes, perhaps for the last time.

The man behind the footage is a Canadian photographer, filmmaker, and marine biologist named Paul Nicklen (Paul Nicklen Photography, n. d.). Nicklen is an assignment photographer for National Geographic who specializes in Arctic photography with an interest in demonstrating the effect of ice loss on polar ecosystems (National Geographic, n. d.). Nicklen’s childhood amongst the Inuit and his background as a marine biologist heavily influence his hands-on approach to nature photography (National Geographic, n. d.). The footage was captured in collaboration with a team from Nicklen’s organization, SeaLegacy. SeaLegacy was cofounded by Paul Nicklen and Cristina Mittermeier in 2014 (SeaLegacy, n. d.). SeaLegacy is a nonprofit organization that uses photography and videos to tell stories about the ocean in order to inspire change (SeaLegacy, n. d.). The organization functions by sending their teams into the field to capture images, which are then used in campaigns to raise money for various oceanic causes (SeaLegacy, n. d.). Nicklen called upon SeaLegacy, including Mittermeier, to assist in the filming of the polar bear video.

Nicklen had been taking photographs on a solitary mission to an ice cave when he spotted the polar bear (Mittermeier, 2018). He immediately called upon SeaLegacy to help him capture images of the bear. The video that Nicklen initially posted on his Instagram was devoid of added text. The caption contained the following:

This is what starvation looks like. The muscles atrophy. No energy. It's a slow, painful death. When scientists say polar bears will be extinct in the next 100 years, I think of the global population of 25,000 bears dying in this manner. (Nicklen, 2017)

The caption went on to describe several solutions to the impending destruction that climate change will bring. However, it never stated that the polar bear was starving due to global warming. It simply used the starving polar bear as a representation of what climate change will eventually do to the species.

National Geographic proceeded to pick up the video, make edits, and add the in-video text about climate change. After they posted the edited video, it promptly went viral. To date, the video has 1,679,116 YouTube views (National Geographic, 2017), 9.71 million views and 224,789 retweets on Twitter (National Geographic, 2017), and 128,470 shares on Facebook (National Geographic, 2017). In total, it reached an estimated 2.5 billion people, making it the most viewed National Geographic video of all time (Mittermeier, 2018). The emotional content of the video drew a number of reactions that ranged from “gratitude that [they]’d shined a light on climate change” to anger that “[they] had not fed the bear or covered him with blankets or taken him to a vet” (Mittermeier, 2018).

However, the video was not all that it seemed. Following the video’s rapid spread across the internet, a number of scientists spoke up to dispute the claim that “this is what climate change

looks like.” One reason scientists disagreed with the language of the video is that there is no way to prove that the bear was starving from climate change as opposed to an illness or some other cause (Hopper, 2017). Additionally, studies had shown that bear populations in that region were quite healthy at the time the footage was shot (Hopper, 2017). Furthermore, the polar bear’s rank as an apex predator means that starvation is one of the most common causes of death since it lacks natural predators (Hopper, 2017). These objections validated climate change deniers in their use of the video as an example of environmental exaggeration, thus undermining the message of the video (Mittermeier, 2018). In response to the criticism, National Geographic released an article by Cristina Mittermeier explaining how SeaLegacy lost control of the narrative. National Geographic published a formal apology and a revised version of the video as well. However, these attempts at fixing their error came eight months after the publication of the original National Geographic video, raising the question of whether their attempt had any meaningful effect.

Regardless of accuracy, the video’s virality indicates that it resonated with millions. On the surface, this may seem like a victory for climate change communication. Yet the video’s rhetoric points to an underlying ideology that may be undermining the work of climate change communicators around the world. For the purpose of this analysis, I will use ideological criticism to argue that the use of the polar bear as a climate change icon perpetuates the ideology that humans have a moral obligation to prevent climate change in order to protect nature-- rather than ourselves.

