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“I Never Saw as Good a Nature Show Before”: Walt Disney, Environmental Education, and the *True-Life Adventures*

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Abstract

Alongside Walt Disney’s animated movies, television programming, and theme parks, scholars have examined The Walt Disney Studios’ *True-Life Adventures* series of live-action nature documentary films for their impact on popular culture. Historians, however, have mostly overlooked the significance of the *True-Life Adventures* for student learning about the natural world. Amending this historiographical shortcoming, this essay examines Disney’s innovative approach to wildlife filmmaking, describes viewers’ reactions to the *True-Life Adventures*’ educational qualities, and investigates the Studios’ efforts to use the films to enter the education market. The study breaks new ground by analyzing seldom accessed documents preserved in the Walt Disney Archives both to reveal how students, teachers, and college and university faculty responded to the films and to examine the extension of the nature documentaries through related media.

Keywords: environmental education; nature; Walt Disney; documentary film; wildlife film

In December 1948, Walt Disney premiered a twenty-seven-minute movie at a Pasadena, California, theater that profoundly influenced what students learned about the natural world. Just months later, *Seal Island* won Disney his fourteenth Academy Award[®]. Yet, the movie was unlike any for which he had previously received an Oscar[®]. Having garnered an international reputation for innovative cartoons and animated feature-length films, The Walt Disney Studios had with *Seal Island* created its first live-action nature documentary.¹ Over the next twelve years, the Studios released twelve more films under the series title *True-Life Adventures*. They earned Disney an additional seven Academy Awards[®].

¹Throughout this study I use the terms *nature documentary* and *wildlife film* interchangeably, although the literature occasionally draws distinctions between the two. On the history of wildlife film, see Gregg Mitman, *Reel Nature: America’s Romance with Wildlife on Film* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999); Derek Bousé, *Wildlife Films* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000); Cynthia Chris, *Watching Wildlife* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006). Popular in the early twentieth century, wildlife films faded from commercial distribution beginning in the late 1920s. The Walt Disney Studios re-popularized them, using new cinematic methods, beginning with *Seal Island*.

Most importantly for the environmental education of generations of students, Walt Disney used the *True-Life Adventures* to popularize wildlife film and make it accessible as never before.² Unlike most nature documentaries, which after theatrical release disappeared from public view, The Walt Disney Studios marketed the seven “two-reel” short films and six feature-length films comprising the *True-Life Adventures* to schools, libraries, churches, and homes across the nation. Prior to the films’ premieres, the Studios held private screenings for educators and, after the movies completed their runs, made various versions of them available in 16-millimeter format along with film strips and other classroom materials to assist teachers in integrating the series into their curricula. Disney further expanded the reach of the *True-Life Adventures* by licensing the publication of reading books adapted from the films, producing a series of stylized comic books, and, through syndication, publishing wildlife illustrations in newspapers across the country under the *True-Life Adventures* banner. After the launch of his first regular television program in 1954, Disney again repurposed the films, incorporating them into the show.

The Walt Disney Studios was not the first entity to make what became known as wildlife films. The conceptual and technical approaches it brought to the craft, however, transformed the genre. Most early wildlife film was human-driven safari, expedition, and far-off travelogue fare, often representing animals (and indigenous peoples, when they were not erased from the landscape) as expendable and exploitable.³ The *True-Life Adventures* shattered this archetype, establishing animals as protagonists in stories devoid of human interference.⁴ Disney’s naturalist photographers used live-action cameras with regular, telephoto, and close-up lenses for filming mammals, birds, reptiles, amphibians, and insects in their natural habitats; they also shot dramatic sequences in controlled settings. The Studios’ production team then edited the footage and, drawing on experience from making animated films, combined it with compelling—and often comedic—narratives and music. The resulting movies, as historian Derek Bousé observes, “united the disparate elements of wildlife filmmaking up to that time” and consolidated them “in a unified but still flexible form.”⁵ Although critics would take Disney to task for initially stretching and later violating the series’ claim that the films were “completely authentic, unstaged and unrehearsed,” they were wildly successful and favorably reviewed in a range of publications, including newspapers, trade magazines, and academic journals.⁶

Scholars of American studies and cinema as well as sociologists and biographers have examined the *True-Life Adventures* series alongside Disney’s animated movies, television programming, and theme parks for their impact on popular

²I use the term *environmental education* in this essay as shorthand to describe student learning about the natural world. It should be noted, however, that current parlance for “the environment” came into common use only following World War II. On the concept of the environment, see Paul Warde, Libby Robin, and Sverker Sörlin, *The Environment: A History of the Idea* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2018).

³Literature on the use of film to reify Eurocentric ideologies of race, gender, nationality, and colonialism is extensive. See, for instance, Ella Shohat and Robert Stam, *Unthinking Eurocentrism: Multiculturalism and the Media* (New York: Routledge, 1994).

⁴Chris, *Watching Wildlife*, 28.

⁵Bousé, *Wildlife Films*, 62.

⁶James Algar, director, *Seal Island*, Walt Disney Productions, 1948.

culture.⁷ Historians, however, have mostly overlooked the significance of the *True-Life Adventures* for student learning about the natural world. As one scholar observes, “Many of the [Disney] nature documentaries, plus a few other educational shorts, became ‘staples on the school circuit’ and are still used in schools and educational settings in the USA and other countries. Disney’s educational films and documentaries of this period deserve more attention than they have received.”⁸ Amending this historiographical shortcoming, this essay examines *Seal Island* as an example of The Walt Disney Studios’ innovative approach to wildlife filmmaking, describes viewers’ reactions to the *True-Life Adventures’* educational qualities, and investigates the Studios’ efforts to use the films to enter the education market. The study then proceeds to break new ground. It analyzes seldom accessed documents preserved in the Walt Disney Archives to reveal how students, teachers, and college and university faculty responded to the films, illuminating the powerful influence of the *True-Life Adventures* on those who viewed them. It also examines the extension of the nature documentaries through related media—an approach that few, if any, previous studies have undertaken—and interrogates what the *True-Life Adventures* taught about the natural world.

Having initially insisted that the *True-Life Adventures* films were meant to entertain rather than educate, Walt Disney eventually acknowledged, “To the extent that they are instructive, to that degree we must admit that they may also teach.”⁹ Indeed, over the course of three decades, cinematic, textual, and televised *True-Life Adventures* media became woven into student learning about the natural world. What this collection taught was a complex mixture of scientific fact, teleology, and middle-class family values, including traditional gender norms, wrapped up in a highly entertaining format. The way the *True-Life Adventures* anthropomorphized non-human animals, however, was likely their most influential attribute.¹⁰ Ascribing human traits to non-human mammals mostly, but also other fauna, the films broke with previous cinematic representations of animals as trophies to be hunted or threats to be eliminated. Instead, they encouraged viewers to empathize with creatures in the natural world, nurturing a belief that animals deserved respect

⁷The literature on Walt Disney is massive, but a few excellent bibliographies and bibliographic essays constructively guide historical research: Elizabeth Leebron and Lynn Gartley, *Walt Disney: A Guide to References and Sources* (Boston: G.K. Hall, 1979); Kathy Merlock Jackson, *Walt Disney: A Bio-Bibliography*, ed. M. Thomas Inge, (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1993); and the bibliographic essay in Steven Watts, *The Magic Kingdom: Walt Disney and the American Way of Life* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1997). The most comprehensive biographies of Disney are Bob Thomas, *Walt Disney: An American Original* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1976), and Neal Gabler, *Walt Disney: The Triumph of the American Imagination* (New York: Vintage Books, 2006). Gabler’s selected bibliography is especially useful.

⁸Janet Wasko, *Understanding Disney: The Manufacture of Fantasy* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2001), 146.

⁹Walt Disney, “Educational Values in Factual Nature Pictures,” *Educational Horizons* 33, no. 2 (Winter 1954), 82.

¹⁰Disney was not the first filmmaker to anthropomorphize non-human animal subjects for commercial ends, but he was one of the most successful. See Jan-Christopher Horak, “Wildlife Documentaries: From Classical Forms to Reality TV,” *Film History* 18, no. 4 (2006), 467. For Disney’s use of anthropomorphism in both animated and nature films, see Séan Harrington, *The Disney Fetish* (London: John Libbey Publishing, 2014), 194–96.

and even admiration.¹¹ As Studios' director James Algar recalled, Disney admonished that "no condescending attitude was to be taken toward nature. Creatures were to be viewed not as 'dumb animals' but as 'our friends, the wise animals.'"¹²

Precisely because the *True-Life Adventures* generated sympathy for animals, organizations such as the Audubon Society, the Wilderness Society, and the National Association for Conservation Education and Publicity acknowledged *True-Life* media as important contributions to educating the public about the natural world, with the Audubon Society presenting Disney with its 1955 award for rendering "distinguished service to the cause of conservation."¹³ In 1963, three years following the release of the final *True-Life* film, the National Geographic Society commended Disney as "a superb teacher of natural history, geography and history."¹⁴ Given the recognition Disney received from these organizations, it would be careless, as some critics have been, to dismiss the *True-Life Adventures* as an exercise in "Disneyfying" nature.¹⁵ Yet, neither should their deficiencies be ignored. While often placing greater emphasis on environmental concerns, contemporary wildlife films maintain conventions The Walt Disney Studios established decades ago, demonstrating that the *True-Life Adventures* continue to shape viewers' learning about the natural world in the twenty-first century.

