

THE EDUTAINER: WALT DISNEY, NATURE FILMS, AND  
AMERICAN UNDERSTANDINGS OF NATURE IN  
THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

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A Thesis  
Submitted to  
the Temple University Graduate Board

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In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
MASTER OF ARTS

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by  
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July 2015

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## ABSTRACT

Throughout much of the twentieth century Walt Disney wielded considerable influence in American culture. By identifying and commercially exploiting a strain of environmental thought that sentimentalized and romanticized nature, Walt Disney influenced the attitudes of millions of Americans concerning how they conceptualized environmental issues. The Walt Disney Company's nature documentaries and their popularity as both entertainment as well as educational material helped disseminate the virtues of conservation within the American mindset. The Disney interpretation of conservation clashed with other post-war environmental understandings of the ethic, as did the company's consistently inaccurate representations of nature on film. Disney's particular strain of environmentalism, based on an Edenic appreciation for nature, the belief that to conserve land it must be developed, and practice of moralizing to humans through anthropomorphized depictions of animal behavior, stood out in contrast to other existing post-war environmental mindsets during the controversy surrounded the proposed construction of a vacation resort in Mineral King, California, following Disney's death.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

On the bank of a man-made river stood Walt Disney, flanked by a pair of animatronic beavers. It was the grand unveiling of a new section of Disneyland in Anaheim, California, intended to promote and honor the Walt Disney Company's latest successful forays into nature documentaries known as *True-Life Adventures*. Though Frontierland had been a part of the theme park since it opened in 1955, the public's enthusiastic response to the *True-Life* series prompted the Walt Disney Company to expand Frontierland's train ride to include what the company dubbed Nature's Wonderland. Tourists could now ride a tiny train through a fake desert, complete with a robotic bobcat perched atop a phony cactus (pulled directly from a scene in the Disney documentary *The Living Desert*) as well as a tiny river and forest, replete with artificially constructed bears, and, of course, the beaver stars of the documentary *Beaver Valley*. Before a crowd of photographers on a sunny June day in 1960, Walt Disney stood with his three grandchildren, each of whom sported a jaunty Wild West cowboy hat as, instead of cutting a ceremonial ribbon, they chopped at a carefully positioned branch with tiny, adorable hatchets.<sup>1</sup>

Upon being forced out of his first animation studio by a former partner, Walt Disney, with his brother Roy, created in 1928 what would become the most successful

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<sup>1</sup>Richard West, "Mechanical Animals, Visitors Frolic in Disney's New Nature's Wonderland," *Los Angeles Times*, June 13, 1960; Jerry Hulse, "Dream Realized - Disneyland Opens: \$17,500,000 World of Fantasy Dedicated to Children and Hope," *Los Angeles Times*, July 18, 1955.

animation studio in the history of the world.<sup>2</sup> From the onset of Walt Disney's career, the theme of nature absolutely permeated his work. Initially the cartoon shorts produced by the Walt Disney Company featured barnyard animals in agricultural settings. Black and white horses, cows, and pigs with decidedly similar countenances stretched and collapsed as they wobbled across the screen in parody of any kind of actual movement by either human or animal. This unrealistic technique was in keeping with the work of many of Walt Disney's peers, and as such his early cartoons were largely deemed unremarkable by contemporaries.<sup>3</sup>

In time, the Walt Disney Company would demonstrate a tremendous degree of creativity combined with business acumen that would set it far apart from the rest of the animating world. Aside from creating memorable and exceptionally popular characters such as Mickey Mouse, the studio also ventured into creating animated cartoons that strove to appear realistic. This was an artistic decision drastically at odds with not just the work of other studios, but with the public's expectations of what cartoons could be. The cartoons of the Disney Company have always been denigrated and viewed as faddish fluff by some, but many Americans feel that the Walt Disney studio's realistic depictions of nature have elevated cartoons into art.<sup>4</sup>

While the Walt Disney Company does not hold the distinction of being the first studio to release a full length animated feature, 1937's *Snow White and the Seven*

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<sup>2</sup> Richard Holliss and Brian Sibley, *The Disney Studio Story* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1988), 14-16. Holliss and Sibley name 1928 as the year of the studio's founding as that is when Walt and Roy Disney struck out on their own to create independent cartoons. The Walt Disney Company's website claims the studio's founding was in 1923, when the brothers were still working for Charles Mintz, who later deprived them of their intellectual property. <http://thewaltdisneycompany.com/about-disney/disney-history>. Accessed June 19, 2015.

<sup>3</sup> Frank Thomas and Ollie Johnston, *Disney Animation: The Illusion of Life* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1981), 30-31.

<sup>4</sup> Leonard Maltin, *The Disney Films*, 3rd ed. (New York: Hyperion, 1995), 12-13.

*Dwarves* did prove to be the first full length animated film that was hugely popular with the American masses. From practically the first frame, *Snow White* demonstrated what would become the defining feature of the Disney Company's obsession with nature; that is, a sentimentalized depiction of nature as a romantic, idealistic Eden populated with anthropomorphized fauna. Furthermore, the film made liberal use of the pathetic fallacy. When Snow White smiled, the birds sang. When she was in danger, the skies went black and poured rain. In many ways, this film proved to set the tone of how Disney would present nature to its viewers from that moment on.

Partly as a result of the Walt Disney Company's influence, many Americans in the mid-twentieth century nurtured romantic and sentimental attitudes towards a nature from which they were increasingly physically removed and dissociated. These Americans came to conceptualize nature in a manner that closely mirrored the Disney Company's artistic approach, as they were influenced all of their lives by Disney's interpretation of nature both when being entertained as well as when being educated. Walt Disney's role in educating the American public about nature, animal behavior, and the importance of conservation is obscured in modern memory in part because he himself was conflicted about his authority to do so. A high school dropout, Walt Disney was slow in embracing the fact that his voice was loudest in the mid-twentieth century when it came to the issue of conservation, and his position gave him the ability to educate audiences about nature by the millions.<sup>5</sup>

The catch, of course, is that the nature about which he educated the public was a simplified, packaged, easily consumable fantasy. Disney sought to instill his moral

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<sup>5</sup> On Disney not completing high school, see Robert De Roos, "The Magic Worlds of Walt Disney," *National Geographic* 124, no. 2 (August, 1963), 178.

values into his audience through motion pictures, and this moral education was more easily communicated when it was padded with tales of loveable forest creatures behaving in a manner that felt relatable to humans. Conservative, post-war values were popular in America and were reflected in the popularity of all things Disney. Furthermore, Walt Disney's definition of conservation was one that centered on outdoor recreation and land development, and it did not necessarily reflect how conservation would come to be defined by those raised under the scope of his influence. This conservation ethos paired with a fantastic portrayal of nature, presented to Americans in theaters, homes, and schools in the mid-twentieth century as authentic fact, can help explain the sentimental, romantic strain of thought running through twentieth-century environmentalism.

There is no shortage of books written about Disney the man and Disney the company.<sup>6</sup> The deluge of works written on these subjects in turn run the gamut in terms of opinion. Seemingly, most biographies of note about Walt Disney were celebratory fanfare until Richard Schickel published *The Disney Version* in 1968. This book was the first to offer stark and unflinching criticisms of the Disney corporation as well as of Walt, the man himself. Coming, as it was, so soon after the death of Walt Disney, Schickel's

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<sup>6</sup> For more on Walt Disney the man, see Richard Schickel, *The Disney Version: The Life, Times, Art and Commerce of Walt Disney* (Chicago: Elephant Paperbacks, 1968); Leonard Mosley, *Disney's World* (New York: Stein and Day, 1985); Marc Eliot, *Walt Disney: Hollywood's Dark Prince* (New York: Birch Lane Press, 1993); Kathy Merlock Jackson, *Walt Disney: A Bio-Bibliography* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1993); and Amy Boothe Green & Howard E. Green, *Remembering Walt: Favorite Memories of Walt Disney* (New York: Disney Editions, 1999). For more on Disney the company, see Maltin, *The Disney Films*; Thomas and Johnston, *Disney Animation*; Ollie Johnston and Frank Thomas, *Bambi: The Story and the Film* (New York: Stewart, Tabori & Chang, 1990); Andi Stein, *Why We Love Disney: The Power of the Disney Brand* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2011); Charles Solomon, *The Disney That Never Was: The Stories and Art from Five Decades of Unproduced Animation* (New York: Hyperion, 1995); Richard Shale, *Donald Duck Joins Up: The Walt Disney Studio during World War II* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1982); and Janet Wasko, *Understanding Disney* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 2001). For more on Disney and nature, see Derek Bouse, *Wildlife Films* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000); Matt Cartmill, *A View to a Death in the Morning* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993); and Ronald B. Tobias, *Film and the American Moral Vision of Nature: Theodore Roosevelt to Walt Disney* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2011).

book was regarded by many as an unfair attack. Others, noted Schickel in the introduction to the third edition of his book, were relieved that someone was finally taking on the Magic Kingdom and its deceased ruler.<sup>7</sup>

By the end of the twentieth century the American public more or less became accepted it as canon that Walt Disney and the company that survived him were tainted. For instance, Marc Eliot's 1993 biography *Walt Disney: Hollywood's Dark Prince* picked up where Schickel had left off by acknowledging the artistic and cultural contributions of Walt Disney but paying special emphasis to Walt's role as a fervent anti-Communist FBI informant and politically conservative anti-unionist. To be sure, there is equally no shortage of authors that have taken up the pen in defense of Walt Disney, but they frankly tend to be more hagiographic than academic in character. Torn between viewing Walt Disney as some sort of uncle figure or as an arch-capitalist with zero respect for American culture, people seem to have a hard time seeing the man as he actually was.

