

Arguments about Animal Ethics

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Chapter Ten

Whale Wars and the Public Screen Mediating Animal Ethics in Violent Times

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"We're out here off the coast of Antarctica, and behind me is the *Nisshan Maru*, which is the largest whale killing machine on the planet," begins *Steve Irwin* captain Paul Watson. Kicking off the first-ever episode of *Whale Wars*, Animal Planet's new hit reality show/melodrama, the crew of the *Steve Irwin* launches an attack on the largest ship in the Japanese whaling fleet. The *Nisshan Maru* fights back, and within minutes, a Sea Shepherd deckhand is yelling, "The Captain's been shot!" The scene of a magnificent, blue Antarctic Ocean dissolves to black as three words ("Three Months Earlier") pull the viewers into a flashback that spans the rest of the season.¹

The television series *Whale Wars* was born when cable network Animal Planet agreed to send a camera crew onto the *Steve Irwin* for the Sea Shepherd Conservation Society's 2007–2008 Antarctic Whale Defense Campaign. During the seven episodes in Season One, the history of the campaign is gradually revealed. Watson began the Sea Shepherd Conservation Society (SSCS) in 1977, believing that Greenpeace, which he co-founded, and international laws were insufficient to protect marine life. Whaling continued unabated and Greenpeace did not favor the direct confrontation tactics Watson believed were needed. Using direct intervention and lessons learned from Sun Tzu's *The Art of War*, SSCS strives to reach its mission of ending "the destruction of habitat and slaughter of wildlife in the world's oceans in order to conserve and protect ecosystems and species."² The organization recruits young, passionate animal rights activists who are willing to put their lives on the line to defend ocean mammals. And if they can pull a few carefully crafted stunts to gain media attention at the same time, or what rhetorical critic Kevin DeLuca calls "image events," well, so much the better for the cause.³

With a pirate flag hoisted high and equipped with little more than cameras and stink bombs, the crew of the *Steve Irwin* tries to balance their convictions

and their personal lives, all while carefully portraying a pirate image in front of anxious armchair adventurers. According to Watson, "This is why we present the pirate image, it's all theatrics. Kids love the pirate image."⁴ Apparently, children are not the only ones. The first season of *Whale Wars* proved to be a success for Animal Planet. Nielsen ratings report that *Whale Wars* attracted over a million television viewers. By its second airing, the show had also set a five-year record for Animal Planet's virtual telecasts.⁵ However, the show has not been without its controversies, as some critics have called the Sea Shepherd's tactics extreme.⁶ Fortunately, network executives learned years ago that "extreme" actions tend to keep viewers coming back for more. Hoping to mimic the success of shows like Discovery Channel's *Deadliest Catch*, Animal Planet's President and General Manager, Marjorie Kaplan, "has been re-branding Animal Planet with compelling, reality-style entertainment."⁷ The decision appears to be paying off in terms of ratings.

Although the public's response to the show is one measure of success, perhaps the most important measure is the effectiveness of the SSCS's direct interventions. The campaign, which is rooted in ethical convictions, is also considered a success because it has helped to halve the number of whales killed by Japanese hunters.⁸ Indeed, the mere act of observing the whaling has accomplished a great deal in curtailing the killing. Journalist Christopher Bantick argues that when the shepherds are there, the whalers stop hunting; when the activists leave to refuel, the slaughter continues.⁹ The moral spotlight of the shepherds is not helping the public to see actions hidden by darkness, but hunting hidden by distance.

Despite the success of both Animal Planet's television series and the SSCS's campaign, we argue *Whale Wars* relies on an implicit anthropocentrism that ultimately limits the effectiveness of its animal rights rhetoric. Rather than drawing attention to the shepherds' ethical position regarding whales or the possibility of valuing whales as living creatures, viewers are invited to bear witness to human conflict. In other words, a concern for animal ethics is secondary to the human conflict captured by the reality programming. This is not to say the shepherds are at fault. Instead, our reading complicates readily accepted reality programming as a vehicle for the communication of ethical norms. As animal rights rhetoric is absorbed into the nearly endless matrix of cable broadcasting and capitalistic spectacle, attracting viewers for ratings trumps changing behavior toward animals. To analyze the Sea Shepherd's campaign as portrayed in *Whale Wars*, we will first examine the role of image events and their relationship to public sphere theory. Following this, we will explore the historical context for the Sea Shepherd's campaign. Next, we will engage in a close reading of season one before, finally, drawing conclusions about the ethics of image events in the animal rights movement.