### **Method: Ideological Criticism**

According to Sonja K. Foss (2018), an ideology is “a system of ideas or a pattern of beliefs that determines a group’s interpretations of some aspect(s) of the world” (p. 237). While theorists dating back to Aristotle have played with the idea of ideologies, the term itself was first coined by Destutt de Tracy in 1801 in *Mémoire de faculté de penser* with the goal of creating an organized “theory of the moral and political sciences” (as cited in Kennedy, 1979, p. 355). It was originally proposed as an alternative to the studies of metaphysics or psychology (Kennedy, 1979). However, it was Karl Marx who established the social importance of ideology during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Through works such as his 1846 manuscript *The German Ideology* and his 1867 book *Capital*, Marx explored the importance of socioeconomic context in the formation of society’s conditioned ideas (Drucker, 1972). Marx’s notions of ideology serve as the basis for modern ideological criticism.

Though there exists a multitude of works that have contributed to the development of ideological criticism, essays by Michael Calvin McGee and Philip Wander are regarded as formative works in the field. Michael Calvin McGee’s (1980) greatest contribution to the field of ideological criticism was the coining of the term “ideograph” to mean “an ordinary-language term found in political discourse” (p. 15). In this way, ideographs are manifestations of ideologies in the rhetorical fabric of society. McGee’s 1980 essay, “The ‘Ideograph’: A Link Between Rhetoric and Ideology” played a key role in revitalizing and redirecting ideological criticism which, according to McGee, had begun to atrophy. Philip Wander also played a key role in directing the development of the method with his 1983 essay “The Ideological Turn of Modern Criticism” and his follow up essay in 1984, “The Third Persona: An Ideological Turn in Rhetorical Theory”. “The Ideological Turn of Modern Criticism” served to summarize and

respond to the work of other theorists in the field, while “The Third Persona” built on Wander’s previous work to explore the concept of hegemony. The evolution of ideological criticism has since converged with many other fields of rhetoric such as structuralism and semiotics.

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Structuralism is a linguistic approach to identifying the grammars of different rhetorical artifacts (Foss, 2018). By examining the different elements of an artifact and the relationships between those elements, rhetoricians can reveal the implicit ideologies. Semiotics, or the study of signs, is an offshoot of structuralism that was developed by Ferdinand de Saussure and Charles Sanders Peirce in the early 20th century (Foss, 2018). In semiotics, any unit that represents something else is studied as a sign. According to Sonja K. Foss (2018), this includes “words, font styles, camera angles, colors, clothing, and gestures” (240). Each sign in an artifact can point is a clue to the overarching ideology in a work. Semiotics is particularly useful when analyzing National Geographic’s symbolic use of the polar bear in its climate change narrative.

Foss outlines the process of an ideological criticism in her 2018 textbook, *Rhetorical Criticism: Exploration and Practice*. According to Foss (2018), the steps of an ideological criticism are as follows: 1) Identify the artifact’s presented elements; 2) Identify the suggested elements; 3) Formulate an ideology from the suggested elements; and 4) Identify the functions served by the artifact’s ideology. For this criticism, I will analyze the various presented and suggested elements that demonstrate the underlying ideology before discussing the implications of the artifact’s ideology.

### **Analysis**

An important characteristic of National Geographic’s polar bear video is the collaboration of rhetors. As mentioned in the artifact description, this video is interesting in that

it borrows Paul Nicklen's footage. While Nicklen's original video and the National Geographic video are similar in appearance, the strategic editing choices made by National Geographic present a drastically different narrative. This means that while the video features striking shot composition and framing, the key presented elements emerge from the added text and editing choices of National Geographic. The presented elements in the video reflect three themes: polar bear as victim, climate change as perpetrator, and humans as culpable witnesses.

The video's powerful climate change rhetoric begins with the title: "Heart-Wrenching Video: Starving Polar Bear on Iceless Land". Before the video even starts, the title uses the established climate icon of the polar bear to conjure imagery of a tundra ravaged by the effects of climate change. The juxtaposition of "polar bear," which is most directly associated with the icy tundra, with the word "iceless" presents the imagery in the video as unnatural (Stenport & Vachula, 2017). While the footage was captured in August when reduced ice cover is healthy, National Geographic chose the title of the video carefully to allude to climate change as the reason for the "iceless land" and, consequently, the "starving polar bear" (Hopper, 2017).