"Nature Is the Dramatist"¹⁶

Walt Disney's entrance into the field of education came many decades after the nation's public schools began instructing students about the environment through the subject of science. Historian John Rudolph's recent work demonstrates how teachers' approach to this subject transformed over the course of four distinct periods beginning in approximately 1850, with the most dramatic change before the Second World War occurring during the Progressive Era.¹⁷ Among other developments during this period, a movement to incorporate "nature study" into school curricula arose seeking to reform the teaching of science as an "information" subject learned primarily through textbooks and by rote.¹⁸ In 1903, Cornell University horticulturist and nature study leader Liberty Hyde Bailey delineated this shift when he observed,

¹¹Margaret J. King, "The Audience in the Wilderness," *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 24, no. 2 (April 1996), 68.

¹²The Walt Disney Studios, *The Story of Walt Disney's True-Life Adventure Series* (Burbank, CA: Walt Disney Productions, 1952), 6. Located in Folder: TRUE LIFE—BROCHURES—School Exploit. 2nd File, Box: Prod-Files, Cabinet 0207566, Drawer 1, Walt Disney Archives [hereafter WDA], The Walt Disney Studios, Burbank, CA.

¹³Quoted in Mitman, *Reel Nature*, 123. Also, see Matt Cartmill, *A View to Death in the Morning: Hunting and Nature through History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), 161–88.

¹⁴See letter from editor Melville Bell Grosvenor, which appears on an unnumbered page immediately prior to: Robert de Roos, "The Magic Worlds of Walt Disney," *National Geographic Magazine*, Aug. 1963, 159–207.

¹⁵As an example, see Richard Schickel, *The Disney Version: The Life, Times, Art and Commerce of Walt Disney* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1968), 290.

¹⁶Ben Sharpsteen, director, *Water Birds*, Walt Disney Productions, 1952.

¹⁷John L. Rudolph, *How We Teach Science: What's Changed, and Why It Matters* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2019).

¹⁸Rudolph, *How We Teach Science*, 10.

“Nature may be studied with either of two objects: to discover new truth for the purpose of increasing the sum of human knowledge; or to put the pupil in a sympathetic attitude toward nature for the purpose of increasing the joy of living.”¹⁹ Nature study advocates promoted both objectives, though the latter best characterized the movement by sending teachers and their students out of classrooms and into fields and forests (or, in the case of cities, urban gardens) to both celebrate nature and study it.²⁰

Nature study shared the goal of teaching appreciation of the natural world with a variety of organizations and programs for children and youth established during the first half of the twentieth century. As Pamela Riney-Kehrberg observes in her environmental history of childhood, the Boy Scouts, Camp Fire Girls, and 4-H all sought to inspire youngsters “with a love of the land.”²¹ Meanwhile, zoos and natural history museums—especially children’s museums—had begun developing educational programs, many linked directly to the nature study movement. While undoubtedly sites of entertainment, most zoological parks sought to distance themselves from low-brow, profit-seeking menageries by promoting educational missions. Cincinnati public schools, for example, sent thousands of students on zoo trips beginning as early as 1896, while the San Diego Zoo transported children from local schools for zoo visits that were coordinated with the school district’s Nature Study Department.²² During this same time, major public natural history museums began contacting classroom teachers to offer nature study training. As Karen Rader and Victoria Cain note, even smaller institutions provided outreach to educators, with the curator of the Davenport Academy of Sciences, for instance, writing curricula for the city’s schools and serving as an elementary school nature study instructor.²³ Children’s museums were even more deeply involved in fostering an appreciation for nature. The

¹⁹Quoted in Kevin C. Armitage, *The Nature Study Movement: The Forgotten Popularizer of America’s Conservation Ethic* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2009), 1.

²⁰On the history of nature study, see Sally Gregory Kohlstedt, *Teaching Children Science: Hands-On Nature Study in North America, 1890–1930* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010); Armitage, *The Nature Study Movement*; Kim Tolley, *The Science Education of American Girls* (New York: RoutledgeFalmer, 2003), 127–48.

²¹Pamela Riney-Kehrberg, *The Nature of Childhood: An Environmental History of Growing Up in America since 1865* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2014), 33. On the Boy Scouts, see Benjamin René Jordan, *Modern Manhood and the Boy Scouts of America: Citizenship, Race, and the Environment* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2016); David I. Macleod, *Building Character in the American Boy: The Boy Scouts, YMCA, and Their Forerunners, 1870–1920* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1983). On Camp Fire Girls, see Jennifer Helgren, “Native American and White Camp Fire Girls Enact Modern Girlhood, 1910–1939,” *American Quarterly* 66, no. 2 (June 2014), 333–60; Helen Buckler, Mary F. Fielder, and Martha F. Allen, *Wo-He-Lo: The Story of the Camp Fire Girls, 1910–1960* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1961). On 4-H, see Gabriel N. Rosenberg, *The 4-H Harvest: Sexuality and the State in Rural America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016); Dianne D. Glave, *Rooted in the Earth: Reclaiming the African American Environmental Heritage* (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 2010), especially 93–104; Carmen V. Harris, “States’ Rights, Federal Bureaucrats, and Segregated 4-H Camps in the United States, 1927–1969,” *Journal of African American History* 93, no. 3 (Summer 2008); Thomas Wessel and Marilyn Wessel, *4-H: An American Idea, 1900–1980* (Chevy Chase, MD: National 4-H Council, 1982).

²²Elizabeth Hanson, *Animal Attractions: Nature on Display in American Zoos* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002), 40.

²³Karen A. Rader and Victoria E. M. Cain, *Life on Display: Revolutionizing U.S. Museums of Science and Natural History in the Twentieth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014), 24.

Brooklyn Children's Museum collaborated with the Boy Scouts in holding competitions and awarding prizes for "insect study," "tree study," and "the study of aquatic life." The Museum also sponsored field trips, including to Prospect Park for bird watching, to the shore end of Flatbush Avenue for observing ocean life, and to a nearby excavation for the subway on Eastern Parkway to study mineralogy.²⁴

In his study of American life at the turn of the twentieth century, Peter J. Schmitt notes that these educational and recreational initiatives occurred in the context of an even broader cultural transformation. Resulting largely in response to the rise of industrialization, urbanization, and the decline of the agrarian ideal, Americans developed an obsession with nature that manifested in a wide array of forms, including literature and children's fiction, the rise of landscape architecture and public parks, an explosion of interest in summer camps, and the growth of a national audience for landscape photography.²⁵ Into this cultural milieu, Walt Disney was born in the year 1901. Whether resulting from his exposure to the nature study ethos in school, a national cultural impulse to turn "back to nature," or simply his own personal interests and formative experiences as a child on a farm, Disney claimed a deep appreciation for nature and animal life.²⁶ "Some of the most fascinating people I've ever met are animals," he professed in 1953, before explaining how his interest in nature led him to use animals first as models for his animation and later as principal characters in the *True-Life Adventures* films.²⁷

Disney's first nature documentary nevertheless had a circuitous beginning. In 1945, as the Second World War drew to a close, Disney approached longtime studio employee Ben Sharpsteen with the idea of making a film documenting developments in Alaska.²⁸ Disney thought the location interesting as America's "last frontier," and Army veterans stationed there during World War II were beginning to return and establish residence, increasing the likelihood the territory would become a state.²⁹ Although not exactly sure what kind of project Disney had in mind, Sharpsteen contracted Alfred and Elma Milotte, naturalist photographers living in Fairbanks, to shoot scenes of life throughout the territory.³⁰ For much of the next year, the Milottes shot thousands of feet of film, including Inuit villages, timber mills, salmon fisheries, road building, mining, hunting, and wildlife. They also spent a month on the Pribilof Islands, located hundreds of miles off Alaska's coast, filming the annual fur seal migration.³¹ Collectively, the footage comprised the makings of a travelogue.³²

²⁴Rebecca Onion, *Innocent Experiments: Childhood and the Culture of Popular Science in the United States* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2016), 30–31.

²⁵Peter J. Schmitt, *Back to Nature: The Arcadian Myth in Urban America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969).

²⁶Watts, *The Magic Kingdom*, 8–9.

²⁷Walt Disney, "What I've Learned from the Animals," *American Magazine*, Feb. 1953, 23.

²⁸Don Peri, *Working with Walt: Interviews with Disney Artists* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2008), 20–21.

²⁹Thomas, *Walt Disney*, 212.

³⁰Interview of James Algar Conducted by Richard Hubler, May 7, 1968," in *Walt's People: Talking Disney with the Artists Who Knew Him*, vol. 5, ed. Didier Ghez (Bloomington, IN: Xlibris, 2007), 95.

³¹Eddy von Mueller, "Nature Is the Dramatist": Documentary Entertainment and the World According to the *True-Life Adventures*," in *Learning from Mickey, Donald and Walt: Essays on Disney's Edutainment Films*, ed. A. Bowdoin Van Riper (Jefferson, NC: McFarland and Company, 2011), 145.

³²Peri, *Working with Walt*, 21.