With so many books and opinions on Disney, there are, within them, a subset that directly address Walt Disney and his unique relationship with nature. Derek Bouse, in his book on nature documentaries, found himself writing about Walt Disney out of necessity, due to the Disney Company's expansive influence in the field. Evidently, Bouse felt he was on well-trod ground, obliging him to insist that he was not in a scholarly echo chamber and that he was "eager to move the discourse on from Disney."<sup>8</sup> This is a difficult task for anyone wishing to write about nature as depicted through motion pictures, considering that Disney popularized the practice and formulated the standard like no other individual before or since.

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<sup>7</sup> Schickel, *The Disney Version*, 3.

<sup>8</sup> Bouse, *Wildlife Films*, xiii.

Walt Disney has proven to be so influential to American cultural attitudes towards nature that there even exists a tiny corner of academia devoted to the scholarly study of the film *Bambi*. Matt Cartmill, in a book covering human history from the Hellenic period to the twentieth century, affords the subject of *Bambi* an entire chapter, so convinced is he of the film's cultural significance. That is not to say that Cartmill is crediting Disney with creating what he calls "the Bambi Syndrome:" a sentimental, almost naive opposition to hunting due to the belief that nature is a paradise corrupted by the very presence of humankind. Cartmill points out that this myth is practically as old as human history. What Disney did was mass produce and popularize films that, whatever his intention, helped foster this mentality amongst Americans.<sup>9</sup>

Supposedly, a child once asked Walt Disney if he drew the cartoons his studio released, to which Walt said no. The child pressed, asking just what it was exactly that Walt did. "Well," Walt supposedly responded, "sometimes I think of myself as a little bee. I go from one area of the studio to another and gather pollen and sort of stimulate everybody. I guess that's the job I do."<sup>10</sup> Ollie Johnston and Frank Thomas, two lead animators who worked with Walt Disney for decades, later described their boss as "a communicator."<sup>11</sup> Walt Disney communicated his vision to America and the rest of the world through animation as well as live action films, spreading his version of nature and his ideas about the importance of conservation like pollen. Walt Disney concerned himself with a great many causes in his lifetime, but his commitment to conservation was held chiefly among them. That his role in educating Americans about the vital necessity

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<sup>9</sup> Cartmill, *A View to a Death in the Morning*, 182.

<sup>10</sup> Robert De Roos, "The Magic Worlds of Walt Disney," 162.

<sup>11</sup> Thomas and Johnston, *Disney Animation*, 23.

of wildlife conservation should be largely forgotten is one of the great ironies of his complicated and fascinating life.

Influence is something impossible to measure. Few would argue that the Disney Company's impact on American cultural values in the twentieth century was not substantial. The precise extent to which Walt Disney's unique understanding of nature permeated the lives of individual Americans as a result of viewing his films can never be satisfactorily quantified. That said, by analyzing contemporary newspaper articles and reviews, comments from Walt Disney and those who worked for him, as well as some of the films released by the Disney Company in the mid-twentieth century, the tremendous influence of Walt Disney on how Americans viewed nature can be better appreciated. Disney did not by any means create the sentimental strain of thought in American environmental culture, but he did broadly distribute it. To get a better sense of environmental attitudes among Americans in the mid- to late-twentieth century, it is essential to understand how nature and conservation were represented in the films of the Walt Disney Company, and how the public received those representations.

## CHAPTER 2

### EARLY YEARS

Prior to the first moment Walt Disney put pencil to paper, America was embroiled in a discussion over what exactly was appropriate when it came to instructing children. Following the explosive popularity of Theodore Roosevelt and the politically satirical cartoons of Clifford Berryman, “teddy bears” hit the markets for the first time in 1906, prompting serious discussions about whether or not such plush toys were suitable for children. Could little girls, perhaps, after bonding with a stuffed animal instead of a babydoll during their formative years, grow up to become inept mothers?<sup>12</sup> How seriously concerned about this issue Americans were would be difficult to assess today, but the fact that the issue was part of the national discussion at all suggests the importance with which they regarded educating children about nature.

Theodore Roosevelt, that premier conservationist, in 1907 inserted himself into the center of a more famous controversy concerning nature, pertaining to nature writers and what he decried as their misleading fakery. At the very end of the nineteenth century, Ernest Thompson Seton and William J. Long had begun to write and publish a series of fanciful fables that were populated with humanized animal protagonists. Long’s works, in fact, were directly marketed towards children, and for a time both authors were quite successful. Roosevelt took issue with what he felt were unrealistic representations of animals that the authors were presenting as factual. Matt Cartmill noted that Roosevelt’s public and derisive moniker for writers of fiction that starred

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<sup>12</sup> Tobias, *Film and the American Moral Vision of Nature*, 71-72; Cartmill, *A View to a Death in the Morning*, 186.

anthropomorphized animals, “nature fakers,” stuck and effectively ended their careers. However, Cartmill also pointed out that Roosevelt’s Cartesian belief that animals were little more than automated meat was no more accurate a position than that which the president had attacked.<sup>13</sup>

In the heyday of the nature fakers, 1906, when children’s literature was focused on animals as cute, emotional, fuzzy little things that thought and acted like humans, young Walt Disney found himself as a five year-old boy relocated by his father to a rural farm in Missouri.<sup>14</sup> It was here that he first began to sketch animals, though it was not the domestic creatures kept in gates and stables by his father, but the wild rabbits that delighted him. When his brother Roy shot and killed one for dinner, Walt was traumatized.<sup>15</sup> Wild creatures, particularly small, adorable mammals, would become a recurring theme throughout Walt Disney’s life and career. In turn, his obsession with big-eyed, cute, furry things would be transmitted to the American collective consciousness via film.

Another childhood incident concerning nature likely had a transformative effect on Walt Disney. As an adult, Walt would claim to never have harmed an animal in his life, save for an owl he killed when he was about eight years old. He had startled the owl out of a tree and, perhaps out of fear, then proceeded to stomp the bird to death. Disney harbored shame over this act for the rest of his life, frequently experiencing nightmares as

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<sup>13</sup> Cartmill, *A View to a Death in the Morning*, 150-156; see also Ralph H. Lutts, *The Nature Fakers: Wildlife, Science & Sentiment* (Golden, Colorado: Fulcrum Publishing, 1990) and Jon T. Coleman, *Vicious: Wolves and Men in America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 205-209.

<sup>14</sup> Stein, *Why We Love Disney*, 14; Schickel, *The Disney Version*, 47-48.

<sup>15</sup> Mosley, *Disney’s World*, 28.

a result.<sup>16</sup> It is little wonder then that owls would figure somewhat prominently in his animated features: mysterious, often half-hidden, and wise. The recurring nightmares into his adulthood suggest that he carried this event with him, and that he felt he had something for which to atone.

It was not rabbits or even owls, but a different animal of the forest that preoccupied Walt Disney Studios in its early years. Felix Salten's novel *Bambi* was released in 1924 and in 1935, when the animated feature *Snow White* was still only in development, a filmmaker by the name of Sidney Franklin approached Walt Disney with the rights to Salten's novel. Franklin had originally wished to make a live action version of the story, but he became convinced that an animated feature would do the material better justice. Walt Disney read the book and more or less discarded the philosophy while simultaneously embracing some of the characters and a loose interpretation of the narrative. By 1937, with the rights to Salten's book transferred to Walt Disney, the production of the animated film *Bambi* became the studio's primary focus.<sup>17</sup>

In the very narrow meeting place where Disney films and environmental history converge, *Bambi* looms large. It is widely accepted that this animated feature film was a step apart from the previous works of the Walt Disney Company, and that it had profound things to say about the relationship between nature and "Man" (that often capitalized, and always gendered, synecdoche for humanity). Though not as much of a box office smash upon its initial release as one might assume, with subsequent theatrical releases over the years *Bambi* became enormously popular, as well as controversial.<sup>18</sup> At first, much of the

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<sup>16</sup> Janet Martin, "Bringing Bambi to the Screen," *Nature* (August-September, 1942), 352.

<sup>17</sup> Johnston and Thomas, *Bambi: The Story and the Film*, 104-108.

<sup>18</sup> Eliot, *Walt Disney*, 178.

public was befuddled at the film's realism. "Why have cartoons at all?" asked an irritated reviewer in *The New York Times*.<sup>19</sup> Visually realistic when compared to previously released animated films, *Bambi* taught viewers the Disney version of nature more so than any other cartoon released by the studio.