The video opens on the polar bear as it limps in slow motion, the first line of text reading, "This is what climate change looks like." This initial line establishes several key assumptions in the video. The first assumption is that climate change is real. The video's message depends on climate change as reality. In fact, this line states that climate change is not only real, but it is already here. By writing "*this* is what climate change looks like," National Geographic places the phenomenon of climate change in the present moment as opposed to a future challenge. This lends the video a sense of urgency that future-focused climate change communication can lack. The third assumption is that climate change is to blame for the bear's starvation. As many scientists have pointed out, it is possible that a multitude of causes may be responsible for the

state of the bear's health (Hopper, 2017). While National Geographic does not blame climate change outright, it strongly implicates that climate change is the perpetrator.

After transitioning to another shot of the bear dragging itself forward on its knees, the video cuts to a wide shot of the bear laying dejectedly in the grass with text that reads "This starving polar bear was spotted by National Geographic photographer Paul Nicklen while on expedition in the Baffin Islands." The repetition of "starving polar bear," paired with the image of the bear slumped in the grass, begins to develop a character for the polar bear based on the bear's downfall. The polar bear is established as the video's protagonist and victim. Additionally, by mentioning the bear and Paul Nicklen in the same sentence, National Geographic begins to establish a relationship between the two in which the bear is the victim and Nicklen is the witness to its pain. While this is the only time Nicklen is directly mentioned, this places him in the narrative for the rest of the video. The implicit meaning of this line is that Nicklen felt such a sense of duty to tell this bear's story that he dropped his original expedition goals to follow the bear. Nicklen's responsibility to share the images of the polar bear with the world transfers to the viewer, whose responsibility is to bear witness to the harmful effects of climate change.

The next image is a medium shot of the polar bear beside two rusty barrels. As he begins rummaging inside one for food, text pops up that reads "As temperatures rise, and sea ice melts, polar bears lose access to the main staple of their diet-- seals." This line serves to further reinforce the illusion that climate change is to blame for the bear's poor health. Coupled with the image of the bear raising its head feebly with a decaying scrap in its mouth, this line also reinforces the polar bear's victimized character. We are to pity this creature that suffers the consequences of forces beyond its understanding. Humans are also drawn back into the narrative by the image of the rusty barrels. In the context of the text, the barrels serve as a symbol of

human pollution, and thus remind the viewer that humans are not simply bystanders. We are witnesses to a disaster of our own manufacturing. Even in the barren Arctic tundra, human pollution scars the landscape.

The camera lingers on the bear and the barrels as new text pops up: “Starving, and running out of energy, they are forced to wander into human settlements for any source of food.” Here, the theme of the polar bear as victim returns with more repetition of the word “starving.” The video transitions to a close up of the bear ripping at the small, gray scrap that it found. The use of the close up emphasizes the bear’s pitiful state. Again, the video suggests that the bear’s condition is unusual and unnatural. By mentioning that the bears are being forced into human settlements, National Geographic suggests that the natural order has been disrupted. The gaunt polar bear is depicted as an apex predator reduced to scavenging due to its changing ecosystem. However, biologists who watched the video commented that starvation is actually one of the most common causes of death for animals at the top of the food chain because they lack natural predators (Hopper, 2017). Nevertheless, the next shot further illustrates the wrongness of it all by showing an extreme close up of the bear as it chews on seemingly nothing with a foamy mouth. This is one of two images in the piece that is unaccompanied by text. Following the line about relying on human settlements for food, it seems to symbolize poison. Not only are we poisoning the Earth with greenhouse gas emissions, but we are poisoning its non-human inhabitants with garbage. At this point in the video, it is clear that humans are not idle bystanders. We are actively taking part as accomplices to climate change.