SPHERES, SCREENS, AND IMAGE EVENTS

A public's understanding of animal ethics is not only informed by personal interactions with animals and the natural world but also shaped by a variety of discursive encounters that take place within a media-saturated culture. The importance of media culture for today's society should not be underestimated. According to philosopher and media critic Douglas Kellner, a "media culture has emerged in which images, sounds, and spectacles help produce the fabric of everyday life, dominating leisure time, shaping political views and social behavior, and providing the materials out of which people forge their very identities."¹⁰ Although few scholars would likely disagree with Kellner's assessment of media culture's contemporary pervasiveness, they are divided about whether to celebrate or mourn this relatively recent development.

For many scholars, a heavily mediated culture is one in which its members have lost their ability to rationally and critically engage one another on matters of common concern. In other words, media-saturated cultures do not possess what Jürgen Habermas has conceptualized as a healthy "public sphere;" that area of our social lives where we can deliberate about society's most important issues.¹¹ In the Habermasian view of the public sphere, it is assumed that people have open access to it, that social inequalities are bracketed for the sake of the common good, that rationality is privileged, and that participants have consensus as their objective. Turning to television, rhetorical scholars like David Zarefsky have argued that a media-saturated culture is one that cannot have an active and healthy public sphere: "Thanks largely to television, people have been transformed into passive consumers of messages and images, rather than participants in a dialogue."¹² Similarly, Christopher Lasch believes engaging in public argument is now a "lost art."¹³ To borrow a phrase from Neal Postman, many believe we are "amusing ourselves to death."¹⁴

While the Habermasian public sphere certainly offers a normative point of comparison for society, it has also been heavily criticized. Feminist scholar and critical theorist Nancy Fraser, for example, has argued Habermas' view of the public sphere is not yet capable of "theorizing the limits of actually existing democracy."¹⁵ A central element of Fraser's argument is that we do not actually bracket differences between people and that some marginalized groups have found it necessary to form "subaltern counterpublics."¹⁶ Sociologist Michael Schudson criticizes Habermas on historical grounds.¹⁷ Was the public sphere of the French salon or the colonial American town hall meeting really worth using as a normative model for contemporary democracy? More recently, scholars have noted an aversion of the visual in public sphere theory. Rhetorical critics Cara Finnegan and Jiyeon Kang have accused Habermas and other public sphere theorists of iconoclasm.¹⁸ Our purpose here is

not to revisit every argument leveled against the Habermasian public sphere, nor do we wish to offer a defense of it. Instead, we wish to address recent trends in the latter critique developed against the Habermasian public sphere as a theoretical point of departure for our analysis. In other words, what role does the visual play in a society where public opinion formation and political culture is heavily influenced by mass mediated messages?

In his studies on environmental activists, DeLuca has argued subaltern counterpublics often use "image events" to draw attention to their cause. Echoing the view of Greenpeace member Robert Hunter, DeLuca argues these image events are "mind bombs" that rattle public consciousness and shape public opinion in ways face-to-face methods could not.¹⁹ Image events, for John Delicath and DeLuca, are "staged acts of protest designed for media dissemination."²⁰ Rhetorical critic Davi Johnson, a student of DeLuca's, offers a more specific summary:

An "image event" is a type of rhetorical address that is ocular, rather than verbal. Image events are often orchestrated by social movements, and they are defined as deliberately staged spectacles designed to attract the attention of the mass media and disseminate persuasive images to a wide audience.²¹

Although the idea of an "image event" provides scholars with a much-needed tool to analyze the rhetoric of a mediated society, it does not fit neatly into the iconoclastic notions of the public sphere. As Delicath and DeLuca note, "Within the conventional usage of Habermas' liberal public sphere, however, image events do not register. That is, they neither count nor make sense within the rules, the formal procedures, of such a public sphere."²² Yet, for Jennifer Peeples and DeLuca, in a society where "TV places a premium on images over words, emotions over rationality, speed over reflection, distraction over deliberation, slogans over arguments, the glance over the gaze, appearance over truth, the present over the past," understanding the role of the image event in contemporary discourse has never been more vital.²³