Another two years passed before Disney settled on an approach to the production, eventually instructing Sharpsteen to craft a film around the seals. “Focus on them—don’t show any humans at all,” Sharpsteen recalled Disney directing him. “We’ll plan this for a theatrical release, but don’t worry about the length. Make it just as long as it needs to be so you can tell the story of the seals.”³³ The team Disney assigned to the production included Sharpsteen as producer, James Algar as director, and Winston Hibler as writer and narrator. All three were longtime studio employees and had worked on numerous animated films, experiences they infused into the tone and character of *Seal Island*.³⁴ Only after editing was complete did Hibler develop a script for the narration of the film, a practice continued for all of the *True-Life Adventures*. According to Algar, Disney wanted the narrative “simple” and “clean.” “We developed a figure of speech . . . that good narration is like rolling a hoop with a stick,” Algar recalled. “You just hit the hoop occasionally with the stick and if it’s a well-edited film it’ll roll on its own for a while.”³⁵ The approach the production team adopted—of allowing the action to tell the story with minimal narration—became a hallmark of the *True-Life Adventures* series.

The opening to *Seal Island* is animated, depicting the location of Alaska and the Pribilof Islands. “Hidden by mist the whole year through,” goes the narration of the opening sequence, “these remote specks of land have long been known as the ‘Misty Islands.’ It’s behind this curtain of fog that Nature plays out one of her greatest dramas, a story strange as fantasy yet a story straight from the realm of fact, for this is a true-life adventure: the saga of the fur seals.”³⁶ The film provides no history of the islands, however, which had been a site of dispute over seal hunting between the United States, Great Britain, Japan, and Russia, leading in 1911 to the adoption of the North Pacific Fur Seal Convention—the first international treaty concerning wildlife protection.³⁷ Instead, at Disney’s direction, the film shows no humans or human interference of any kind. Rather, it depicts island flora and fauna, including reindeer and fox, before describing the arrival of the seals.

As a nature documentary, *Seal Island* is instructive. It accurately describes the seal migration to and from the Pribilof Islands, informs viewers that the fur seal has often been called the “sea-going bear,” and notes that fur seals and bears share “a common ancestor.” It describes seal pups’ need to learn to swim and claims that only the strongest bulls—the “beachmasters”—maintain the authority to mate with females. “It is Nature’s way of keeping up the quality of the herd,” observes the narrator. “Only he is fit, according to Nature, to propagate the species.”³⁸

³³Quoted in Thomas, *Walt Disney*, 214.

³⁴Interview of Stormy Palmer Conducted by Les Perkins, 2006,” in *Walt’s People*, vol. 13, ed. Didier Ghez (Theme Park Press, 2013), 343–44.

³⁵Interview of James Algar Conducted by Bob Thomas, 1973,” in *Walt’s People*, vol. 10, ed. Didier Ghez (Bloomington, IN: Xlibris, 2011), 187.

³⁶*Seal Island*, Walt Disney Productions, 1948.

³⁷On the history of the North Pacific Fur Seal Convention, see Kurkpatrick Dorsey, *The Dawn of Conservation Diplomacy: U.S.-Canadian Wildlife Protection Treaties in the Progressive Era* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1998).

³⁸*Seal Island*, Walt Disney Productions, 1948.

Alongside such accuracy, the film exercises a pronounced gendered anthropomorphism, with the narration explicitly portraying the seals in human terms. In describing the organization of the female seals under dominant males into “harems” (an appropriate use of the zoological term), the narrator explains, “Finally all the females join the parade to the wedding line. There are no old maids on Seal Island.” Soon after, the narration continues, “The beachmaster, while pleased with himself, settles down to watch over his new wives as they take their beauty naps.” In another sequence, the film depicts the reaction of a bull to a female that has repeatedly moved to join another harem: “The jealous husband still seems to be having his troubles. He’s finding out it’s one thing to have a bride and another to hold her.” In yet another scene, the film depicts the life of male seals between the ages of two and five. Noting that these juveniles are not yet old enough to challenge a beachmaster for control of a harem, the narrator states, “Free from the burdens of family life, these gay young blades frisk and play at water sports and generally have a good time for themselves.” Continuing in this fashion throughout the film, the narration strives to achieve a comedic tone parallel to its naturalist one.³⁹

Seal Island accomplished exactly what Walt and his brother Roy O., the company’s business manager, hoped. Costing less than a quarter of what it earned on the film’s initial release, it convinced the Disney brothers of the profitability of the nature documentary.⁴⁰ They immediately began production on the next film in the series, which Walt decided would focus on beavers and life in the surrounding habitat.⁴¹ Released in July 1950, the resulting thirty-two-minute film, *Beaver Valley*, also received an Academy Award[®], cementing the Studios’ reputation for making innovative wildlife pictures. Over the next decade, The Walt Disney Studios released eleven more *True-Life Adventures* (as shown in Table 1). In total, seven of the films came to be categorized as shorter “featurettes,” each running approximately thirty minutes. The remaining six films were full-length features, running approximately seventy minutes each. In addition to the Oscars[®] won for *Seal Island* and *Beaver Valley*, the Studios received six more Academy Awards[®]—a combined total of eight awards for thirteen films.

The *True-Life Adventures* were wildly popular with viewers and critical reception was overwhelmingly favorable.⁴² Some reviewers found the films so innovative they marked a “new era” for The Walt Disney Studios. Writing for the *Los Angeles Times*, columnist Ed Ainsworth observed, “When ‘The Living Desert’ is shown beginning December 16 at the Fine Arts Theater it will mark the new high point in Disney’s career as the man who has found in nature a limitless treasure house for the recapturing of what is called the Garden of Eden—a world and its creatures more wonderful than the imagination of the fairy-tale writers.”⁴³ Alternatively, some critics took issue with the way the Studios transgressed its claims that the

³⁹*Seal Island*, Walt Disney Productions, 1948.

⁴⁰Michael Barrier, *The Animated Man: A Life of Walt Disney* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 208. Future films in the series would make ten and even fifteen times their production costs. See King, “The Audience in the Wilderness,” 63.

⁴¹“Interview of James Algar Conducted by Richard Hubler, May 7, 1968,” in *Walt’s People*, vol. 5, 98.

⁴²Watts, *The Magic Kingdom*, 304.

⁴³Ed Ainsworth, “Disney Creating New Era of Realism,” *Los Angeles Times*, Nov. 29, 1953, D1.

Table 1. True-Life Adventures Films

Film Title	Year	Brief description
<i>Seal Island</i>	1948	Examines the annual fur seal migration to the Pribilof Islands.*
<i>Beaver Valley, aka In Beaver Valley</i>	1950	Examines a beaver colony and life in the surrounding habitat.*
<i>Nature's Half Acre</i>	1951	Examines the abundance of life in a half-acre plot of land, including plants, animals, and insects.*
<i>The Olympic Elk</i>	1952	Examines elk herd migrations across Washington State's Olympic Peninsula.
<i>Water Birds</i>	1952	Examines a variety of bird species living near bodies of water throughout North America.*
<i>The Living Desert</i>	1953	Examines plants and creatures living in the inhospitable desert climate of the American West.*
<i>Bear Country</i>	1953	Examines the life cycle of the American black bear.*
<i>Prowlers of the Everglades</i>	1953	Examines the life cycle of the American alligator.
<i>The Vanishing Prairie</i>	1954	Examines plants and creatures living on the American prairie.*
<i>The African Lion</i>	1955	Examines the behaviors of a lion pride in southern Africa.
<i>Secrets of Life</i>	1956	Examines reproduction and survival of a variety of species, including plants, insects, and animals.
<i>White Wilderness</i>	1958	Examines plants and creatures living in the Arctic, including the annual caribou migration in Alaska's Brooks Range.*
<i>Jungle Cat</i>	1960	Examines the life cycle of the jaguar in South America.

* Notes an Academy Award®-winning film.

films' depictions of the natural world were "completely authentic, unstaged and unrehearsed." Renowned *New York Times* film critic Bosley Crowther criticized Disney for repeatedly using narration in the *True-Life* films to anthropomorphize non-human animals. He similarly took issue with the use of editing techniques for comedic effect. In his review of *The Living Desert*, for instance, Crowther disparaged the way two scorpions, pincers locked on one another, are depicted in forward motion and then reverse, with the narrator likening the movement to a square dance and then calling the dance to music provided by Disney composer Paul Smith. "The Disney boys are as playful with nature pictures as they are with cartoons," Crowther observed. "The footage is cut, reversed and timed to a jolly square dance score—all very humorous and beguiling. But it isn't true to life."⁴⁴

Crowther and a handful of other critics aside, most reviews of the *True-Life Adventures* failed to address the films' shortcomings as authentic depictions of the natural world. Rarely, for instance, did naturalist photographers shoot footage in the wild and simultaneously record audio. Many sounds heard in the films, then,

⁴⁴Bosley Crowther, "The Screen: Two Pictures Have Premiers," *New York Times*, Nov. 10, 1953, 38.