Whatever his later vacillations on the subject, Walt Disney embraced his role as an educator of the American public from the start of his career. Evidence for this can be found in some of the short subject productions made by his company since its infancy. In 1922 an impoverished Walt Disney Company released a short film for a local dentist named Thomas B. McCrum. Aside from also paying for Walt's delinquent shoe-repair bill, McCrum paid the studio five hundred dollars to produce *Tommy Tucker's Tooth*, an instructional film on oral hygiene. Four years later when the studio was undergoing financial straits once again, it produced a second educational short film for McCrum, this time starring Walt's niece, called *Clara Cleans Her Teeth*.<sup>20</sup>

The fledgling studio was not short on cash for too long. With the success and acclaim that came in the wake of the release of *Snow White*, the Walt Disney Company spent the next several years developing and producing followup feature length films. *Fantasia* and *Pinocchio* were released in 1940, but both films performed poorly at the box-office. These financial losses, coupled with the outbreak of the Second World War in a Europe that was suddenly no longer interested in distributing Disney films, motivated

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<sup>19</sup> Quoted in Schickel, *Disney Version*, 266.

<sup>20</sup> Bob Cruz, Jr, "Paging Dr. Disney: Health Education Films, 1922-1973," in *Learning from Mickey, Donald and Walt: Essays on Disney's Edutainment Films*, ed. A. Bowdoin Van Riper (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, 2011), 128.

Walt and his brother Roy, who acted as business manager, to turn the studio's attention back towards educational films as a means to supplement income.<sup>21</sup>

World War Two proved to be the impetus behind the Walt Disney Company's expansion into documentary-style short films, and it was during that time that the company grew more comfortable with creating a product designed to educate. To prove during the war years that the Walt Disney Studio could produce quality educational shorts to assist the effort, Walt had personally financed a training film called *Four Methods of Flush Riveting*.<sup>22</sup> Walt showed this film to the Canadian government in an attempt to woo them into a contract. In response to his ardent campaign for the job, the Canadian government paid the Walt Disney Company to produce four short documentaries, which served to get the notice of another Allied nation.<sup>23</sup> Though the deal had been in the making for some time, the United States government contracted Walt Disney Studios to make short subject training films on December 8, 1941, the day after the bombing of Pearl Harbor.<sup>24</sup> Ultimately, Disney would make hundreds of documentaries during World War Two, though before the House Un-American Activities Committee Walt would label them as propaganda.<sup>25</sup> The titles of these films, such as *Insects As Carriers of Disease*, *Hookworm*, and *Environmental Sanitation* suggest the

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<sup>21</sup> Cruz, "Paging Dr. Disney," 130.

<sup>22</sup> Solomon, *The Disney That Never Was*, 91.

<sup>23</sup> Shale, *Donald Duck Joins Up*, 16-20.

<sup>24</sup> Shale, *Donald Duck Joins Up*, 22.

<sup>25</sup> Thomas Patrick Doherty, *Projections of War: Hollywood, American Culture, and World War II* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 68; "The Testimony of Walter E. Disney before the House Committee on Un-American Activities," in *Walt Disney: Conversations*, ed. Kathy Merlock Jackson (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2006), 36.

diversity of topics covered, and that not all aspects of nature given the Disney treatment turned out cutesy and anthropomorphized.<sup>26</sup>

During the war the work on *Bambi* continued, despite the studio being short on staff due to a number of animators that had either been drafted or had voluntarily joined the military.<sup>27</sup> Wishing to render a realistic depiction of nature, the animators employed multiple methods of inspiration. Ollie Johnston and Frank Thomas, two of the lead animators who contributed to the production of *Bambi*, wrote a memoir over fifty years later recalling another artist, Jake Day, who supplied the studio with two live fawns to serve as models for animation. Walt at one point posed for a photograph while holding one baby deer and feeding the other from a bottle. “Other animals were brought in,” Thomas and Johnston recollected, “and almost overnight, the unit had its own zoo.”<sup>28</sup> Ardent in their wish to portray deer anatomy accurately, the Disney animators also attended classes held by their colleague Rico Lebrun, which entailed the dissection of a decomposing fawn. The process took ten days and as the smell intensified, the attendance of Lebrun’s students dwindled.<sup>29</sup> It is uncertain whether Walt attended these classes, but if he did, he chose not to pose for any photographs.

Following the war, Walt Disney went into something of a slump, unable to produce the kind of material that struck a chord with audiences. He was unhappy with the mish-mash that was the film *Make Mine Music*, and found himself next turning to the stories of Joel Chandler Harris for inspiration. The mixed live action and animation feature film *Song of the South* was the result. While it was somewhat well received by

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<sup>26</sup> Shale, *Donald Duck Joins Up*, 164.

<sup>27</sup> Holliss and Sibley, *The Disney Studio Story*, 50.

<sup>28</sup> Johnston and Thomas, *Bambi*, 104-105, 122-124.

<sup>29</sup> Thomas and Johnston, *Disney Animation*, 339-341.

white audiences, the film's controversial portrayal of African Americans led to it being awash in justifiable criticism immediately upon its release. *Time Magazine* and the National Urban League expressed concern at the movie's depiction of black people, as did the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People.<sup>30</sup> The racial imagery grew only more jarring to viewers as decades passed, leading the Disney Company to virtually disown the film, not reissuing it for any theatrical or home video releases since 1986.<sup>31</sup> The film's condescending racism has overshadowed the fact that it was, for Walt Disney, a turning point leading to an era of primarily live action films. Walt was bored with cartoons and he wanted to make live action movies on the cheap. One way to do that was to eschew sets, scripts, special effects, and human actors.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Holliss and Sibley, *The Disney Studio Story*, 56; Maltin, 78.

<sup>31</sup> Maltin, *The Disney Films*, 78.

<sup>32</sup> Mosley, *Disney's World*, 210.

## CHAPTER 3

### TRUE-LIFE ADVENTURES

The conclusion of the war did not spell the end of Disney's foray into educational films. Walt Disney formulated the idea to produce nature documentaries during the production of *Bambi*, when parts of the studio were overrun with various forest creatures to serve as models. "They were fun," said Walt in reference to the films made during the early 1940s, "so much fun that we thought we might stay in the 16-millimeter field after the war and do short educational films for school groups, for churches, for clubs."<sup>33</sup> The documentaries created next were called *True-Life Adventures*, and for decades they were what the Walt Disney Company was known foremost for producing. "For all the acclaim Disney's cartoons have achieved," wrote contemporary film reviewer Richard L. Coe for the *Washington Post*, "...these nature studies strike me as far more likely to last than the popular cartoons. In such studies as these of the earth's incommunicative creatures we have truly unique records of our planet, of interest over the globe's surface for limitless time."<sup>34</sup> For a great portion of Walt Disney's life he was seen, at least by some, as more memorable for his role as the creator of educational nature films than as the head of a studio that produced cartoons.

Beyond the inspiration gleaned from the study of wildlife during the making of *Bambi*, the next few details concerning the launch of the *True-Life Adventure* series are unfortunately somewhat murky. Richard Schickel contended that, already aware of their

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<sup>33</sup> Barbara Berch Jamison, "Amazing Scripts by Animals," *New York Times*, July 18, 1954.

<sup>34</sup> Richard L. Coe, "Disney's Nature Seems Certain of Long Life," *Washington Post*, April 3, 1952.

work as nature photographers, Walt Disney wandered into a camera shop owned by Al and Elma Milotte somewhere in Alaska on an unknown date. “How would you like to make some pictures for me up here?” Schickel quoted Disney as asking the Milottes. When asked what kind of pictures, Disney reportedly said something along the lines of “I don’t know--just pictures. Movies.... I guess it will be a documentary or something--you know.” With these vague instructions the Milottes set to work filming and shipping the footage back to Walt in California, who would respond with concise notes via telegraph: “More animals.” “Shoot fur seals.” “More seals.”<sup>35</sup> The Milottes complied.

This version of events supplied by Schickel differs from what Walt publicly claimed. In a 1954 article for the *New York Times* Walt is quoted as saying that while hunting for a quality nature photographer he was referred to Al Milotte and found him in Seattle. Under contract, Milotte went to Alaska and returned with footage of seals and Inuits.<sup>36</sup> In a 1985 documentary produced by the Walt Disney Company, Elma Milotte claimed that she and her husband Al had lived in Seattle but had spent their summers in Alaska, where they shot an excessive amount of footage of seals. They sent their films to Disney on speculation, and he contracted them to go back to Alaska and shoot more.<sup>37</sup> Lastly, Leonard Mosley’s 1985 biography of Walt Disney has a grumpy, stressed Walt vacationing in Alaska while simultaneously checking in with the Milottes, whom he had hired. Supposedly Walt took a great deal of photographs of seals during his visit and from them formed the idea to make what became *Seal Island*.<sup>38</sup> Why the genesis of the relationship between Disney and the Milottes should be so uncertain is anybody’s guess,

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<sup>35</sup> Schickel, *Disney Version*, 284-285.

<sup>36</sup> Jamison, “Amazing Scripts by Animals.”.

<sup>37</sup> Bouse, *Wildlife Films*, 64.

<sup>38</sup> Mosley, *Disney’s World*, 211.

but what is relevant here is that the Milottes were the first nature photographers to be employed to shoot nature films for Disney, and that *Seal Island* was but the first of many collaborations between them.