The final line of text comes with a new shot of the polar bear slowly ambling forward. The shot is close enough that we can see the whites of its eyes as it desperately swings its head back and forth, seemingly searching for a chance at survival. The text reads “Feeding polar bears

is illegal. Without finding another source of food, this bear likely only had a few more hours to live.” This line brings back Nicklen’s responsibility in all of this. By bring up that it is illegal to feed polar bears, National Geographic suggests that Nicklen would do such a thing if he could. Just as it is his duty to capture this perfect imagery of the brutality of climate change, it would be his duty to play rescuer. The second line-- “Without finding another source of food, this bear likely only had a few more hours to live--” confirms what the audience already knew. There is no hope for this bear. By informing the audience that feeding the polar bears is illegal, National Geographic is hinting at the real solution: stopping climate change. Here, they ask the audience to move beyond their role as a complicit witness to become an ally of the polar bears.

The final shot is another close up of the polar bear as it lays sprawled in the grass. This time, it stares directly into the camera. It blinks several times, and as it closes its eyes, the shot fades to black. The last shot gives the sensation of standing by someone’s deathbed. The polar bear’s gaze is a call to action to prevent its brethren from suffering the same fate. The audience watches the symbolic death of the polar bear as the image fades to black, thus leaving them responsible for the polar bear’s unspoken demand.

### **Discussion**

As demonstrated through the artifact analysis, the three primary themes in the National Geographic video are polar bear as victim, climate change as perpetrator, and humans as culpable witnesses. It is in the dynamic between these three characters, so to speak, that the video’s ideology shines through. The video starts by portraying the polar bear as a victim of climate change and people as witnesses to the polar bear’s situation. As the video approaches its midpoint, it becomes clear that humans are not innocent witnesses, but complicit bystanders. In

fact, anthropogenic climate change is the result of human action, and therefore comes to symbolize human action. Thus, video implies that humans are directly responsible for the health of the polar bear. But the end of the video gives the viewer a chance to atone by fighting climate change for the good of the polar bears. Therefore, I believe that the underlying ideology is that humans have a moral obligation to prevent climate change in order to protect nature.

This ideology is similar to Hans Jonas' theory of responsibility. 20<sup>th</sup> century philosopher Hans Jonas argued that man's responsibility on Earth is to be "a steward of being" who values life on Earth above the destructive progress of humanity (Mantatov & Mantatova, 2015). Even in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, he believed that human action was sending us towards apocalyptic damage. He correlated responsibility with power, and he argued that our status as the dominant species on the planet also meant that humans are responsible for the well-being of all other life (Mantatova & Mantatova, 2015).

Jonas is not alone in believing that we have a moral responsibility to nature. In a survey of students in the United States, forty-five percent of participants said that they believed climate change was a moral issue (Markowitz, 2012). Of the students who believed that climate change is a moral issue, the majority of them said they felt that way because they believed humans play a stewardship role on Earth (Markowitz, 2012). This ideology of stewardship is appealed to across environmental communication rhetoric, and for good reason. These individuals were more likely to feel empowered to create positive change with their actions (Markowitz, 2012). People who feel a moral duty to protect the environment are an easy target for the rhetors behind popular environmental communication.

But herein lies the flaw in environmental communication's reliance on nature-based ideology. The people who already subscribe to the stewardship ideology are not necessarily the people who need to be reached by these messages. There is no harm in promoting environmental messages that put nature first when one is communicating with this environmentally conscious community. But often times the goal of environmental communication is to inform and persuade the other members of our society to take climate change seriously, such as climate change skeptics and people who don't believe climate change will affect them. Environmental communication that relies on ideologies that are driven by a responsibility to nature, such as the one guiding National Geographic's video, only serve to undermine the message they are trying to promote by depicting climate change as an issue that affects the "other" as opposed to an issue that will affect every individual on Earth.