including those made by animals, were created by studio effects artists, sometimes without any knowledge of what sounds the animals actually made. As one artist recalled of developing sounds for the films, “It was always an improvisation.”⁴⁵ Moreover, as production on the series accelerated, sequences were increasingly staged for dramatic effect. Naturalist photographers were quite familiar with this technique; filming in controlled environments was both a common practice and one they considered acceptable as long as the staged behavior also occurred naturally in the wild.⁴⁶ In the *True-Life* films, some of this staging was obvious, such as scenes in *The Vanishing Prairie* and *The Living Desert* depicting prairie dogs and kangaroo rats running through underground tunnels. For both films, photographers constructed sets with a series of cutaway tunnels made of dirt and glue and then added animals to the set to capture the desired shots.⁴⁷ Disney made no effort to disguise these methods, describing in *The Atlantic* the use of the cutaways, often with glass walls, for filming.⁴⁸ In other cases, however, such as in *Beaver Valley*, when a beaver and a coyote are filmed in the same frame, and in *The Living Desert*, when a tarantula battles a *Pepsis* wasp, it was unlikely that moviegoers would have known that photographers staged the scenes.⁴⁹ Perhaps the most egregious example of staging—one that clearly violated naturalists’ standard of authenticity—occurred in *White Wilderness* when, during a mass migration, several dozen lemmings are shown hurling themselves off a cliff into what viewers are told is the Arctic Ocean. In truth, James Simons, former director of the Jackson Hole Wildlife Park and lead Disney animal photographer responsible for filming the sequence, arranged for it to be shot near Calgary (nowhere near the Arctic Ocean) and captured the behavior by herding the lemmings off the cliff.⁵⁰

The 1982 exposé that uncovered the now-infamous lemming sequence cast a shadow over the entirety of the *True-Life Adventures* series. In hindsight, the controversy was just the latest in a long-standing debate over the credibility of nature documentary film.⁵¹ Wildlife filmmakers have always used cinematic techniques to craft the stories they wish to tell, editing footage in ways that speed up action, arranging sequences to advance a story line, and using sound to dramatize events. They do this mostly because nature films seek to delight as well as inform, captivate as well as document. As scholar and filmmaker Eddy von Mueller observes regarding the *True-Life Adventures*, “Like many documentaries, Disney’s nature films position

⁴⁵“Filmmakers’ Journal: Interview with Jimmy Macdonald,” *Lands of Exploration* (Burbank, CA: Buena Vista Home Entertainment, 2006), DVD.

⁴⁶Horak, “Wildlife Documentaries,” 461–62.

⁴⁷Jack Alexander, “The Amazing Story of Walt Disney,” *Saturday Evening Post*, Nov. 7, 1953, 99; Christian Moran, *True-Life Adventures: A History of Walt Disney’s Nature Documentaries* (Theme Park Press, 2017), 41. Also see, “Interview of Paul N. Kenworthy Conducted by Les Perkins in 2006,” in *Walt’s People*, vol. 13, 365–66.

⁴⁸Walt Disney, “The Lurking Camera,” *Atlantic Monthly*, Aug. 1954, 24–25.

⁴⁹For an explanation of the staging of this iconic scene, see “Interview of Paul N. Kenworthy Conducted by Les Perkins in 2006,” in *Walt’s People*, vol. 13, 356–57.

⁵⁰The lemming incident is described and critiqued in numerous sources, the most considered of which is von Mueller, “Nature Is the Dramatist,” 154–56.

⁵¹On these debates, see Bousé, *Wildlife Films*. On non-fiction documentary film more broadly, see Erik Barnouw, *Documentary: A History of the Non-Fiction Film* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1964).

themselves in a kind of hazy no-man's-land between education or information and entertainment, banking—literally, in the case of the commercial exploitation of such content, on television or in classrooms—on the notion that these two terms are not, as is sometimes suggested, antithetical.⁵² Indeed, Walt Disney insisted that the *True-Life Adventures* be, first and foremost, entertaining. His nephew, Roy E. Disney, who got his start at the Studios by working on the films, recalled his uncle going so far as to say, “You’re not making nature films. Don’t make nature films. Make entertainment!” “Because,” as Roy explained, “if you couldn’t be entertaining, you didn’t have an audience.”⁵³ Yet even Walt Disney was eventually compelled to acknowledge the *True-Life Adventures*’ educational benefits. “Our intent is not formal education in natural sciences,” he asserted. “Our main purpose is always to bring interesting and delightful entertainment into the theater. But here nature’s wonderful house is entertainment—and this entertainment is informative.”⁵⁴ In the end, the Studios mollified most critics of the *True-Life* series by revising the films’ introductory narration to state, “In the making of these films, nature is the dramatist. There are no fictitious situations or characters.”⁵⁵

“It’s Educational as Few Pictures Ever Have Been”⁵⁶

Beginning with *Seal Island*, reviewers praised the *True-Life Adventures*’ educational qualities along with their cinematic ones.⁵⁷ Writing of *Nature’s Half Acre* in the *Baltimore Sun*, Donald Kirkley emphasized the unintentional benefit children would reap from viewing the featurette, which Disney paired with the Studios’ new animated feature *Alice in Wonderland*. “Nature’s Half Acre’ is one of the most fascinating pictures ever made,” he declared. “It provides painless education for the children who will come to see the Lewis Carroll classic—and there will be millions of them.” “Mr. Disney,” Kirkley concluded, “has produced herein a memorable picture, not only for its enduring beauty and high skill in a difficult field, but also for its permanent worth in the schools.”⁵⁸ Similarly, Jimmy Fidler praised the film in the *Davenport Democrat and Leader*: “Educational? Certainly, it’s educational as few pictures ever have been. It’s the full equivalent of a year’s study in zoology, biology, botany, and philosophy. But . . . this is a picture that’s rich in drama, loaded with comedy, saturated with visual beauty; in short, it’s as completely absorbing as any movie you’ve ever seen.”⁵⁹

Not just critics but the general public judged the *True-Life* films highly educational. “In my opinion, ‘Nature’s Half Acre’ is the best short I have ever seen,” wrote James Frost, associate consultant of audio-visual education for the

⁵²Von Mueller, “Nature Is the Dramatist,” 147.

⁵³“Filmmakers’ Journal: Interview with Roy E. Disney,” *Lands of Exploration* (Burbank, CA: Buena Vista Home Entertainment, 2006), DVD. For Roy E. Disney’s reflections on making the series, see “Interview of Roy E. Disney Conducted by Les Perkins, February 16 and June 13, 2006,” in *Walt’s People*, vol. 13, 315–37.

⁵⁴Walt Disney, “Why I Like Making Nature Films,” *Woman’s Home Companion*, May 1954, 38.

⁵⁵*Water Birds*, Walt Disney Productions, 1952.

⁵⁶Quoted in Nicholas Sammond, *Babes in Tomorrowland: Walt Disney and the Making of the American Child* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), 310.

⁵⁷“Festival Selects Disney Film,” *New York Times*, July 4, 1950, 10.

⁵⁸Donald Kirkley, “Theater Notes,” *Baltimore Sun*, Aug. 12, 1951, A9.

⁵⁹Quoted in Sammond, *Babes in Tomorrowland*, 310.

Connecticut State Department of Education, to the Studios. “I wish that it might be possible to make it available as an educational instrument in the public schools as well as in commercial theaters. . . . This kind of film would be a superior teaching instrument for public schools.”⁶⁰ Katherine W. Irvin of Detroit, Michigan, similarly wrote, “Your Picture ‘Nature’s Half Acre’ is the most beautiful movie I have ever seen, and I am simply writing to say thank you for it. It should be seen by everyone, especially the children in schools.”⁶¹

Prior to World War II, the absence of cost-effective methods for distributing movies outside of theaters posed a serious challenge to the development of an educational film market. By the early 1950s, however, the problem began to be solved through the growing popularity of 16 mm film and projectors. Introduced in 1923 by Eastman Kodak as an affordable alternative to more costly products, 16 mm film was not used widely until World War II, when industry and the military chose it as the primary format for informational and instructional films.⁶² When amateur photographers adopted it after the war, the format expanded dramatically, with the estimated number of 16 mm sound projectors in the United States jumping from 6,500 in 1936 to 100,000 in 1948.⁶³ Benefiting from postwar economic prosperity, thousands of schools, especially those in well-resourced public school districts serving primarily middle- and upper-class students, began investing in the technology.⁶⁴ Educators then used their professional associations and publications to spread word about available films.⁶⁵ The Walt Disney Studios eventually tapped into this network, advertising 16 mm *True-Life* films for the “non-theatrical field” along

⁶⁰Letter from James Frost, Associate Consultant, Audio-Visual Education, Connecticut State Department of Education, to Carl Nater, Director, Educational Film Division, Oct. 5, 1951, Folder: TRUE LIFE ADVENTURES, School Exploitation 1st File, Box: Prod-Files, Cabinet 0207566, Drawer 1, WDA.

⁶¹Letter from Katherine W. Irvin of Detroit, Michigan, to Walt Disney, Aug. 30, 1951, Folder: TRUE LIFE ADVENTURES—Fan Mail, Box: Prod. Files, Cabinet 0207566, Drawer 1, WDA.

⁶²Given its role in producing World War II instructional films, The Walt Disney Studios had extensive experience with 16 mm film prior to making the *True-Life Adventures*. Disney directed naturalist photographers to use the film because it was less expensive than 35 mm and because 16 mm equipment was relatively lightweight, durable, and portable. The Studios edited the footage and then enlarged it to 35 mm for theatrical release. On the complications arising from this process, see “Interview of Roy E. Disney Conducted by Les Perkins, February 16 and June 13, 2006,” in *Walt’s People*, vol. 13, 332–33. Also see “Interview of Stormy Palmer Conducted by Les Perkins, 2006,” in *Walt’s People*, vol. 13, 347–48.

⁶³Mitman, *Reel Nature*, 55.