*Seal Island* still stands out for its accomplished cinematography, causing one reviewer to praise it as “the most astonishing wildlife record ever made.” Walt Disney, quoted in that same article, anticipated the success of the film based on test audience reactions. He claimed that the public was already “clamoring for more. Evidence of audience preference bearing on our new series also is found in magazines and books of the day - people finding deep satisfaction, yes entertainment in matters of fact; matters of fact amongst people and out of the firmament around them, binding them and their concerns all together.” Putting his finger on the appeal of the new nature film, Walt said: “It all adds up... to man’s interest in himself and his own behavior as reflected in the behavior of his fellow animals.”<sup>39</sup> Disney was quick to qualify this point. Commenting on the irksomely folksy narration of *Seal Island* by Winston Hibler, who would go on to narrate almost all of the *True-Life Adventures*, Disney admitted that it did, “to a slight extent, playfully compare some of the seal behavior to human antic; but this is not done with any sense of distortion of the animal activities. Whatever parallel is implied merely notes the resemblance of all vertebrates in their basic concerns with food and sex and survival.”<sup>40</sup> It was a bit of a stretch, but it allowed Disney to maintain the stance that their *True-Life Adventures* were authentic, factual, and, of course, true.

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<sup>39</sup> Hedda Hopper, “Disney Marches On: Looking at Hollywood with Hedda Hopper,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, December 26, 1948.

<sup>40</sup> Herman Quick, “Disney Finds the Fur Seals - and Wins another ‘Oscar,’” *Nature* 42, June 1949, 260.

Setting aside the narration of Hibler and some of the anthropomorphic turns of phrase in *Seal Island*, such as describing the trench that the seal pups wallowed in as a “school, yes; a school,” there are other instances of willful inaccuracies for the sake of entertainment. When the female seals approach from the sea to meet the awaiting males, it is to a raucous, brassy rendition of Wagner’s “Bridal Chorus.” An “orphan” pup is followed at length, as a narrative is spun about the young seal’s search for his mother, navigating through rocks crowded with heavy, adult seals who sometimes sit on him. A discerning viewer will notice that more than one pup plays the role of orphan, and that some footage is reused from earlier in the film to provide a somewhat happy ending.<sup>41</sup> Regardless of these inconsistencies and the studio’s insistence on the film’s veracity, the wildlife film was a hit.

However successful *Seal Island* turned out to be, initially no one but Walt thought it had a chance of turning a profit. RKO Pictures refused to distribute the film, claiming that audiences would have no interest in a thirty-minute short that featured only fur seals and no humans whatsoever. Undaunted, Walt Disney had his brother Roy create their own distribution company, Buena Vista, so that he could distribute *Seal Island* wherever he felt it would make the biggest splash.<sup>42</sup> That location turned out to be the Crown Theater in Pasadena, California. It premiered just before the final deadline for consideration for the 1948 Academy Awards, for which it won the now defunct Oscar for “Best Two-Reel Short Subject.” Even without the Academy’s acclaim, *Seal Island* proved, at a third of the length, to be as financially profitable as the studio’s full length

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<sup>41</sup> *Walt Disney Legacy Collection - True Life Adventures, Vol. 1: Wonders of the World*, DVD (Burbank, CA: Buena Vista Home Entertainment, 2006).

<sup>42</sup> Eddy von Mueller, “‘Nature is the Dramatist:’ Documentary, Entertainment, and the World According to the *True-Life Adventures*,” in *Learning from Mickey, Donald and Walt*, 145-146.

animated films and it had been produced at a fraction of the cost.<sup>43</sup> There was, then, much incentive for the Walt Disney Company to continue producing the *True-Life Adventures*.

When the Milottes returned disenchanted from Canada with reels of footage that they feared were boring, Walt found something that he felt was inspiring. Captured on film was footage of a beaver trying to get a tree through a hole in the ice of a pond and, with the tenacity and industriousness for which the animals are famous, the beaver whittled the tree down until it fit through the hole. Walt loved it and, when the film was spliced together into a short documentary called *Beaver Valley*, audiences loved it, too. In fact, the thirty-minute film made enough money to help finance three animated features that were lingering within the studio from a lack of funds: *Peter Pan*, *Alice in Wonderland*, and *Cinderella*.<sup>44</sup> Proof that the Disney Company's nature films resonated with audiences can be found beyond profits, as *Beaver Valley* also received an Academy Award in 1950. In fact, the following three *True-Life Adventures*-- *Nature's Half Acre*, *Water Birds*, and *Bear Country*-- all won Academy Awards, as well.<sup>45</sup> Clearly Walt Disney was onto something.

It would be difficult to overstate the enthusiasm with which the *True-Life Adventures* were received by the American public. An article in the magazine *House Beautiful* in 1955 rapturously described *Seal Island* and *Beaver Valley* as "the two most important reasons why no home should be without a 16mm sound projector" when the Disney Company released the films for non-theatrical purchase. The article's author

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<sup>43</sup> Jackson, *Walt Disney: A Bio-Bibliography*, 45; Bouse, *Wildlife Films*, 63-65.

<sup>44</sup> Mosley, *Disney's World*, 212.

<sup>45</sup> Maltin, *Disney Films*, 348.

assured readers that everyone from babies to grandparents would appreciate these films, as they provided a window into “a world which too few of us can get to know at first hand but which cannot fail to give us pleasure and insight.”<sup>46</sup> Entertainment and education could now be experienced simultaneously within the home, for the enjoyment of the entire family.

Reviewers of the *True-Life Adventures* were for the most part impressed, appreciating the films for standing at the crossroads of entertainment and education, leading one to describe the films as “beautiful and instructive.”<sup>47</sup> Another reviewer, upon hearing of two upcoming *True-Life Adventures* focused on elk and bears, respectively, implored: “For the sake of both entertainment and education, may [the upcoming films] resemble *Beaver Valley*.”<sup>48</sup> A contemporary author trying to pinpoint the reason for the success of the *True-Life Adventures* speculated that audiences were simply “fed up with the complexities of modern living” and turned to Disney’s nature films as a primitive form of escape. However, this author also suspected that the films’ appeal was due to something less cynical. “Disney is bent on demonstrating the human aspects of animal life,” he wrote. “Animals, [Walt Disney] says, have tender feelings, intelligence, and even a sense of humor.”<sup>49</sup> This anthropomorphized, humanizing approach to presenting animal behavior held considerable appeal for American audiences, who suddenly felt as though they could relate to members of other animal species that lived on distant parts of the globe.

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<sup>46</sup> Cecile Starr, “Now You Can Have Professional Movies for Home Showing,” *House Beautiful* 97 (February, 1955), 147-148.

<sup>47</sup> Mae Tinee, “Elk the Subject of New Disney Nature Film,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, January 13, 1952.

<sup>48</sup> Alma Ganio, “Disney’s Nature Films,” *Films In Review* Vol. 2, no. 9 (November, 1951), 39.

<sup>49</sup> Louis Berg, “Disney’s Greatest Gamble,” *Los Angeles Times*, March 15, 1953.

In order to appreciate the popularity of the *True-Life Adventure* films, it is worth pausing for a moment to consider the obvious. When *Seal Island* reached a broad audience in early 1949, most Americans were justifiably fascinated by the footage of animals they had perhaps never before seen. Any knowledge of seal behavior the average American would have held would most likely have been garnered from seeing seals in a zoo, hearing or reading about them, or seeing still photographs. To be sure, the filming of animals, both tame and wild, has been in practice since the invention of motion pictures, but the *True-Life Adventures* were different. Any footage of exotic animals Americans were likely to have seen before the Disney nature films would have most likely been black and white, staged, and almost certainly out of any sort of context. Motion pictures of animals frequently did not feature them in their environment, and quite often portrayed them while they were being hunted, executed, or pitted against other animals.<sup>50</sup> Advances in technology, such as Technicolor and telescopic lenses, combined with Disney's narrative style, distribution system, and attempt to present nature somewhat truthfully, would have entirely changed how people experienced viewing animals on film.<sup>51</sup>

Each *True-Life Adventure* featured a disclaimer that appeared during the title sequence: "This is one of a series of TRUE-LIFE ADVENTURES presenting strange facts about the world we live in. These films are photographed in their natural settings

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<sup>50</sup> For more on animals and their shared history with motion pictures, see Bouse, *Wildlife Films*, 38-56.

<sup>51</sup> For more on technology and the *True-Life Adventures*, see J.P. Telotte, *The Mouse Machine: Disney and Technology* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2008), 85.

and are completely authentic, unstaged, and unrehearsed.”<sup>52</sup> The supposed authenticity of the series was a subject much harped upon by Disney and the other producers of the films. James Algar, who directed numerous *True-Life Adventures*, attested that “Factual honesty in essence as well as in detail is the distinguishing hallmark of the *True-Life Adventure* films.”<sup>53</sup> Walt Disney maintained the same. “Accuracy was the watchword,” he said of the *True-Life Adventures*. “There could be no distortion of natural facts in the name of theatrical diversion.... To that end, we shaped our editorial labors - assembly of the film brought in from the field, preparation of the narrative which might help clarify the meaning of animal action, and the complementary music which helps release emotional values in an audience.”<sup>54</sup> It is impossible to truly know if Disney and his producers sincerely believed these obviously false claims, but the regularity with which they were repeated indicates that they may have. Alternately, it is also likely that they were well aware that their studio was associated with cartoons and child’s play, prompting blustery protestations that their work be taken seriously. An incident that took place during the shooting of *The Vanishing Prairie* suggests the latter scenario to be the case.