Realizing the image event could not cleanly fit into the traditional understanding of the public sphere, DeLuca and Peeples have suggested the idea of the "public screen" is needed to supplement scholarly understanding of the public sphere.²⁴ As our culture has become increasingly saturated with the signs of the spectacular and technology further connects us to one another, the manner in which we participate in democratic culture has changed. For DeLuca and Peeples, a concept like the "public screen" is desperately needed in our technologically developing world; it is a concept that "takes technology seriously." They argue scholars "cannot simply adopt the term 'public sphere' and all it entails, a term indebted to orality and print, for the current screen age."²⁵ As our socio-technical culture changes, our theoretical understanding of it should as well.

Ultimately, DeLuca and others have argued scholars need to change the way they see image events. Image events are not explicitly included in the Habermasian public sphere, yet, they are not irrelevant in a world filled with public screens. For DeLuca and Delicath, "Theories of rhetoric and argument that would too readily dismiss image events as debased forms of more authentic, reasoned debate fail to understand the need to explore social problem construction and opinion formation in terms of the way people actually gather and process information."²⁶ Image events have fundamentally changed the way subaltern counterpublics may voice their opinions for and to a larger public. In turn, critics now have a new way to "critique through spectacle, not critique versus spectacle."²⁷

According to DeLuca, his coauthors, and students, image events should be viewed with a sense of optimism. Image events provide inventional spaces for subaltern counterpublics and give voice to those who would not otherwise be allowed to participate in the public sphere. According to Delicath and DeLuca:

Image events create opportunities for generative argument as they are sources of confrontational and creative claims-making and refutation. They may spark the imagination, inspire argumentation and debate, and promote innovative argumentative practices. Environmental image events create opportunities for generative argument by increasing the visibility of environmental issues, subverting the privilege of dominant environmental discourses, and expanding the range of thinkable thoughts with regards to environmental matters. To the extent that they challenge taken-for-granted assumptions and disrupt the existing grid of intelligibility, environmental image events are uniquely capable of animating public argument and rearticulating the rhetorical boundaries of environmental knowledge.²⁸

However, despite their optimistic assessment, the notion of an image event is not without its critics.

Although image events are filled with the potential to disrupt dominant power structures operating within the public sphere through the use of public screens, some scholars have questioned the rhetorical effectiveness of image events. Image events, in addition to forcing subaltern issues into the public sphere, have the potential to polarize parties involved in disputes. Following the work of environmental communication scholars Michael Spangler and David Knapp, performance studies critic Jonathan Gray has argued, "Image events often work counter to traditional concepts of effective rhetorical discourse, bringing outrage and backlash down on the heads of the activists and their cause."²⁹ Image events are not designed to disseminate mediated messages of unity or consensus; they are designed to challenge dominant public practices by breaking from normative tactics of protest.

Most of the initial work on image events and the public screen has used environmental movements as primary topics.³⁰ However, there is little reason to suspect that these concepts could not be used to analyze animal rights rhetoric. Some scholars have already done so: Lesli Pace and C. Richard King each use the concept of the image event to analyze PETA's anti-fur rhetoric, Hunter Stephenson uses the concept in relation to seal hunting protest, and Brett Lunceford employs the image event to understand nude protests for PETA in this volume.³¹ This essay likewise uses the image event and the public screen as central theoretical elements in the following analysis. However, one important distinction must be noted. Although Watson has long been known for using image events, *Whale Wars* is in the unique position of being a reality show designed to observe activists as they are creating image events. One might even say the show is a kind of metacommunication, a mediated image event about making image events. Although the first appropriation of an image event on *Whale Wars* is to garner media attention, we must remember that the reality programming does not necessarily do the same thing in the second appropriation. Thus, the text itself may contain contradictions and tensions worthy of analysis. However, before we turn to our analysis of the television series, a brief exploration of whaling's history is in order.