⁶⁴On the history of educational technology, see Victoria Cain, *Schools and Screens: A Watchful History* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2021); Kelly Ritter, *Reframing the Subject: Postwar Instructional Film and Class-Conscious Literacies* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2015); Bill Ferster, *Teaching Machines: Learning from the Intersection of Education and Technology* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014); Michael Russell, *Technology and Assessment: The Tale of Two Interpretations* (Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing, 2006), chap. 9; Bob Johnstone, *Never Mind the Laptops: Kids, Computers, and the Transformation of Learning* (New York: iUniverse, 2003); Stephen Petrina, “Getting a Purchase on ‘The School of Tomorrow’ and Its Constituent Commodities: Histories and Historiographies of Technologies,” *History of Education Quarterly* 42, no. 1 (Spring 2002), especially pages 100–102, footnotes 61–65; Paul Saettler, *The Evolution of American Educational Technology* (Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing, 1990); Larry Cuban, *Teachers and Machines: The Classroom Use of Technology since 1920* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1986).

⁶⁵See, for instance, “Audio-Visual News,” *American Biology Teacher* 16, no. 3 (March 1954), 73.

with teacher's guides and suggested activities for classroom use.⁶⁶ Meanwhile, commentators touted Disney films as a primary reason for private citizens to take the financial plunge into purchasing 16 mm equipment for their homes. "If past efforts to locate worthwhile films have left you too discouraged to use or purchase a 16mm sound projector for home entertainment—and rightly so—here are 24 reasons for reconsidering the situation," wrote columnist Cecile Starr in *House Beautiful* magazine.⁶⁷ The twenty-four reasons offered included eighteen Disney cartoons, three Disney special releases, and three *True-Life Adventures*. Referring to *Seal Island* and *Beaver Valley*, Starr concluded, "The way I see it, these are the two most important reasons why no home should be without a 16mm sound projector."⁶⁸ Starr then described the upcoming release of four more *True-Life* films.

From Thomas Edison's promotion of the phonograph and motion picture to Steve Jobs's marketing of the Apple computer, entrepreneurs have typically overstated technology's capacity to revolutionize schooling. In contrast, Walt Disney urged the rapid expansion of 16 mm film projectors into public schools while consistently resisting claims—made by others—that his films would replace traditional methods of instruction. In an April 1945 interview for *Look* magazine entitled "Walt Disney—Teacher of Tomorrow," for instance, Disney described animated film as "the most versatile and stimulating" tool that teachers had at their disposal. Yet, he also observed, "the job of the animated film is not to take the place of the teacher but to help the teacher." Months later, Disney reiterated this claim in the *Public Opinion Quarterly*, writing, "Educational pictures merely offer a new tool for the educator's kit."⁶⁹

Disney felt the same way about his Studios' live-action nature documentary films and increasingly sought to enter the education market with new *True-Life* theatrical releases. Staff sent press books to exhibitors encouraging them to contact "editors of school pages" and "officers of the Parent Teacher Associations."⁷⁰ "Be sure that local school bulletin boards and the student publications carry publicity notices and ads on your showing of *Water Birds*," instructed the Studios, "and suggest the high school principal announce the show to the student body. Offer special rates to Natural History classes."⁷¹ In addition to convincing students to see the films, the marketing plan strove to have schools use the films as the basis for "camera contests, essay contests, nature exhibits . . . science club discussions and lectures, editorials in schools newspapers and scholastic magazines."⁷² It also advertised directly to teachers by

⁶⁶Ronald B. Tobias, *Film and the American Moral Vision of Nature: Theodore Roosevelt to Walt Disney* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2011), 190–91. For teachers' guides, see the folders for the *True-Life* films marketed to schools: *Bear Country*; *Prowlers of the Everglades*; *The Living Desert Series*; *African Lion and Jungle Cat* (series); *The Secrets of Life Series*; *White Wilderness*; *Jungle Cat of the Amazon*; *Beaver Valley*, in Educational Materials Collection, WDA.

⁶⁷Cecile Starr, "Now You Can Have Professional Movies for Home Showing," *House Beautiful*, Feb. 1955, 147.

⁶⁸Starr, "Now You Can Have Professional Movies," 147–48.

⁶⁹"Walt Disney—Teacher of Tomorrow," *Look*, April 17, 1945, 26; Walt Disney, "Mickey as Professor," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 9, no. 2 (Summer 1945), 122–23.

⁷⁰Sammond, *Babes in Tomorrowland*, 312.

⁷¹*Babes in Tomorrowland*, 314.

⁷²*Babes in Tomorrowland*, 314.

using mass-market mailings to announce a film's release, informing them where films could be seen and providing curriculum guides.

The Studios then invited school officials to advance private viewings, such as the one held for *The Living Desert*. "Once each year, for the past three years, we have been having an educational group preview and evaluate various films from your TRUE LIFE SERIES," wrote Gardner L. Hart, director of the Audio-Visual Department for Oakland, California, public schools, to the Studios, in 1953. "One of our vice-principals said it was the finest educational picture he had ever seen."⁷³ Vick Knight Jr., educator and director of The Ramblers (an out-of-school youth organization), similarly expressed his gratitude. "Yesterday," he wrote, "I was one of the teachers of Los Angeles County privileged to attend a special screening of your new *True-Life Adventure*[s] film, *The Living Desert*. I was thrilled beyond words with what I saw. . . I'm wasting no time in letting my boys and girls and fellow teachers know about this picture. This is just to let you know how much your work is being appreciated by members of the teaching profession."⁷⁴

The Studios also previewed *True-Life* films at annual meetings of professional educators, such as the National Science Teachers Association and the National Education Association (NEA).⁷⁵ Wrote Gertrude B. Woodward, vice principal of Fremont High School in California, "A year ago at the National Education Association convention in San Francisco I saw your picture, *Nature's Half Acre*. It was enchanting. . . . At that time the hope was expressed that this picture might be available some day for showing in public schools. We all hoped that day would come soon. Today I saw *Water Birds*. It was so beautiful and so entertaining that I again yearned for something like this for a school assembly. It has great educational value in addition to its entertainment value. . . . Is there any thought of releasing any of these films for school use?"⁷⁶

Educators, school officials, and students eventually flooded the Studios with letters of appreciation and support. "These films are outstanding and needed so much in these days when we need to get back to the wholesome and natural in life," wrote Harold C. Crittenden, school principal in Armonk, New York. "We certainly appreciate them."⁷⁷ Elizabeth Golterman, director of Division of Audio-Visual Education for the City of St. Louis, wrote, "*Beaver Valley* and *Nature's Half Acre* are some of the finest teaching and inspirational films that have come to our attention. There will be need for them in schools for many years after theater runs have been

⁷³Letter from Gardner L. Hart, Director, Audio-Visual Department, Oakland Public Schools, to Walt Disney, Dec. 16, 1953, Folder: The Living Desert, Box: A1563, WDA.

⁷⁴Letter from Vick Knight Jr., Field Director, The Ramblers to Walt Disney, Nov. 7, 1953, Folder: The Living Desert, Box: A1563, WDA.

⁷⁵Letter from Carl Nater, Director, Educational Film Division, Walt Disney Productions, to "Dear Science Teacher" [Form letter], Sept. 3, 1951, Folder: TRUE LIFE—BROCHURES—School Exploit. 2nd File, Box: Prod-Files, Cabinet 0207566, Drawer 1, WDA.

⁷⁶Letter from Gertrude B. Woodward, Vice Principal, Fremont High School (Oakland, CA), to Walt Disney, Oct. 6, 1952, Folder: TRUE LIFE—BROCHURES—School Exploit. 2nd File, Box: Prod-Files, Cabinet 0207566, Drawer 1, WDA.

⁷⁷Letter from Harold C. Crittenden, Principal, Armonk Schools, Union Free School District No. 5 (Armonk, NY) to The Walt Disney Studios, Oct. 6, 1952, Folder: TRUE LIFE—BROCHURES—School Exploit. 2nd File, Box: Prod-Files, Cabinet 0207566, Drawer 1, WDA.

completed.”⁷⁸ Ralph D. Amen, a teacher in Cheyenne, Wyoming, claimed, “I had the opportunity of seeing this film [*Nature’s Half Acre*] this past week and found it to be one of the most worthwhile activities of my teaching experience. It was not only enjoyable but of the highest educational value too. . . . I look forward to the day when all students of Science will have an opportunity of viewing such films as this.”⁷⁹ Wrote Valle Wattanzio of Windsor, Connecticut, “I just would like to write you a few lines to tell you how much I enjoyed your movie *Nature’s Half Acre*. I have been teaching for 4 years and I think I learned more about nature in your movie than all my books. It was wonderful.”⁸⁰ Marian E. Heaps, biology teacher at Regional High School in Penns Grove, New Jersey, both expressed her appreciation for the films and inquired into arranging a viewing. “Some time ago, in Philadelphia, I saw your movie *Beaver Valley*,” she wrote. “It was one of the finest nature movies I have ever seen—and I’ve seen many, as a biology teacher. Is this film available for high school use? If so, how does one obtain it and what would be the cost of showing it to a student body of approximately 700?”⁸¹

Students, too, wrote Disney expressing their enthusiasm for the films. Walcott Tice, a sophomore at West Seattle High School in Seattle, Washington, explained, “I have been assigned to write an essay as a requirement, and also an entry in a contest. The essays are to be written about movies we have seen that have contributed something of value to the world. Your picture, *The Vanishing Prairie*, is my choice in this assignment.”⁸² Wrote Susan Diamond of Deerfield, Illinois, “I want to tell you how much I enjoyed *Nature’s Half Acre*. I do love nature and this movie sure told me facts I didn’t know. . . . At school we are studying about nature. . . . Our main study is birds. So you can see how much your movie helped me. Getting back to your movie, I think there should be more like it.”⁸³ Joyce Moeller, also of Deerfield, wrote, “I saw *Nature’s Half Acre* and I never saw as good a nature show before. I wish you Mr. Disney would make more like that one.”⁸⁴ Jimmy Hyatt, a third-grade student at Lamar School in McAllen, Texas, wrote, “I went to see *Beaver Valley* and I liked it very much. I liked the beavers the best. This is the best one you have made. I don’t think you could have made a better show. I saw it

⁷⁸Letter from Elizabeth Golterman, Director, Division of Audio-Visual Education, City of St. Louis Board of Education, to Carl Nater, Director, Educational Film Division, Walt Disney Productions, Sept. 11, 1951, Folder: TRUE LIFE—BROCHURES—School Exploit. 2nd File, Box: Prod-Files, Cabinet 0207566, Drawer 1, WDA.