Recollecting a sequence in *The Vanishing Prairie* years after Walt’s death, his nephew, Roy E. Disney, detailed the lengths taken to fudge the truth in the *True-Life Adventures*. Jim Algar, acting as producer, showed Walt Disney some footage of ducks coming in to land on a pond that, unbeknownst to the ducks, was frozen. One duck in

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<sup>52</sup> *Walt Disney Legacy Collection - True Life Adventures, Vol. 1: Wonders of the World*, DVD (Burbank, CA: Buena Vista Home Entertainment, 2006). Capitalization and lack of italics in original.

<sup>53</sup> Quoted in Maltin, *The Disney Films*, 19.

<sup>54</sup> Walt Disney, “Educational Values in Factual Nature Pictures,” *Educational Horizons* Vol. 33, no. 2 (Winter, 1954), 83-84.

particular started to go “ass-over-teakettle” directly before the cameraman had stopped the shot. Walt was delighted and asked for the rest of the footage. According to Roy E. Disney, the editor informed Walt that there was none. Walt, however, insisted that he had seen it elsewhere previously and for months demanded that it be found. Finally Jim Algar sent a small crew to Minnesota to find a frozen pond and create the footage. Off-camera handlers gently slid tame ducks across the ice into one another until they had adequate material from which to edit. “So we took the best of the footage and cut it in and needless to say, added the sound of bowling balls,” Roy E. Disney recalled blithely, most likely well aware that the jig had been up for years, and there was no longer any need to adhere to claims of authenticity.<sup>55</sup>

Calculated editing, a constructed narrative, and an emotionally manipulative score may have been deliberate tools Disney utilized to grind out what he felt was a truly realistic documentary, but these devices were ultimately what most displeased audiences, including those who otherwise enjoyed the films. Some reviewers felt compelled to pepper their praise of the *True-Life Adventures* with criticism. Richard Coe, who was so enamored with Disney’s nature films that he claimed they would be Walt’s greatest legacy, also expressed a concern that the films suffered from “an overlarding of sugar, both verbal and musical.”<sup>56</sup> The author in *Home Beautiful* who encouraged the purchase of a projector and the *True-Life Adventure* films also bemoaned the “sugar coating” applied by the Disney hand.<sup>57</sup> Another offered a left-handed compliment to the film *The Living Desert* in 1953, saying “Despite all the petty efforts to Disneyfy what the ages

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<sup>55</sup> Roy E. Disney quoted in Green & Green, *Remembering Walt*, 127.

<sup>56</sup> Coe, “Disney’s Nature Seems Certain of a Long Life.”

<sup>57</sup> Starr, “Now You Can Have Professional Movies for Home Viewing.”

have dignified, *The Living Desert* remains a triumphantly beautiful film.”<sup>58</sup> Years later, Leonard Maltin, ordinarily an avid cheerleader for all things Disney, wrote “For all the wonder and delight and awesomeness of the [*True-Life Adventure*] films, one cannot help but bristle at some of the hoke Disney injected into them.”<sup>59</sup> The general complaint was that Disney’s narrative-driven artifice stood out glaringly, detracting from the otherwise enjoyable and educational experience of watching a *True-Life Adventure*. What has been called the “Disneyfication” of the films’ content upset these reviewers, and they called for more accurate representations of nature.<sup>60</sup>

Loudest amongst these reviewers was Bosley Crowther, a film critic at the *New York Times*. It is evident from his reviews of the *True-Life Adventure* films that he typically enjoyed them and urged audiences to see them, as well. However, Crowther was careful to qualify his praise by pointing out to his readers that the nature that Disney presented was a fictional variant of the real thing. He wrote that the producers of the *True-Life* films “hold up a mirror to nature, but the mirror isn’t always flat and clear. Sometimes it is willfully angled or distorted for the sake of a gag.” Crowther was not contending that this was maliciously deceitful. “The Disney boys do not aim to mislead. They simply desire to shape and order nature so that it will captivate and amuse.”<sup>61</sup> This astute assessment demonstrates that of all contemporaries, including Walt himself, it may

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<sup>58</sup> “The New Pictures,” *Time* Vol. 62 Issue 20, November 16, 1953, 108.

<sup>59</sup> Maltin, *The Disney Films*, 19.

<sup>60</sup> For more on the term “Disneyfication,” see Eddy von Mueller, “It Is a Small World After All: *Earth* and the Disneyfication of *Planet Earth*,” in *Learning from Mickey, Donald and Walt* ed. A. Bowdoin Van Riper (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, 2011), 173-182.

<sup>61</sup> Bosley Crowther, “The Screen in Review: ‘Vanishing Prairie,’ by Disney, at Fine Arts,” *New York Times* August 17, 1954.

well be that it was Bosley Crowther who best understood the Disney studio's relationship with nature.

Crowther was savvy enough to label the *True-Life Adventures* as "a new kind of nature picture wherein nature itself is made to seem to conform to the conventions of Disney humor and sentiment." Regarding the Disney nature picture as a novelty that the public might not fully comprehend, Crowther felt obliged to issue a disclaimer to his readers that there was a degree of cinematic "trickery" employed by the studio and that there were "some aspects of these films that have been recognized and should be discounted by intelligent customers."<sup>62</sup> He worried that not all viewers could discern actual animal behavior from what he called "the Disney treatment," which was "unnaturalistic" and a "fabrication of reality."<sup>63</sup> The pictures were entertaining, but he wanted his readers to understand that the Disney Company's intention was not truly to present factual, educational documentaries.<sup>64</sup> Crowther even worried that a trend had been set, pointing out how the work of other nature documentarians had changed in an attempt to imitate Disney's style in the wake of the success of the *True-Life Adventures*.<sup>65</sup> "It remains to be seen how untruthful the True-Life series will become," he warned in 1953.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> Bosley Crowther, "Disney's Nature: 'The Vanishing Prairie' has Animals Like Those in Familiar Cartoons," *New York Times*, August 22, 1954.

<sup>63</sup> Bosley Crowther, "Disney Treatment: Walt and his Boys Continue to Play Tricks in their True-Life Adventure Films," *New York Times*, November 22, 1953.

<sup>64</sup> Bosley Crowther, "The Screen: Two Pictures Have Premiers," *New York Times*, November 10, 1953.

<sup>65</sup> Bosley Crowther, "'Below the Sahara,' a Documentary of Animal and Tribal Life in Africa, Opens At Plaza," *New York Times*, September 2, 1953.

<sup>66</sup> Crowther, "Disney Treatment," *New York Times*. Italics missing in original.

By 1958, with the release of the short documentary *White Wilderness*, it was apparent that the producers of the *True-Life* series had become dangerously comfortable with being untruthful. The most notorious disregard for accuracy that the Disney nature pictures have been charged with took place during the filming of *White Wilderness*. The film, directed by James Algar, was an attempt to portray wildlife in the extreme climate of the Arctic. The sequence on lemmings, however, was filmed in Alberta, Canada, where there are no lemmings. In 1983 the Canadian Broadcasting Company investigated the claims of *White Wilderness*, discovering that the filmmakers purchased scores of the small rodents from Inuits in Manitoba and brought them to Alberta. From there, the lemmings were herded by cameramen and production assistants off of a cliff into a river that was later edited to look like a sea. As the tiny victims of a true-life murder drowned, Winston Hibler's jocular narration falsely explained that what audiences were seeing was voluntary, suicidal behavior on the part of the dying lemmings, taken on to alleviate overpopulation. This was, of course, completely untrue, but it nevertheless subsequently became accepted as natural fact.<sup>67</sup>

The concerns of Crowther and other reviewers about inaccuracies within the *True-Life Adventures* demonstrate a less obvious way that Disney's nature films affected environmental thought in post-war America. Upon seeing the nature that Disney had to offer, American viewers clamored for more nature and less Disney. Disney had discovered a large segment of society that was acutely receptive to his personal interpretation of nature. These audiences yearned for not just authenticity, but for a

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<sup>67</sup> John Corry, "'Cruel Camera,' About Animal Abuse," *New York Times*, March 24, 1986; Riley Woodford, "Lemming Suicide Myth: Disney Faked Bogus Behavior," *Alaska Fish & Wildlife News*, September, 2003; Maltin, *Disney Films*, 148-149.

glimpse of nature completely unspoiled by the human touch. Hungry for a window into the unseen parts of the world that they inhabited, they were willing to settle for even just the illusion of a nature still pristine. This mawkish understanding of the environment and desire to have nature presented as if it were completely unadulterated can be seen as being related to the burgeoning popularity of the conservation movement, as well as to Disney's role within it.