WHALING'S HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Sustenance whaling has existed for millennia. The enormous mammals provided an abundant source of food, as well as blubber and bone for a variety of early peoples. Evidence discovered by a team of University of Alaska researchers and their Russian colleagues revealed that the indigenous peoples of Un'en'en on Russia's Chukchi Peninsula were hunting whales as many as 3,000 years ago.³² Because the Native peoples hunted the creatures for their own survival, and not for commercial distribution, sustenance hunting had a negligible impact on whale populations. The Industrial Revolution changed this, however, and by the 1840s and 1850s, commercial whaling was booming. Every part of a whale was in demand. The blubber produced enormous amounts of oil and the baleen (or "whalebone") in the mouths of certain whales could be warmed, shaped and cooled to give form to hoopskirts and corsets.³³ Whale byproducts were also used in makeup, perfume, cold cream, hairbrushes, fishing rods, umbrellas, pet food, fertilizer, lamp fuel, paint, varnish and even ice cream.³⁴ But when oil was discovered in Pennsylvania in 1859, the commercial whaling industry suffered a severe setback, as whale oil was no longer the only resource—or even the cheapest resource—for lighting homes and businesses. However, baleen was still in high demand, and as its value more than quintupled between 1870 and

1904, whalers once again hit the oceans in record numbers in search of making "big money quickly." As Eric Jay Dolin, author of *Leviathan: The History of Whaling in America*, wrote, "Whaling voyages were now being dubbed whale-bone cruises, and with a large bowhead capable of providing upward of 3,000 pounds of baleen, the profits for a really successful cruise were simply astounding."³⁵ The end result was that between 1904 and 1978, 1.4 million whales were killed in the Antarctic alone.³⁶

Sensing the potential devastation of such dramatic hunts, twelve nations created the International Whaling Commission (IWC) in 1946 under the International Convention for the Regulation of Whaling. From the time it came into force in 1948, the main purpose of the Convention and Commission was to "provide for the proper conservation of whale stocks and thus make possible the orderly development of the whaling industry." Its main duty was to review and revise the parameters laid out for international whaling, which protected certain species, identified whale sanctuaries, limited numbers and size of whales that may be killed, set seasons and areas for whaling, and prohibited the capture of suckling calves and their mothers. The IWC also prepared and released catch reports and other statistical and biological records as well as coordinated and funded whale research.³⁷

Despite the IWC's focus on regulating the whaling industry, many species of whales were on the brink of extinction, and the IWC knew it needed to take action. The IWC began to seriously discuss banning all commercial whaling until populations rebounded and a detailed resource management plan could be enacted. In 1982, they succeeded. To the dismay of pro-whaling members of the organization, the five-year ban on commercial whaling took effect in 1986 and has been repeatedly renewed. It remains in effect today, though exceptions do exist for aboriginal sustenance hunting and scientific research.³⁸

The controversy around modern-day whaling resides within the IWC's exceptions. Who is considered aboriginal? What is considered sustenance hunting? What qualifies as scientific research? How are the exceptions and limits enforced? While the IWC reviews proposals for sustenance hunting and grants permission to the aboriginals seeking to maintain their traditional way of life, member nations interested in conducting scientific research merely submit a proposal to the IWC and then make the final decision for themselves. According to the IWC, "Whilst member nations must submit proposals for review, in accordance with the Convention, it is the member nation that ultimately decides whether or not to issue a [scientific] permit, and this right overrides any other Commission regulations including the moratorium and sanctuaries. Article VIII also requires that the animals be utilised [*sic*] once the scientific data have been collected."³⁹ Of all the categories of whaling, scientific permit whaling takes the greatest number of whale lives

annually. During the 2007 whaling season, 951 whales were killed under scientific permits, and all but 39 of those were taken by Japan.⁴⁰ Japanese whalers argue that, "scientific whaling is necessary to understand whales' biology and monitor their population dynamics with a view to eventually resuming commercial whaling."⁴¹ However, critics argue that Japan's scientific permits are merely a thin veil covering their real purpose: getting around the moratorium on commercial hunting. The "research" ships are the same harpooning vessels previously used for commercial purposes.⁴² And as the final Season One episode of *Whale Wars* reveals, one of the six vessels in the Japanese whaling fleet is the *Nisshan Maru*, which is dedicated to the immediate processing of the hunted whales while at sea.⁴³ No time is lost as whale products are immediately unloaded for commercial distribution once the ships return home. In November 2007, the Japanese whaling fleet began its annual hunt, and whaling activists were not far behind.