⁷⁹Letter from Ralph D. Amen, teacher in Cheyenne, Wyoming, to Carl Nater, Director, Educational Film Division, Walt Disney Productions, Sept. 20, 1951, Folder: TRUE LIFE—BROCHURES—School Exploit. 2nd File, Box: Prod-Files, Cabinet 0207566, Drawer 1, WDA.

⁸⁰Letter from Valle Wattanzio of Windsor, Connecticut, to Walt Disney, Feb. 23, 1952, Folder: NATURE’S HALF ACRE—Fan Mail, Box: 3129/77-4, WDA.

⁸¹Letter from Marian E. Heaps, Biology Teacher, Regional High School, Penns Grove, New Jersey, to Walt Disney Studios, March 30, 1952, Folder: TRUE LIFE ADVENTURES—Fan Mail, Box: Prod. Files, Cabinet 0207566, Drawer 1, WDA.

⁸²Letter from Walcott Tice of Seattle, Washington, to Walt Disney, March 19, 1955, Folder: THE VANISHING PRAIRIE—Fan Mail, Box: 3276/80-1, WDA.

⁸³Letter from Susan Diamond of Deerfield, Illinois, to Walt Disney, March 11, 1952, Folder: NATURE’S HALF ACRE—Fan Mail, Box: 3129/77-4, WDA.

⁸⁴Letter from Joyce Moeller of Deerfield, Illinois, to Walt Disney, Oct. 2, 1951, Folder: NATURE’S HALF ACRE—Fan Mail, Box: 3129/77-4, WDA.

three times when it was here. . . . Make some more shows like that one.”⁸⁵ As with most of the student letters the Studios received, the one Bruce Hertford of Riverside, California, sent was greatly appreciative. Hertford, however, also saw in *The Vanishing Prairie* an opportunity. “I just saw your wonderful picture,” he wrote. “At school we’re studying about buffalos. When I saw the baby buffalo born I quick said to myself I think if I got a picture of it for school I think I’d get an A!! So if you’d be so kind to send what I suggested I would be very happy. Thank you.”⁸⁶ A staffer responded that although the Studios did not have a still photograph of the actual birth, he would happily provide a picture of the calf soon after it began standing on its own.

College and university faculty, especially teacher educators, were as effusive as students in their responses to the films. N. E. Bingham, Professor of Education at the University of Florida, wrote, “I. . . hope that in the not too distant future all of this True Life Adventure series will be available to schools on sixteen millimeter film. Many of the teachers who have been in my classes on the teaching of science in the elementary school have also reacted favorably to these films. In some cases they have called them to the attention of their children; in other cases they have gone to the theater in a group to see these films.”⁸⁷ Mary Haga, science instructor at Macalester College in Saint Paul, Minnesota, similarly observed, “My classes include about 100 cadet [pre-service] teachers every year. During summer sessions there are about 10–20 experienced teachers. Last summer (June-Aug. 1951) we made *Nature’s Half Acre* a classroom project.”⁸⁸ Wrote B. J. Watson of Teachers College of Connecticut, “This is from a fussy patron who seldom goes to movies and has never before been impelled to write a fan letter. The picture which has brought about this unprecedented occurrence is your *Beaver Valley* which requires that I use all the adjectives from which a conservative scientist usually refrains—it is superlative, colossal, breathtaking and unforgettable!”⁸⁹

Ultimately, hundreds of students and educators from throughout the United States wrote the Studios celebrating the *True-Life Adventures*.⁹⁰ In response to the films’ success, the professional educator organization Phi Delta Kappa International presented Walt Disney with its Education Award in 1954.⁹¹ That same year, the Associated Exhibitors of the NEA presented him with the American Education

⁸⁵Letter from Jimmy Hyatt, third grade student at Lamar School in McAllen, Texas, to Mr. Disney, Oct. 30, 1950, Folder: BEAVER VALLEY Fan, Box: 2977/74–2, WDA.

⁸⁶Letter from Bruce Hertford of Riverside, California, to Walt Disney, Nov. 10, 1954, Folder: THE VANISHING PRAIRIE—Fan Mail, Box: 3276/80–1, WDA.

⁸⁷Letter from N. E. Bingham, Professor of Education, University of Florida, to Walt Disney Productions, Oct. 2, 1951, Folder: TRUE LIFE ADVENTURES, School Exploitation 1st File, Box: Prod-Files, Cabinet 0207566, Drawer 1, WDA.

⁸⁸Letter from Mary Haga, Science Instructor, Macalester College, to Carl Nater, Director, Educational Film Division, Oct. 24, 1951, Folder: TRUE LIFE ADVENTURES, School Exploitation 1st File, Box: Prod-Files, Cabinet 0207566, Drawer 1, WDA.

⁸⁹Letter from B. J. Watson, Professor of Biology, Teachers College of Connecticut, to Walt Disney Nov. 2, 1950, Folder: BEAVER VALLEY Fan, Box: 2977/74–2, WDA.

⁹⁰See Folder: TRUE LIFE ADVENTURES, School Exploitation 1st File, Box: Prod. Files, Cabinet 0207566, Drawer 1, WDA.

⁹¹Walt Disney, “Humor: An International Sixth Sense,” *Phi Delta Kappan* 35, no. 8 (1954), 327.

Award.⁹² By the mid-1950s, educational organizations, teacher professional associations, and a host of educational institutions acknowledged Disney as America's foremost educator. Writing in the *California Teachers Association Journal* after an interview with Disney in 1955, one educator concluded, "Some of our most prominent American schoolmen have recognized him as a powerful force in the spreading of knowledge and have named his films as valuable aids to classroom instruction. . . . In whatever light this distinguished American of many talents and incalculable influence may be viewed, his record and his plans establish him as a remarkable public educator."⁹³

With the *True-Life Adventures* films increasingly sought after by teachers and administrators—and students expressing their enthusiasm for them—Disney extended the series' reach by publishing a collection of reading books "adopted for school use."⁹⁴ Under the company's "Tell-a-Tale" series, Whitman Publishing released illustrated *True-Life* picture books for young children. Jane Werner Watson, best known as an early editor of the Little Golden Books series and whom in 1958 the *Los Angeles Times* named Woman of the Year in Literature, authored many of the Simon & Schuster books written for youth.⁹⁵ Noted botanist and nature photographer Rutherford H. Platt wrote the text for some of the more advanced readers. The Studios also began producing spin-off books using visual material from the movies, such as the 176-page *Walt Disney's Worlds of Nature* and 56-page *Walt Disney's Wildlife of the West* (published as part of Simon & Schuster's "Golden Library of Knowledge" series).⁹⁶ As part of its marketing effort, the Studios sent review copies of the books to a wide range of popular publications and specialized journals. The Science Service, for instance, a leading provider of science information to schools and libraries, announced the books' release in the Books of the Week section of its *Science News-Letter*, and journals such as the *Quarterly Review of Biology* and *Elementary English* favorably reviewed.⁹⁷

Extending the *True-Life Adventures* even further, the Studios produced a series of stylized comic books. Dell Comics had published the *Walt Disney's Comics and Stories* anthology comic book series beginning in October 1940, proving themselves an obvious future collaborator for the new *True-Life* comics. Dell created a new category especially for the series—Dell Nature Classics—and used the *True-Life* films as models for each issue, depicting animal behavior and emphasizing conflicts between

⁹²Disney, "Educational Values in Factual Nature Pictures," 82.

⁹³"Walt Disney, Showman and Educator, Remembers Daisy," *California Teachers Association Journal* 51, no. 9 (1955), 5–6.

⁹⁴See, for instance, Jane Werner Watson, *Walt Disney Seal Island: A True-Life Adventure* (Syracuse, NY: L.W. Singer Company, 1958).

⁹⁵See the entry for "Watson, Jane Werner," in Anne Comire, ed. *Something about the Author*, vol. 54 (Detroit: Gale Research, 1989), 164–74; Jane Werner Watson, *Walt Disney's Vanishing Prairie* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1955).

⁹⁶Rutherford Hayes Platt, *Walt Disney's Worlds of Nature: A Treasure of True-Life Adventures* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1957); Robert Louvain, *Walt Disney's Wildlife of the West: Animals of the Plains, Mountains and Desert* (New York: Golden Press, 1958).