For example, climate change communication rarely touches on the fact that countless people have already had their lives torn apart by climate change. Climate change refugees are a growing issue that is often lost in a sea of nature-first environmental communication. According to NPR, 24 million people have been displaced due to extreme weather events each year since 2008 (McDonnell, 2018). The frequency and severity of these events will only worsen as global warming increases. From desertification in the Sahel to chronic inundation in South Asia, millions of people already suffer the consequences of our anthropogenic warming (McDonnell, 2018). These are the real victims of climate change. Climate change communication that relies on distant icons such as polar bears serve to invalidate and drown out the experiences of real humans.

Furthermore, the argument has been made that it is philosophically impossible to be responsible *to* nature (Meinertsen, 2017). To be responsible to something means that there is

potential for a reciprocal relationship. However, for this to be the case, both members of the relationship must be a person or person-like, which is not the case in humankind's relationship with nature (Meinertsen, 2017). Rely as we will on nature, nature does not *need* us. If we truly do cause environmental damage of apocalyptic proportion, the Earth will bounce back with or without humans. When we talk about a responsibility to nature, we are often better off talking about our responsibility *for* nature for the sake of other people.

Apart from the National Geographic video's problematic ideology, it calls to question another issue in environmental communication: if we need to manipulate the truth to make people care, is it a truth worth telling? As mentioned in the artifact description, the manipulative aspect of the video served as fodder for climate change deniers and damaged the trust of average people. National Geographic is not the only environmental communicator that falls victim to this problem. As is the issue across many fields of communication, communication experts aren't necessarily experts in what they are communicating. Masters of rhetoric and persuasion may find themselves stretching the truth or butchering the details of many complex environmental issues. For example, the prominent environmental organization Greenpeace has received criticism for misleading messages several times. In 2016, about a third of Nobel laureates signed a letter which attacked Greenpeace's anti-GMO (genetically modified organism) campaign (France-Press, 2016). The organization stated that one GMO, Golden Rice, was "environmentally irresponsible, poses risks to human health, and could compromise food, nutrition and financial security," but there is no evidence to support their claims (France-Press, 2016). In the same year, they were accused of misrepresenting the business practices and forest management of Resolute Forest Products. Trusted magazines such as *New York Magazine* fall victim to misleading messaging as well. Their article "The Uninhabitable Earth," written by David

Wallace-Wells, was one of the most popular climate change stories of 2017, yet many scientists were dismayed by its alarmist and hyperbolic interpretation of the facts (Vincent, 2017). The article was frequently circulated as proof of our impending doom despite climate scientists' rating of the article's scientific accuracy as low (Vincent, 2017). While it is unfortunate that misleading environmental communication occurs so frequently, it is unlikely to improve as climate change becomes an increasingly common topic in popular media.

This analysis holds several implications for future studies of environmental communication. One aspect that requires further investigation is the effectiveness of human-centric versus nature-centric rhetoric. While I hypothesized through this research that nature-centric messaging dilutes the importance of climate change, there is no study that has been completed to date that examines these two different schools of thought when it comes to environmental communication. Reaching a better understanding of the impacts of each method could be greatly beneficial in the field. Another area of this criticism that requires further research is the tropes and patterns in environmental communication. Given my research goal, I decided to use an ideological lens. However, it may be beneficial to explore the subject of nature-centric climate change rhetoric through a genre criticism lens in order to determine whether there is a genre of nature-centric (and human-centric) climate change communication.

### **Conclusion**

There is no doubt that the polar bear is a powerful climate change icon. From its humble anthropomorphized debut in the glossy pages of *National Geographic Magazine* to its record-breaking virality across social media, the polar bear will continue to serve as the poster child of climate change impact. The polar bear gives activists something to rally around and

communicators something to fall back on for an easily understood statement. Given its popularity, there are certainly benefits to utilizing icons such as the polar bear in climate change rhetoric.

However, there is something to be said for the bluntness of the truth. In a world where climate change has already claimed lives and has reshaped others, why rely on the same stale imagery to communicate the crisis? Perhaps it is time to revisit the semiotics of climate change. In a world that will only continue changing, it makes sense that our communication methods should change as well.

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