IMAGE EVENTS AND A WILLINGNESS TO DIE

Whale Wars makes it abundantly clear that Watson and the shepherds are motivated by one overriding concern: saving whales. This goal of fighting for a group of other beings different from themselves is characteristic of organizations that are part of what Charles J. Stewart calls an "other-directed social movement."⁴⁴ Both Stewart and Jason Edward Black have argued that the animal rights movement is an exemplar of this kind of movement.⁴⁵ That the SSCS is an other-directed social movement organization becomes clear in the first few episodes of the season. In episode one, "Needle in a Haystack," Watson makes the position of the SSCS apparent: "You don't beg criminals to stop doing what they are doing. You intervene and physically and aggressively shut them down." The narrator even notes in a voiceover that Watson "is a man who will die for the whales and he expects his crew to do the same." Not to be outdone by Watson, the officers of the *Steve Irwin* are likewise framed in a way that features their devout concern for the whales. Kim McCoy, executive director of the SSCS, claimed in the same episode: "You see that whale and there's a connection and you just feel a sense of obligation to do something." Second Mate Peter Hammarstedt even commented on how far he was willing to go for the whales: "I didn't join Sea Shepherd until I could say with 100 percent conviction that I was willing to risk my life to save a whale." Watson and the *Steve Irwin* officers are framed as being among the few people in the world who would die for their beliefs.⁴⁶

In addition to verbally showcasing the motives of Watson and his officers, *Whale Wars* visually illustrates their perspective. Aside from verbal claims,

Whale Wars features short segments of the whales in their natural environments. In episode one, for example, crew members are given a "reminder" of why they are there; footage of whales breaking the ocean's surface show the viewers what is at stake in this nontraditional war. The whales are only dwarfed by the gigantic icebergs floating nearby, sublime in their frozen beauty. But not all of the visuals are so pleasant. Throughout the episodes viewers are also shown graphic images of whales being harpooned, gutted, and processed. These images of blood, bone, and intestines let the viewers see what it is the SSCS is fighting against. By the time the shepherds encounter the Japanese whaling fleet for the staging of their first image event, viewers have seen what it is that motivates Watson and his officers.

In episodes two and three, "Nothing's Ideal" and "International Incidents R Us," the sea shepherds finally have the opportunity to stage their first image event. After finding the *Yushin Maru 2*, a Japanese harpoon ship, Watson reveals his plan during a crew meeting: two members of the *Steve Irwin* are to board the harpoon vessel. Betting the Japanese will take the crew members into custody and not allow them to leave when they request to do so, Watson tells the crew they will create an international incident by accusing the Japanese of kidnapping. Although the crew is hesitant at first, two members finally step forward. Cook Benjamin Potts and Engineer Giles Lane agree to board the whaling ship. With a helicopter circling above to take pictures and crew members hurling stink bombs onto the deck of the *Yushin Maru 2*, Potts and Lane successfully board by using a small inflatable Delta boat, and as expected, are taken into custody. Immediately following confirmation of their boarding, Watson and the sea shepherds begin to notify the press, sending out video and photos of the incident.⁴⁷ Their first image event appears to be a success in terms of press coverage with Watson spending over 36 hours on the satellite phone being interviewed. The media-savvy Watson is well aware of the orchestration he is directing: "We live in a media culture, so it's very important, images are very important. The camera is probably the most important weapon we have."⁴⁸ However, as with any orchestration and as the title of episode two indicates, nothing is ideal. As we shall see, the members of this other-directed social movement garner more attention than the whales for whom the movement is fighting.

ANTHROPOCENTRISM AND PERFORMATIVE CONTRADICTIONS

Despite the appearance of being a show that attempts to draw in viewers because of its "save-the-whales" message, virtually every episode features dramatic human relationships as a means of keeping audience members focused

on the screens. In other words, *Whale Wars* uses the audience's concern for other human beings as a primary motivator to keep watching. Animal Planet explained the goal of *Whale Wars* in more detail: "The series attempts to capture the intensity of the group, their personal motivations, their mistakes and mishaps, their internal conflicts and their encounters with whaling vessels in the seas of Antarctica."⁴⁹ Because television requires scripting and editing, staging and direction, there is the potential for an animal rights reality TV show to create a great chasm between the featured organization's cause (protection and preservation of whales) and the objective of the broadcast network producing the series (ratings and profit). Notice that Animal Planet never mentions stopping the killing of whales as an underlying goal, nor do they take an ethical side concerning the IWC's policies. The show, at times, even begins to take on the dramatic elements of an animal rights soap opera.