⁹⁷See, for instance, "Books of the Week," *Science News-Letter*, Dec. 25, 1954, 410; C. P. Swanson, "Walt Disney's Vanishing Prairie: A True-Life Adventure," *Quarterly Review of Biology* 30, no. 4 (Dec. 1955), 382; Bernice J. Wolfson, "The Educational Scene," *Elementary English* 40, no. 8 (Dec. 1963), 864.

predators and prey. Although printed in comic book form, the issues depicted wildlife in realistic detail. As with the films on which they were based, they emphasized the “mystery” and “wonder” of the natural world, while often anthropomorphizing their animal subjects.

The *True-Life Adventures* also served as the source for a daily newspaper comic. Written by Dick Huemer and illustrated by George Wheeler (both Disney studio artists), the daily illustrations resembled the Dell comic books in adopting a realistic style.⁹⁸ Each issue appeared in a single-panel rather than strip format, under the title “Walt Disney’s True Life Adventures,” with a subtitle that provided the subject matter for that day’s illustration. Although Huemer’s source material included natural history magazines such as *National Geographic*, he claimed that the “trick” to producing a good *True Life* comic was having the reader “identify with something in his life.”⁹⁹ “Even though animals can’t possibly think about things the way we do,” he explained, “when a dog seems to be talking to you there’s a tendency to believe.” In keeping with the style of the *True-Life* films, he acknowledged, “That sort of anthropomorphism we’re allowed to do.”¹⁰⁰ Syndicated by King Features, the comic appeared in newspapers throughout the United States, six days a week, for almost twenty years.

Television provided Disney with yet another opportunity to extend the reach of the *True-Life Adventures*. In October 1954, the first Disney TV series, *Disneyland*, premiered on the American Broadcasting Company (ABC) network.¹⁰¹ During its initial episodes, Walt Disney used the hour-long show to advertise upcoming Disney productions as well as the theme park he was constructing in Anaheim, California (scheduled to open several months later).¹⁰² He also incorporated the *True-Life Adventures* into the program in a variety of ways, including showing featurettes in their entirety and premiering shorter, edited versions of the features along with “Behind the True-Life Cameras” segments depicting how naturalist photographers captured the films’ footage in the field. The show’s third episode, for instance, aired *The Vanishing Prairie* and *Seal Island*, while its tenth included *Beaver Valley* and a segment entitled “Cameras in Africa,” providing a behind-the-scenes look at the filming of *The African Lion*. With the latter movie scheduled to premiere nine months later, the segment was informative while also serving as an advertisement. As with its publication of spin-off texts, the Studios also repurposed *True-Life* footage and, combined with that previously left on the cutting room floor, made shorter spin-off films such as the hour-long *Survival in Nature*, which aired in February 1956. The Studios made this film, along with others of a similar origin such as the eleven-minute *African Birdlife*, available to schools to rent (and, later, to purchase) along with film strips that also drew on the *True-Life* footage.

⁹⁸Allan Holtz, *American Newspaper Comics: An Encyclopedia Reference Guide* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2012), 396.

⁹⁹“Interview of Richard Huemer Conducted by Joe Adamson, 1968 & 1969,” in *Walt’s People*, vol. 4, 86–87.

¹⁰⁰“Interview of Richard Huemer,” 87.

¹⁰¹On the *Disneyland* series, see Christopher Anderson, *Hollywood TV: The Studio System in the Fifties* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1994), 133–55.

¹⁰²Douglas Gomery, “Disney’s Business History: A Reinterpretation,” in *Disney Discourse: Producing the Magic Kingdom*, ed. Eric Smoodin (New York: Routledge, 1994), 75–77.

Finally, the Studios treated the *True-Life Adventures* films as it did many of Disney's animated features, re-releasing them into theaters every few years until, on October 8, 1975, the Studios premiered the final *True-Life*-centric film. Using clips from all thirteen *True-Life Adventures*, the Studios created a feature-length movie entitled *The Best of Walt Disney's True-Life Adventures*. Directed by James Algar, the film premiered almost three decades after audiences first saw *Seal Island* and nine years following Walt Disney's death at the age of sixty-five.

"They Can Sympathize with It and Understand Its Problems Better"¹⁰³

Throughout the dozens of movies, books, film strips, comics, and TV programs comprising the *True-Life Adventures*, The Walt Disney Studios sustained a number of themes from which students learned about the natural world. In the first, Disney characterized the natural world itself as overseen by "Nature," an idea with which his audience would have been familiar. A variation on "Mother Nature," Nature is always referred to as "she" in the *True-Life Adventures*—and she occupies a place of reverence. Nature is responsible for bringing "new life with tropical rains" and for fashioning "odd patterns of life" in response to harsh environments.¹⁰⁴ "It is the way of Nature that some must perish that others may live," describes *Walt Disney's Vanishing Prairie*, a middle-level reading book. "Often it is the weak or sick or old that are killed—Nature's way, perhaps, of keeping both hunter and hunted strong."¹⁰⁵

It would be easy to interpret "Nature" in the *True-Life Adventures* as God's pen name—and many viewers did. Writing for the *New York Daily Mirror*, Justin Gilbert claimed that *The African Lion* "Teaches, Thrills, Fascinates," while also noting, "The picture has an overall religious quality, proving step by step that the Creator has a plan for all, no matter how mighty or humble."¹⁰⁶ The *St. Paul Pioneer Press* declared Disney had "unmasked nature" and uncovered "a sphere where God's master plan for the existence of the planet is dramatically enacted every second of the day." Disney's "genuine cinema art," the paper concluded, offered viewers access to "the wonders of creation and a deeper sense of awareness of the Creator who made them all and ordered their lives."¹⁰⁷ In 1955, the *Christian Herald* included two *True-Life* films in its list of "Pictures of the Year" for the way that the movies adhered to "Christian concepts of morality and dramatic inspiration."¹⁰⁸

Across all the *True-Life* media, "God" made only one appearance, in the introduction to a booklet written as part of the Studios' marketing efforts. The sixteen-page booklet, entitled *The Story of the True-Life Adventures*, explains the development

¹⁰³The Walt Disney Studios, *The Story of Walt Disney's True-Life Adventure Series*, 8.

¹⁰⁴James Algar, director, *The African Lion*, Walt Disney Productions, 1955; Algar, director, *The Living Desert*, Walt Disney Productions, 1953.

¹⁰⁵Watson, *Walt Disney's Vanishing Prairie*, 49.

¹⁰⁶Justin Gilbert, "Disney's 'The African Lion' Teaches, Thrills, Fascinates," *Daily Mirror*, Sept. 15, 1955, 34.

¹⁰⁷Quoted in Tobias, *Film and the American Moral Vision of Nature*, 185.

¹⁰⁸Quoted in Douglas Brode, *From Walt to Woodstock: How Disney Created the Counterculture* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2004), 132.

of the nature documentary series. The Studios distributed over forty thousand copies of the booklet to editors of newspapers, magazines, and trade publications; head librarians of major cities; church pastors; science and audio-visual teachers; and chief rangers of national parks.¹⁰⁹ “No less than with humans,” the booklet’s introduction reads, “we have discovered the drama, the emotions, the humor and the perpetual struggle for existence which goes on in the little known world of primal nature. In a personal way, we have been initiated into a sphere where God’s master plan for the existence of this planet is dramatically enacted every second of the day.”¹¹⁰ The booklet proceeds to make several additional theological references, such as describing “the feathered tribes” in *Water Birds* as having possibly “soared directly out of the Fifth Day of Genesis, so direct is their genealogy with age-old life on this planet.”¹¹¹ Similarly, a description of *Prowlers of the Everglades* claims, “Almost unchanged out of the primeval world, come these savage dwellers of the swamplands. Here, as the exploring cameramen who contribute to the TRUE-LIFE ADVENTURES have captured them on film, are astonishing creatures whose direct ancestry goes back into the morning of creation.”¹¹²

Compared with other *True-Life* media, the booklet is unusual in naming God and directly referencing Scripture. Likewise, the series’ few direct references to evolution are equally exceptional. As previously noted, *Seal Island* suggests an evolutionary process when it refers to fur seals and bears sharing a “common ancestor,” yet the term *evolution* is never used in the film’s narration. As with God, evolution makes no appearance in any of the *True-Life* films. It does, however, appear in publication, most extensively in a reading book authored by Rutherford Platt and studio staff. Platt, a 1918 graduate of Yale University, had a varied career that included working as an advertising executive, editor at Doubleday, Page and Company, nature writer and photographer, and botanist with Rear Admiral Donald B. MacMillan’s Arctic expeditions. Disney hired Platt as a science adviser to the *True-Life Adventures*, which led to his serving as primary author of the 124-page *Walt Disney’s Secrets of Life* middle-level reader.

The book begins by describing how fossils tell the “billion-year-old story of multitudinous forms of life that have flourished on the face of the earth for a time, then vanished.”¹¹³ Having established the significance of the fossil record, as well as the “daring and imagination” it took for people to believe the story it told, Platt investigates the “hidden secrets” of rocks, soil, seeds, and flowers before turning his attention to bees, ants, and “curious underwater creatures” (such as the archerfish and its “invisible pea shooter”). In a chapter entitled “Secrets of Seeds,” Platt describes the

¹⁰⁹Untitled photocopied letters in the Walt Disney Archives refer to *The Story of the True-Life Adventures*: Folder: TRUE LIFE—BROCHURES—School Exploitation, 2nd File, Box: Prod-Files, Cabinet 0207566, Drawer 1, WDA. Also see undated document entitled “Walt Disney Tells the Story of His True-Life Adventures,” Folder: TRUE LIFE—BROCHURE CORRESPONDENCE, Box: Prod. Files, Cabinet 0207566, Drawer 1, WDA.