CHAPTER 4  
DISNEY AS EDUCATOR

Curiously, Walt Disney was initially publicly insistent that what he and his company was peddling was meant only to be entertainment, as Bosley Crowther had contended. "It is not our job to teach, implant morals, or improve anything except our pictures," he wrote in 1933.<sup>68</sup> Following the success of his company's nature documentaries, Disney changed his mind. After the Second World War, in 1945, he reminded the public that "films were considered educational instruments long before the development of the entertainment industry."<sup>69</sup> Later he claimed that the line of distinction between entertainment and education was, and should be, blurred. According to Disney, his company had been firmly assured by "academic leaders" that his films were tools of teaching, and as such the Disney company began to release 16-millimeter films to schools across the country for use in the classroom. Though Walt Disney claimed this to be a source of pride for both him and his company, he still was careful to use words like "instructive" and "informative" about his nature films, instead of outright calling them educational.<sup>70</sup> "Our intent is not formal education in the natural sciences," he said. "But...this entertainment is informative." By 1954 Walt Disney not only believed that his pictures could teach viewers about the natural world, but that by observing animals in nature, one could also be instructed in "the thing which in human

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<sup>68</sup> Walt Disney, "The Cartoon's Contribution to Children," *Overland Monthly and Out West Magazine* October 1933, Vol. 91 No. 8, American Periodicals 138.

<sup>69</sup> Walt Disney, "Mickey as Professor," *Public Opinion Quarterly* (Summer, 1945), 119.

<sup>70</sup> Walt Disney, "Educational Values in Factual Nature Pictures," 82-84.

relations we call moral behavior.”<sup>71</sup> In this way, nature in Disney films reinforced “family, monogamy, and citizenship,” all conservative values to which the American public eagerly responded.<sup>72</sup>

Audiences were not the only ones to learn from Disney’s nature films. The footage from *True-Life Adventures* served another purpose within the studio, in that it provided reference points for a myriad different animals for animators to study and thereby render their cartoon characters more realistically.<sup>73</sup> The studio relied on photography taken outside of the company to refer to as well, keeping every issue of *National Geographic* in a special library so filmmakers could use them to make their pictures look more authentic.<sup>74</sup> In his memoirs, Bill Koehler, the chief animal trainer for the Disney Company for over two decades, makes mention that the Disney studio lot had been nicknamed the “college campus.” While Koehler explains that this moniker was bestowed to the lot due to its “park-like atmosphere” and cleanliness, it also hints at an attitude among employees that their studio was unlike other studios that dealt solely in entertainment, and that the work they were undertaking was approaching something bordering on academic.<sup>75</sup>

In time, the Walt Disney company created productions specifically for academic purposes. In 1954 Walt Disney dispatched his executive Larry Wagner as an “educational representative in the school field” to address four hundred Los Angeles

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<sup>71</sup> Walt Disney, “Why I Like Making Nature Films,” *Woman’s Home Companion* Vol. 81, May 5, 1954, 38.

<sup>72</sup> Ronald Tobias, “Sex, Love, and Death: Disney’s True-Life Fantasies,” in *Learning from Mickey, Donald and Walt*, 165.

<sup>73</sup> Thomas and Johnston, *Disney Animation*, 333.

<sup>74</sup> De Roos, “The Magic Worlds of Walt Disney,” 190.

<sup>75</sup> William R. Koehler, *The Wonderful World of Disney Animals* (New York: Howell Book House, 1979), 16.

teachers and educators at an annual conference. There, Wagner informed his audience that in the future fifty percent of the Walt Disney Company's output would have "educational implications."<sup>76</sup> By the 1960s the Disney Company offered schools a package deal of two hundred short documentaries paired with a projector. Most of these short films were spliced together from the footage taken during the filming of the *True-Life Adventure* series and became "staples" for decades within the United States education system.<sup>77</sup>

It is curious that Walt Disney produced short films explicitly for schools edited from footage taken from a series of films that he had once claimed were "not designed specifically for conventional education."<sup>78</sup> He had, however, learned to qualify his authority by distancing his work from that of traditional educators. While producing *Seal Island* the Disney studio tried getting input from "technicians and educators," but found that they could not work well together. "I decided that we'd have to do the films our way or not at all," Disney stated.<sup>79</sup>

It appears that Walt was conflicted. He wished to entertain, but had grand ideas about elevating the content into something beyond fantasy. He wished to educate, but he did not wish to suffer the scrutiny or criticism that would accompany the responsibility of being an educator. Lastly, he above all wished to make a profit, so for a time he reconciled himself by claiming that his films were informative, but not precisely educational. In Walt Disney's mind, he offered society a service by providing nature

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<sup>76</sup> "Disney Role in Schools Outlined for Teachers," *Los Angeles Times*, February 19, 1956.

<sup>77</sup> Janet Wasko, *Understanding Disney* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 2001), 146.

<sup>78</sup> Disney, "Educational Values in Factual Nature Pictures."

<sup>79</sup> Jamison, "Amazing Scripts by Animals."

films that were morally instructive, the benefit of which offset any misinformation or mistakes of fact.

What is unarguable is the extent to which Disney educational films were ubiquitous in American primary schools in the mid- to late-twentieth century. Leonard Maltin commented that Disney short subject films exploded after the success of *Seal Island* to “become staples on the school circuit.”<sup>80</sup> Just six years after its production, school systems requested copies of *Seal Island* to utilize in classrooms, followed by *Beaver Valley*.<sup>81</sup> The U.S. Department of Education listed a variety of short documentary features produced by the Walt Disney company on its 1960 circular of educational films, on subjects such as meteorology, aerology, and electricity.<sup>82</sup> The American Library Association in 1962 recommended *Niok*, a 1957 live-action short about a Cambodian boy and his elephant friend, as well as the 1953 *True-Life* documentary *Prowlers of the Everglades* in its “authoritative guide to the best films currently available for library collections.”<sup>83</sup> Writing from Glendale High School in California, Frances Norene Ahl advocated the use of *Rite of Spring*, a section of the art film *Fantasia* that detailed the formation and evolution of life on Earth, to be shown by educators in science classrooms.<sup>84</sup> Even a segment of *Bambi* was edited down to a 16-millimeter short released especially for schools called *Bambi--A Lesson in Perseverance*.<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> Leonard Maltin, *The Disney Films*, 340.

<sup>81</sup> Jamison, “Amazing Scripts by Animals.”.

<sup>82</sup> Circular/United States Department of the Interior, Office of Education No. 655, 1960 pgs 13, 36, 438.

<sup>83</sup> *Films For Libraries*, American Library Association (Chicago, 1962), 42, 49.

<sup>84</sup> Frances Norene Ahl, “Disney Techniques in Educational Films,” *Social Studies* December 1, 1944, 346.

<sup>85</sup> Holliss and Sibley, *The Disney Studio Story*, 145.

Disney educational films were deployed at the college level as well. In as late as 1979 the University of Michigan included in its holdings of educational films short Disney documentaries, such as *Secrets of the Bee World* and *Secrets of the Underwater World*, as well as abbreviated segments taken from *The Vanishing Prairie*.<sup>86</sup> Numerous other examples of educational institutions utilizing Disney productions as teaching tools can be easily found, and those provided here suggest that that use was extensive. Not everyone, however, was thrilled with the Disney Company's expansion into the world of education.

When Max Rafferty, a columnist for the *Los Angeles Times* who specialized in schools, unequivocally stated that Walt Disney was the greatest educator of the twentieth century, some, like Mrs. J. K. Elliott from Long Beach passionately agreed.<sup>87</sup> Others, however, were incensed. Frances Clarke Sayers, a celebrated librarian and author of children's literature, wrote a letter to the editor taking issue with Rafferty's assertion, wherein she called Walt Disney "a shameless nature faker in his fictionalized animal stories." Sayers conceded that Disney possessed a unique genius, but that it had "little to do with education..."<sup>88</sup> She apparently found a degree of value in the Disney Company's work, but felt they had no business instructing the public on the behavior of animals. In this way, even for those who despised Disney's nature pictures, the Walt Disney Company's documentaries influenced how Americans thought about nature. Nature was also a place to be defended from the likes of Walt Disney.

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<sup>86</sup> The University of Michigan Resources Center, *Educational Films 1979* (Ann Arbor: Michigan), 521, 595.

<sup>87</sup> Max Rafferty, "The Greatest Pedagogue of All," *Los Angeles Times*, April 19, 1965; Mrs J K Elliott, "Walt Disney," *Los Angeles Times*, April 22, 1965.

<sup>88</sup> Frances Clarke Sayers, "Educator Takes Strong Exception to Rafferty's Praise of Disney," *Los Angeles Times*, April 25, 1965.

## CHAPTER 5

### MINERAL KING

When Walt Disney died in December of 1966, Ralph Izard of the E.W. Scripps School of Journalism at Ohio University mourned the loss of the man he called the “dean” of educators within mass media. Izard wrote that the majority of awards and citations Disney received personally during his lifetime were for his role as an educator, and that he set the standard that both teachers as well as producers of mass media sought to imitate.<sup>89</sup> Izard’s lamentations at the passing of the entertainment industry giant were not shared by all, however. Some Americans perceived the final plans of Walt Disney as an indication of his true attitude towards nature - that is, a resource to be utilized for profit. These Americans, many of whom would have lived their entire lives absorbing beatific images foisted upon them by the Walt Disney Company, felt betrayed. In their opinion, Walt showed his true colors when it came to his intentions for a forest valley in the Sierras of California called Mineral King.