In episode one, the animal rights activists no longer appear as stereotypical fanatics hell-bent on saving whales. As audience members see the novice associates of the crew face seasickness and logistical tasks associated with being a deckhand, viewers are invited to identify with the activists as human beings. There are a number of dramatic moments in episode one where the focus of the show is clearly on the crew and the human relationships they have with one another: Potts damages the blades of the helicopter, possibly compromising one of the crew's most valuable reconnaissance tools against the Japanese fleet; when a boat fails to launch and members of the crew are put into harm's way, senior crew member Peter Brown is blamed. As Shannon Mann quipped, "He's [Brown] a little bit crazy."⁵⁰ Audiences even get to witness snapshots of the conflict between the SSCS and Greenpeace. Although the Greenpeace members believe Watson's tactics are counter-productive, they nonetheless collaborate with the SSCS for a brief stint.

The kidnapping incident in episodes two and three also features the human relationships of the crew members. When Watson first explained his plan to the crew, the reality programming captured the tension and disagreement between the veteran crew members and the new recruits. For Watson, "There's always risks involved. And if you aren't willing to take those risks then I wouldn't think that you would be on the vessel." Boarding the Japanese whaling ship was just another routine image event waiting to be staged. New medical officer Scott Bell had a different view of the plan: "It's a foolish idea. It's a dangerous idea. You've got to think about the personal safety of the people who would volunteer and I don't think that's being taken into account by Sea Shepherd at all. In my opinion they'd be just a couple of sacrificial lambs." Communications officer Wilfred Verkleij concurred: "If you board somebody else's ship, you're a pirate. You're invading somebody else's country. I don't think it's a smart idea." Despite the objections of many crew members, the

SSCS proceeded as planned. Fortunately, the image event worked, the volunteers (Potts and Lane) were eventually returned, and the SSCS garnered a great deal of media attention.⁵¹ While the image event could be deemed a success, the success of the reality coverage should be viewed with a sense of skepticism. Professional producers are editing and framing the shot footage in such a way that the whales are no longer the primary concern. Are viewers tuning in to watch some of these members who are a "little bit crazy?" Are viewers tuning in to cheer for their animal rights heroes, a dramatic conflict between the good humans (sea shepherds) and the evil humans (the Japanese whalers)? Are viewers tuning in to watch the crew encounter growing pains as the shepherds lash out at one another? We can probably answer yes to all of these questions, but we also have to ask whether or not whales even matter for these answers. One can imagine the same reality framing at work in any extreme context. The human interest element is what is featured by a very capable cable company. Are any of the viewers invited to watch because the attention is on the whales? Is the show even trying to emphasize the plight of the whales, or is the human drama what counts? The later episodes allow us to better answer these questions.

In episode four, "We Are Hooligans," audience members are exposed to a cat-and-mouse game as the *Steve Irwin* is being followed by a spy ship, the *Fukuoshi Maru*. The shepherds realize they are being followed so the Japanese whaling vessels will always know their location. Unable to locate the Japanese whalers, the shepherds first have to lose the *Fukuoshi Maru*. Hiding behind an iceberg, the sea shepherds eventually charge at the trailing vessel, scaring them off. Apparently the *Fukuoshi Maru* did not wish to engage the SSCS directly. Allowed to return to their main task, the *Steve Irwin* begins to pursue the *Blue Oriental*, the main fueling vessel of the Japanese fleet. However, the shepherds' attempts to lose the *Fukuoshi Maru* proved to be futile as they once again discover the spy ship close behind. Planning a second attack on the spy ship, the shepherds damage the crane used for lowering the Delta boats into the water, the first of their many mechanical problems.⁵² Again, it is the shepherds who are the agents in the editing and framing. Getting caught up in the cat-and-mouse game almost makes you forget why they are there to begin with.

In episode five, "Doors Slamming and Things Breaking," the shepherds not only have to address their broken crane, but they lose one of their motors as well. Deciding it is better to repair and regroup in port rather than attempt to challenge the Japanese fleet with severely compromised equipment, the *Steve Irwin* crew decides to dock in Melbourne, Australia. On the way, Brown passes down an order for the crew to refrain from "partying" until they reach port. A number of crew members disobey the order. Audience

members get to see the activists drinking and, eventually, hung over. The next morning the captain declares the ship a dry ship. Hammarstedt, in a crew meeting, tells the crew members that if they have a problem with how the ship has been run, porting in Melbourne is now their opportunity to leave. Once again, the tensions between the crew members are featured. While in port, the SSCS is forced to replace a number of crew members. Some of the more notable losses include now demoted communications officer Wilfred, medical officer Scott Bell, and McCoy. Although the *Steve Irwin* loses many of their hands, the SSCS finds replacements with ease. As Brown put it, "Most of these people are one-timers anyway."⁵³ While McCoy is not one of the "one-timers," her reason for leaving is prominently featured in episode five. Receiving word from the SSCS office, Hammarstedt relays a message to Kim over the loudspeaker. Alex, a member of the SSCS who works in the main office and is Kim's significant other, has asked Kim to marry him. She happily accepts. The emphasis of this episode is slanted in favor of seeing how the crew lives and how their relationships with other humans flourish or fall apart. Even as the *Steve Irwin* slowly sailed into Melbourne, the episode focused on the possible legal consequences for Potts and Lane (no action was taken against them), the hero's welcome the crew received from the public, and the family members who welcomed the crew home.⁵⁴ Once again, *Whale Wars* was turned into a human interest story.

Although human relationships are emphasized in episode five, episode six, "Ladies First," also draws attention to this. With new crew members Tod Emko (communications officer) and David Page (medical officer) and financial help from musical groups such as the Red Hot Chili Peppers, the crew set sail once again. Unlike their last image event, Watson this time suggests sending over four of the crew's female members to serve an arrest warrant, believing "they're [the Japanese] not gonna know how to deal with it." Dissent soon emerges. Even Potts, now the only member of the crew who has experience boarding another vessel from a Delta boat, objects to the idea. As before, the SSCS locates the *Yushin Maru 2* and decides to go through with its plan. A slow launch with an inexperienced crew, lack of communication between the main vessel and the small boats, and losing the target, produces high tensions and high drama. During the course of the failed image event, audience members discover cook Amber Paarman and Hammarstedt are partners. The audience also discovers that female volunteer Shannon Mann is seriously hurt with a pelvis injury incurred during the mission. As if these trials were not enough for the *Whale Wars*' heroes, the episode ends with a power outage as the ship is left to navigate its way past icebergs in the dark.⁵⁵

The final episode in season one, "Boiling Point," picks up where episode six leaves off. The crew manages to restore power. The next morning, the

crew finds the main ship of the Japanese whaling fleet, the *Nisshan Maru*. For the SSCS, this is a significant encounter. The flagship of the whaling fleet is the factory vessel that processes and packages the harpooned whales while at sea. For Watson, the *Nisshan Maru* is "the most evil ship on the planet." And for deckhand Laurens de Groot, "That ship stands for everything I hate."⁵⁶ Without the factory ship, the entire whaling fleet would be out of commission. With Jolly Roger raised high and stink bombs in hands, the *Steve Irwin* launched its attack. Unlike the strategy used with the *Yushin Maru 2*, the SSCS decided to pursue the larger whaling ship with the *Steve Irwin* itself. After one successful pass, the *Nisshan Maru* began to flee with the *Steve Irwin* giving chase. After three days of pursuit, the season builds to its final dramatic conflict. The SSCS makes a second successful pass. On their third and final pass, the sea shepherds launch their remaining bombs, despite warnings from the Japanese that they will launch tear gas and flash grenades in response. After what appears to be a successful final pass, it is revealed to the audience that Watson believes he has been shot. Although we never see any footage of gunfire, audiences see Watson open his jacket to reveal a bullet-proof vest with a bullet hole. To this day, the Japanese fleet denies ever firing on the *Steve Irwin*. Audiences are never provided with a definitive answer as to whether or not Watson was staging another image event. Once again, it is the human interest element of the episodes, an assault on one human life, that gains the focus of the episode, not the killing of whales.⁵⁷