Almost exactly three months before his death, Walt Disney announced that he intended to transform Mineral King into a year-round ski resort. Disney World was already in the making, and Mineral King was to be a third theme park, but with a focus on outdoor recreation instead of roller coasters and similar attractions. “When I first saw Mineral King,” said Walt Disney, “I thought it was one of the most beautiful spots I had ever seen and we want to keep it that way.” As he had planned with Disney World, Walt Disney intended to construct an environmentally sensitive microcity without actually

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<sup>89</sup> Ralph S. Izard, “Walt Disney: Master of Laughter and Learning,” *Peabody Journal of Education* Vol. 45 No. 1 (July, 1967), 36-41.

accounting for the impact that such development would have on the regions beyond its borders. As he had with Disneyland and Disney World, Walt Disney wished to construct a resort around a “version of nature” falsely presented as “an undiluted, purified experience to customers.”<sup>90</sup> Patrons of Mineral King would experience nature, not simply appreciate or engage with it. As with all things Disney, the natural experience would be an artfully constructed, carefully managed event.

Despite his desire to construct an enormous, expansive tourist resort that would surely attract thousands of visitors per year, the Walt Disney Company’s plans for Mineral King were painstaking in their attempts to not block any panoramic views, to camouflage the ski lifts, and to ban all automobiles within the premises. Their stated goal was to somehow maintain the land as it was while simultaneously constructing ten restaurants, two hotels, assorted convenience stores, a chapel, a skating rink, a conference center, and a heliport. Most controversial of all, however, was the issue of access to Mineral King. The valley was bordered on three sides by Sequoia National Park, and a resort of the magnitude that the Disney Company intended would demand the laying of a new highway that would cut through the forest.<sup>91</sup> Though the National Park Service had intentionally left a corridor between Mineral King and Sequoia National Park with the intention of building a year-round highway, a new generation of environmentalists,

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<sup>90</sup> John M. Findlay, *Magic Lands: Western Cityscapes and American Culture After 1940* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 73.

<sup>91</sup> Werner Weiss, “New Heights: Walt Disney’s Mineral King,” The Walt Disney Family Museum, <http://www.waltdisney.org/blog/new-heights-walt-disney%E2%80%99s-mineral-king>. Accessed May 1, 2015.

spearheaded by the Sierra Club, took issue with the Disney Company for proposing construction of the road.<sup>92</sup>

The new environmentalists had a very different understanding of conservation than that which the recently deceased Walt Disney had possessed. Furthermore, they were affronted by the United States government's complicity in the plans to develop Mineral King. "Walt Disney Productions is being aided in its attempted rape of this beautiful area by the U.S. Forest Service itself," stammered one author incredulously in the Berkeley, California magazine *Ramparts* in an article titled "Disney's War Against the Wilderness." Within the article, sandwiched between bombastic blather and crude drawings of a bloated, angry Mickey Mouse tearing trees up by the roots and counting fat wads of cash in his four-fingered hands, are very real complaints about what the Disney resort would mean for the area. The human cost would be paid by the sixty owners of cabins who leased land in Mineral King that would be forced out by Disney and, more importantly, there were four hundred acres of wilderness that would be "bulldozed, graded, or otherwise altered" by the construction.<sup>93</sup> However much the Walt Disney Company professed their wish to build the resort without changing the landscape, it was clear to contemporary environmentalists that that was simply not a viable possibility. Raised on Disney films and possibly even in part led to a concern for the environment due to that very exposure, the new environmentalists felt it was their duty to decry the Disney Company's attempt to establish a recreational resort at Mineral King.

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<sup>92</sup> "Sierra Club Opposes Road to Mineral King," *Los Angeles Times*, November 20, 1966. Sierra

<sup>93</sup> Roger Rapoport, "Disney's War Against the Wilderness," *Ramparts* Vol. 10, no. 5 (November, 1971), 27-28.

After some finagling, the Sierra Club successfully submitted a complaint to the United States Supreme Court and the case was heard in November of 1971. The Sierra Club argued that the development of a resort at Mineral King “would destroy or otherwise adversely affect the scenery, natural and historic objects and wildlife of the park and would impair the enjoyment of the park for future generations.” Furthermore, the organization expressed concern for the Sequoia National Game Refuge and the fate of the thousands of fawns birthed there every year by does. In April of 1972 the Supreme Court ruled against the Sierra Club, stating that they could not prove a personal vested interest in the park. Ultimately, this decision was actually a victory for the Sierra Club, as all they had to do was prove that even one of their members hiked or fished or otherwise recreated at Mineral King and would therefore be personally affected by commercial development.<sup>94</sup>

Despite the continued support of the California state government in the form of Pat Brown and then Ronald Reagan, the Sierra Club managed to tie the issue up in the court system. The Walt Disney Company downgraded their plans, cutting their proposed budget from thirty-five million dollars to fifteen million dollars, and they began looking at other properties in Lake Tahoe. Finally, in 1977, the Disney Company abandoned the project altogether and the next year Congress officially made Mineral King part of Sequoia National Park.<sup>95</sup> Walt Disney’s final vision would not be realized.

“Three different organizations” wrote an environmentally-minded contributor to *Harper’s Magazine* in early 1972, “all acting with benign intent, daily use the word

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<sup>94</sup> *Sierra Club v. Morton*

<http://web.ics.purdue.edu/~mclauchl/Spring%2010/POL%20425/SierraClubvMorton%20EndCut.pdf>. Accessed May 3, 2015; “Sierra Club Files New Mineral King Suit,” *Los Angeles Times*, June 7, 1972.

<sup>95</sup> Werner Weiss, “New Heights.”

‘conservation’ to describe radically different concepts.” The organizations to which the author, Peter Browning, referred were the U.S. Forest Service, the Sierra Club, and the Walt Disney Company. According to Browning, by “conservation,” the Forest Service meant utilizing public lands for profit; the Sierra Club meant for the land to be left absolutely untouched; and the Walt Disney Company meant “an investment opportunity...on free land.”<sup>96</sup> This is not an entirely fair assertion, but it does open a door to a larger and significant point. Walt Disney was not the only one to have a personal interpretation of what it meant to care for and preserve nature. The historical understanding of Walt Disney must be complicated to include the specific strain of sentimental appreciation and recreation-based conservation outlined here. It is equally vital that the other strains of thought such as those raised by Peter Browning be included in the historical conversation concerning the nuances of the modern environmental movement. It, like all movements, must be understood as amorphous, shifting, and varying in terms of definition.

What Theodore Roosevelt and John Muir meant by the word “conservation” was different from how Walt and his generation had come to define the term, which in turn was different from how those who came after him defined it. Walt, in a public service announcement for the National Wildlife Federation not too long before he died, said “As an American you have an interest in all public land.... To receive the greatest benefit from these public lands, you should request that they be managed to include all forms of outdoor recreation.... Yes, this is your land. Know its use, and develop it so that tomorrow’s Americans may have these lands to enjoy, too.” In another public service

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<sup>96</sup> Peter Browning, “Mickey Mouse in the Mountains,” *Harper’s Magazine* (March 1, 1972), 65.

announcement for the National Wildlife Federation filmed in 1964, Walt greeted his audience surrounded by animatronic baby dinosaurs. With a congenial smile, he informed his viewers that had the National Wildlife Federation coexisted with dinosaurs, the organization would have done whatever they could to preserve them, because “that’s their purpose,” said Walt, “conservation.” He then went on to discuss the virtues of outdoor recreational activities such as picnicking and camping.<sup>97</sup>

For Walt Disney, to appreciate nature was to recreate within it. His goal in developing Mineral King, despite his shortsightedness on how the construction and tremendous influx of tourists would have disastrously affected the local wildlife, was to instill in Americans a sense of wonder and gratitude for the environment. He wished to do a positive good for American society, but his approach was ultimately too naive and capitalistic. “Mineral King’s great natural beauty must be preserved at all costs,” Walt Disney proclaimed.<sup>98</sup> He had spent a lifetime bringing nature into the homes and lives of American audiences. At the time of his death, his goal was to motivate Americans into making the trek into nature on their own, where they could connect with the environment and reaffirm the moral education that Disney pictures had been even if it meant traversing paved roads so that one might sleep in concrete hotels and eat at fancy restaurants.

Walt felt that the best way to conserve nature was to coax others into appreciating it, by whatever means necessary, so that they and successive generations might feel obliged to better care for their environment, as well. The tragic punctuation to Walt Disney’s efforts is that the artifice he demanded be included in each and every *True-Life*

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<sup>97</sup> Walt Disney in Public Service Announcements for the National Wildlife Federation, available on Youtube at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=in0ZPNR2JDo>. Accessed April 20, 2015.

<sup>98</sup> Browning, “Mickey Mouse in the Mountains,” 68.

*Adventure* is what the series is perhaps now remembered for best. The Disney brand of environmentalism smacked of, well, Disney, and however influential it may have been, it is still somewhat difficult to take seriously. Walt Disney either did not trust Americans to appreciate nature simply as it was or, more likely, could only envision nature a certain way, could only communicate it in that way, and found himself in a position to project his particular version of environmentalism into the schools and lives of twentieth-century Americans for decades. Walt Disney was ambivalent about more than just his authority to instruct the populace about wildlife. His conflicting ideas are evinced by his goal to capture nature authentically, in film or animation, while simultaneously commodifying it as sentimental, anthropomorphized entertainment designed to appeal to a mass audience. One can only speculate how many awards would have been lavished upon him and how well he would be remembered as a conservationist today if he could simply have kept himself from Disneyfying nature.

## CHAPTER 6

### CONCLUSION

On January 2, 1977 the Mine Ride through Nature's Wonderland at Disneyland was converted into something more like a roller coaster, designed to give thrills and titillate instead of instill wonder and educate. By 1979 it had been renamed Big Thunder Mountain Railroad and much of the original site had been closed off or destroyed. The little pond upon the shore of which Walt Disney and his grandchildren once posed for photographs is still there, though the fake beavers have been removed.<sup>99</sup>

It is easy, especially from an academic standpoint, to dismiss and denigrate Walt Disney. Discounting the widespread distribution of the Disney version of nature, Disney's contribution to America's appreciation for environmental causes is simply elided by inaccuracies, fakery, and fantasy. Just as Walt Disney offered his viewing audience a simplified, easily-consumable version of nature, the same has become of his legacy. It is, for whatever reason, more satisfying for most Americans to turn Walt Disney into a caricature instead of taking the time to understand who he was: the most influential conservationist of his time.

Only with the passing of years has considering Walt Disney to be a great conservationist become a point for debate. In his lifetime, Walt Disney was widely recognized for his work in conservation, winning numerous awards for his efforts. The Department of the Interior and the American Forestry Association both gave awards to

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<sup>99</sup> Werner Weiss, "Mine Train through Nature's Wonderland" on his Yesterland website, <http://www.yesterland.com/minetrain.html>. Accessed March 16, 2015.

Walt Disney in honor of his role as a conservationist.<sup>100</sup> When the Audubon Society presented him with an award for his service as a conservationist in 1955, Walt considered it one of the most treasured of the hundreds of citations he had received in his lifetime. “Our True-Life Adventures,” he said at his acceptance speech, “were conceived primarily as theatrical entertainment, as many of you know. That they have been counted of value also in the cause of conservation is most gratifying.”<sup>101</sup> In his lifetime, as evinced by his celebrated status within the Audubon Society and the National Wildlife Federation, Walt Disney was recognized as a leading and highly influential conservationist. Somehow, since his death, this fact has been mostly left out of the many tellings of his history.

One historian has even called Walt Disney “the stealth conservationist,” holding him up among the ranks of John Muir, Rachel Carson, and Aldo Leopold.<sup>102</sup> It is fair to count Walt Disney among the great conservationists, but to say that he was deliberately stealthy in his actions could not be further from the truth. This is, after all, a man who went on television in 1957 and said “The preservation of our American wildlife is very close to me. [The] animals in our fields, forests, and wetlands... are all important parts of our national heritage, and we must protect them if future generations are to enjoy them.”<sup>103</sup> When releasing the *True-Life Adventure: The Vanishing Prairie*, Walt Disney stated in an interview that he wished to show Americans what the legendary West looked

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<sup>100</sup> Daniel Gifford, “Walt Disney: Stealth Conservationist,” from the Ultimate History Project at <http://www.ultimatehistoryproject.com/walt-disney----the-stealth-conservationist.html>. Accessed May 10, 2015.

<sup>101</sup> Walt Disney’s acceptance speech, quoted in “Walt Disney Receives Audubon Medal,” *Audubon Magazine* Vol. 58 (January-February, 1956), 25. Italics missing in original.

<sup>102</sup> Daniel Gifford, “Walt Disney: Stealth Conservationist,” from the Ultimate History Project at <http://www.ultimatehistoryproject.com/walt-disney----the-stealth-conservationist.html>. Accessed May 10, 2015.

<sup>103</sup> Walt Disney, public service announcement for National Wildlife Week, available on YouTube at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=in0ZPNR2JDo>. Accessed April 20, 2015.

like before the last of the “incalculably vast herds and flocks” disappeared altogether.<sup>104</sup> Even the name of the film - *The Vanishing Prairie* - denotes a concern for the ecosystem of the American West.

Disney was a proud and vocal conservationist, and he wore the accolades environmental organizations showered upon him as a badge of honor. If history has come to regard Walt Disney as a stealth conservationist, that is due to misinterpretation of fact, not a sleight of hand on Walt Disney’s part. It is true that Disney did not like rocking the boat and was cautious not to offend audiences, but when it came to the issue of nature, Walt Disney was exceedingly proud of being heralded as a leading American conservationist. Furthermore, he almost certainly felt vindicated by the praise, as it legitimized his authority as an environmental educator of the masses, especially children.

There are those that would argue this point. After all, the Disney Company continued on with a life and agenda of its own after the death of its founder. Elliot McCleary, writing in 1971 for the National Wildlife Federation of which Walt Disney was an honorary spokesman, expressed concern for what he called a “massive experiment in environmental planning” for Disney World within Florida’s wetlands. With Walt Disney dead, McCleary was somewhat skeptical that the Walt Disney Company could do justice to his environmental vision for Disney World, remarking that even if the corporation was successful in its aim to be eco-friendly, the resulting urban sprawl sure to

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<sup>104</sup> Walt Disney, “Walt Disney Tells Why He Chose to Film ‘The Vanishing Prairie,’” *Daily Boston Globe*, September 12, 1954.

build up around Disney World would have devastating consequences for the local environment.<sup>105</sup>

Regardless of how the Walt Disney Company achieved or thwarted his plans after his death, Walt Disney the man was justifiably viewed as environmentally progressive in his lifetime, in part for his theme park designs. Writing about Disney World after it opened, one reviewer noted that in “an age when people were just beginning to worry about ecology, Disney was not only planning but building futurist cities, ecologically balanced, pollution-free.”<sup>106</sup> This is an overly simplistic and sunny opinion, but it demonstrates that Walt Disney was recognized for his public and impressive attempts to operate successfully within the American economy while trying not to damage the American ecology. That environmental organizations could laud a man who engaged in numerous large scale land development projects is a testament both to the contemporary understandings of conservation as well as to the perceived positive impact of Disney’s productions in raising environmental awareness.

Walt Disney’s contribution to American conceptions of nature is primarily through his production of nature films. These highly successful films followed a strict formula consisting of the depiction of an environment free of all traces of humanity, a plucky narrative, astonishing photography and technique, and a musical score designed to cue emotional responses from the audience. The impact and influence of these educationally entertaining films is impossible to quantify or wholly grasp, but reasonable conclusions can be made. Derek Bouse, a far cry from being a fan of Disney’s nature

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<sup>105</sup> Elliot McCleary, “Will 10,000,000 People Ruin All This?” in *National Wildlife* (June-July, 1971), reprinted with permission in *Trends* Vol. 8, no. 4 (October, 1971), 6.

<sup>106</sup> John Gardner, quoted in Jackson, *Walt Disney*, 101.

films, admitted that it was “possible that for a time Disney’s wildlife films reached and perhaps influenced more viewers globally than any other nature-oriented media.”<sup>107</sup>

Kathy Merlock Jackson credited Walt and the *True-Life Adventure* series for winning over “the baby boom generation, thereby making it receptive to later popular documentaries such as those made by Jacques Cousteau and National Geographic.”<sup>108</sup>

Similarly, Eddy von Mueller wrote that the “Baby Boomers would see *True-Life Adventures* in school as 16mm dubs of dubs; as would their kids, born into the brand, on VHS. [The] style, the technique, and... the rhetorical peculiarities of the series born on *Seal Island* became familiar, at an early age, to generations of viewers.”<sup>109</sup> How most Americans in the mid- to late-twentieth century felt and thought about nature was directly, inextricably tied to how the Walt Disney Company presented nature to them, as well as to how ubiquitously those representations were in turn distributed by the American school system. The degree to which individuals internalized the Disney version of nature would have varied drastically, of course, but hardly an American in the era would have made it through their childhood without some measure of exposure to the Walt Disney Company’s wildlife films.

The generations of Americans who grew up on *True-Life Adventures* and other incarnations of Disney nature films do not have the most impressive track record when it comes to conservation. The extinction of entire species of animals has only accelerated under the watch of these generations, and some of the greatest environmental disasters of all time occurred during their ascendancy. However romantic and sentimental Americans

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<sup>107</sup> Bouse, *Wildlife Films*, 69.

<sup>108</sup> Jackson, *Walt Disney*, 86.

<sup>109</sup> von Mueller, “Nature is the Dramatist,” 146.

may have come to feel about animals and nature since Walt Disney popularized wildlife films, it has not manifested itself very well in behavior or action. On the other hand, nature documentaries, wildlife conservation and protection organizations, and environmentalism in general have all only skyrocketed in popularity since Walt Disney's death in 1966. Either way, it is inescapable that, for better or for worse, the notions of nature held by the majority of Americans in the modern era have been touched directly or indirectly by Walt Disney. For all of the many things that Walt Disney is remembered for, when it comes to environmental conservation, it is only fair and accurate to acknowledge the tremendous influence he wielded both during his lifetime and after, as the films and documentaries he produced have seeped into the national consciousness, indelibly altering how Americans think about nature.

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