CONCLUSION

While both the television series and the SSCS campaign were successful by certain standards, *Whale Wars* relies on an implicit anthropocentrism that ultimately limits the effectiveness of its animal rights rhetoric. The strength of the show is that it softens the image of the animal rights activists, often portraying their actions as passionate and reasonable, rather than extreme. However, to do this, the show focuses on the actors rather than the animals. By villainizing the whale hunters and humanizing the activists, a drama-filled stage is set where the whales are relegated to the role of supporting cast. Although viewers are indirectly persuaded they should care about saving whales because of the whales' inherent worth, the stronger message emerging from *Whale Wars* is that we should care about whales because the people we have grown to care about care about whales. In other words, we should care about whales only to the degree that they influence human lives. Even some members of the SSCS have allowed this worldview to make its way into their discourse, despite their convictions to the contrary. As Johnny Vasic, film

producer and SSCS fundraiser, notes, "We are in a war of sorts, a war to save humanity through saving the diversity of our ecosystems."⁵⁸ This anthropocentric view may increase the viewership of *Whale Wars*, draw attention to image events, and even increase the popularity of the Sea Shepherds, but we are still skeptical about whether it will sway the opinions of viewers who are not committed to whale preservation.

As animal rights activists search for ways to garner more public support in an increasingly mediated world, it seems likely that we can expect an increased reliance on image events. While such a tactic is surely beneficial in some respects, mixing image events with another popular form—the reality television show—is likely to meet with severe limitations. Reality TV is designed to allow viewers to feel as though they are experiencing the action firsthand. However, during the controversial SSCS campaign, Animal Planet repeatedly stressed "it isn't endorsing Watson's campaign, simply documenting it."⁵⁹ By appropriating the SSCS rhetoric, Animal Planet effectively engages in what Jo Littler calls the corporate "neutralization" of the image event.⁶⁰ The SSCS, an "other-directed social movement" organization, appears to have saving whales as its primary concern. Animal Planet, however, is not an "other-directed" corporation. We are not contending that Animal Planet should not be airing a reality TV program about animal rights. However, we are deeply concerned that an animal rights organization's cause is being used by corporate interests to boost ratings and turn a profit and that the important animal ethics message is taking a distant second place to trite human conflicts.

To be fair, we realize that criticism without suggestions for future construction can appear condemning. It is with a spirit of engagement that we offer a few tentative suggestions, incomplete as they may be. Perhaps Animal Planet could create an equally captivating and financially successful series by humanizing the whales, much like they did with the animals in the popular program *Meerkat Manor*. Of course, we realize this has an anthropocentric problem of its own, but it is an anthropocentric bias that is, perhaps, a degree better than what is being produced in *Whale Wars* now. But this problem could be modified with another alternative suggestion. Perhaps Animal Planet should consider editing the show to feature the whales as agents as often as they feature the humans. Additional footage of whales, which are social, family-oriented creatures, living and dying could have allowed viewers to care for the mammals rather than the activists. However, this raises the question of whether or not Animal Planet would then lose viewers who were watching for the human interest element. This may be the case in the short run, but we believe that as more messages about the inherent worth of animals become increasingly mainstream, viewers will slowly start to reward

the network with ratings. Given this observation, social movement activists are in a precarious position because they have to face the rhetorical problem of convincing networks that exist in an instant-ratings culture that long-term ratings are what they should care about. This is a difficult rhetorical constraint to overcome, mostly because access to the activists' message is dependant on the ratings to keep the show afloat. Ultimately, this case study illustrates the difficulties faced by a social change organization as it encountered its image events falling subject to the mangle of modern capitalistic practice.

Season two began airing in June 2009, and the camera crews have returned. Unfortunately, it seems the network has no plans of changing the program's format or of taking a position in the whaling debate. And why should they? The first season of *Whale Wars* was a commercial success, despite its lack of advocacy. Watson and his deckhands are once again navigating the treacherous and icy waters of the Antarctic in pursuit of animal justice, and we can rest assured that no human motivation, mistake, or mishap will go uncaptured.

CHAPTER TEN

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