¹¹⁰The Walt Disney Studios, *The Story of Walt Disney’s True-Life Adventure Series*, 1.

¹¹¹The Walt Disney Studios, *The Story of Walt Disney’s True-Life Adventure Series*, 4.

¹¹²The Walt Disney Studios, *The Story of Walt Disney’s True-Life Adventure Series*, 5.

¹¹³Rutherford Hayes Platt, *Walt Disney’s Secrets of Life: A True-Life Adventure* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1957), 15.

“marvelous mechanical inventions” that plants evolved over time to solve the problem of spreading seeds in crowded spaces. “In the early days of evolution,” he writes, “when fewer plants were fighting for a place in the sun, it was easier for seeds to find places to grow. Simple seeds traveling by air and water kept plants spreading over the land. Trouble arose when, after millions of years, many new plants evolved.”¹¹⁴ Platt then describes evolutionary changes that permitted seed dispersal even in crowded spaces.

The *True-Life Adventures* production teams consulted with dozens of scientists on their projects, including zoologists, marine biologists, and ornithologists.¹¹⁵ Accordingly, *True-Life* story lines frequently incorporated natural processes explained through scientific investigation.¹¹⁶ Still, evolution plays little role in Nature’s stories, no doubt largely because of the controversy it would have generated. As career animator (and creator of Jiminy Cricket) Ward Kimball later recalled of his time working for the Studios, making a film that would stir controversy was a “no-no.”¹¹⁷ Instead, *True-Life* media was typically informed by the concept of “the balance of nature,” while also featuring teleological explanations for natural phenomena.¹¹⁸ Woven throughout films, the resulting *True-Life* doctrine is not so much a consistent set of tenets as it is a mélange of claims generally acceptable to both scientists and the faithful during the 1950s.¹¹⁹

The second theme infused through the *True-Life* films was that of animal protection and natural resource conservation. Depicting the beauty of the landscape and the wonders of the natural world in ways many Americans had never experienced, the *True-Life Adventures* stunned audiences, with critics describing the films as “triumphantly beautiful.”¹²⁰ Naturalists, scientists, and members of conservation organizations praised the films—and Disney himself—for cultivating an appreciation of nature, which they argued would result in viewers having greater respect for wilderness. As Dr. Robert C. Murphy, ornithologist and chairman of the American Museum of Natural History’s Department of Birds, observed in his review of *Water Birds*, “A foremost aim in our branch of education is to instill a love of nature that will redound to its appreciation and protection. There is no better way to accomplish this than by taking advantage of aesthetic opportunities. This Walt Disney has done supremely well in this film. . . . Countless men, women, and children are likely to receive from *Water Birds* the first, or the greatest, internal stirring that ever has

¹¹⁴Platt, *Walt Disney’s Secrets of Life*, 37–38.

¹¹⁵“Interview of James Algar Conducted by Richard Hubler, May 7, 1968,” in *Walt’s People*, vol. 5, 103.

¹¹⁶This includes animal reproduction. Although copulation never appears in the *True-Life Adventures*, the birth of a buffalo calf is vividly depicted in *The Vanishing Prairie*, a scene that the New York State censorship board sought to have removed from the film. Leonard Maltin, *The Disney Films* (New York: Crown, 1973), 118.

¹¹⁷“Interview of Ward Kimball Conducted by Rick Shale, January 29, 1976,” in *Walt’s People*, vol. 5, 56.

¹¹⁸Mitman, *Reel Nature*, 128. For a history of the “balance of nature” concept, see Frank Egerton’s seminal study: Frank Egerton, “Changing Concepts of the Balance of Nature,” *Quarterly Review of Biology* 48, no. 2 (June 1973), 322–50.

¹¹⁹Morgan Richards, “Greening Wildlife Documentary,” in *Environmental Conflict and the Media*, Global Crises and the Media, ed. Libby Lester and Brett Hutchins (New York: Peter Lang, 2013), 175.

¹²⁰“The New Pictures,” *Time*, Nov. 16, 1953, 108.

come to them from the world of nature unspoiled, untouched by man's heavy hand."¹²¹

Olaus J. Murie, noted wildlife biologist, conservationist, and president of the Wilderness Society, similarly celebrated the *True-Life Adventures* for stimulating viewers' appreciation of wilderness on an emotional level. "I think there is significance in this venture," he wrote of the films, "for all who are striving to save our wilderness, who are striving to win recognition of nature's beauty and value to people. . . . Disney's nature films are additional proof of man's response to the simple beauty of untouched woodlands and their wild inhabitants."¹²² Edward F. Dolder, chief of conservation education for the State of California Department of Natural Resources, shared Murie's enthusiasm, writing of *Beaver Valley*, "The beautiful simplicity and natural charm of the *Beaver Valley* film, certainly an outstanding conservation film, is due in part to the excellence of your 'cast.' . . . The wonder of the film to me is the infinite patience and skill of your staff in recording such a story."¹²³

Of course, over a decade earlier Disney had entered the American conscious as a conservation advocate with the release of *Bambi*, a film some have called "perhaps the single most successful and enduring statement in American popular culture against hunting."¹²⁴ The film also depicts the dangers of "man's" carelessness with fire, which led the US Forest Service to adopt *Bambi* and his woodland friends as symbols of forest-fire awareness in the years prior to the creation of Smokey Bear. Disney subsequently became a conservation spokesman, filming public service announcements for the National Wildlife Federation's National Wildlife Week.¹²⁵ Just weeks before his death, the American Forestry Association presented him with an award for "outstanding service in conservation of American resources."¹²⁶

The Vanishing Prairie best epitomized The Walt Disney Studios' approach to animal protection and resource conservation. As with other *True-Life* media, the movie and book focused primarily on living creatures in their habitats. Unlike the others, however, *The Vanishing Prairie* was framed by the idea that habitats were destroyed by human carelessness. The book's introduction marks a distinction between the previous films and *The Vanishing Prairie*: "Each of the others presented the way of life in some locale or among some group of animals; in the *Prairie* we do this job too. But, in addition—a most important addition, we feel—we are seizing history in the making. We are snatching a dwindling opportunity to record on film—and here, in book form—a kind of native American life which within two human generations has been all but crowded out of existence."¹²⁷

¹²¹Robert C. Murphy as quoted in, "The Screen: Water Birds," *Natural History*, Sept. 1952, 330.

¹²²Olaus J. Murie, "The World We Live In," *Living Wilderness* 16, no. 37 (Summer 1951), 17.

¹²³Letter from Edward F. Dolder, Chief, Conservation Education, Department of Natural Resources, State of California, to Walt Disney Productions, Aug. 31, 1950, Folder: BEAVER VALLEY Fan, Box: 2977/74-2, WDA.

¹²⁴Ralph H. Lutts, "The Trouble with *Bambi*: Walt Disney's *Bambi* and the American Vision of Nature," *Forest and Conservation History* 36, no. 4 (Oct. 1992), 160.

¹²⁵National Wildlife, "Vintage National Wildlife Week PSAs - Walt Disney," YouTube video, accessed March 5, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=in0ZPNR2JDo>.

¹²⁶Thomas, *Walt Disney*, 349.

¹²⁷Watson, *Walt Disney's Vanishing Prairie*, 10.

The book proceeds to inform readers that long before settlers “came plodding over the Alleghenies and poling along the rivers, the prairie was already well supplied with inhabitants,” including bighorn sheep, cougar, prairie dogs, and especially buffalo. It reminds readers that these animals had “known mankind for hundreds of years” before describing Native Americans as having “fitted into Nature’s plan without disturbing it.” “Now,” the book continues, as settlers moved onto the prairie “in a thickening cloud, draining the marshes, ripping out the roots of the high, strong grass with the cutting blades of their plows, fencing the prairie and taming it, the days of the buffalo grew brief.”¹²⁸ In this telling, the buffalo “felt the world falling away beneath their uneasy feet,” the bighorn became a “fugitive” in his own land, the cougar lived “with a price on his head,” and birds such as the passenger pigeon “vanished.”¹²⁹ Rather than further pursuing both the causes and consequences of these losses, however, the book and film travel back through time to a pristine wilderness abundant with wildlife. Subsequently, as with the other *True-Life* films, humanity is rendered absent from the story.

The title of *The Vanishing Prairie* highlighted an issue of increasing significance in the post-World War II era, a period when both national and international governments and organizations focused ever-greater attention on the need to better understand humanity’s place in and responsibility for the biosphere.¹³⁰ Although, as historian Ted Steinberg observes, the 1962 publication of Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* popularized the idea of “ecology” and made it “the rallying cry of the environmental movement,” the concept had already become central to a scientific understanding of the natural world.¹³¹ A subfield of biology that investigates the interrelationship of organisms and their environments, ecology—and ecologists—transformed the discourse surrounding environmental protection.¹³² Unlike “wilderness,” which conceived of nature “as a world apart,” according to Steinberg, ecology indicated just the opposite, that “all life was bound up in an intricate, interconnected web.”¹³³ With the prairie “vanishing” as a result of human actions taken within this web, *The Vanishing Prairie* had the potential to explore what previous films had not: the political, economic, technological, social, and cultural factors that shaped people’s relationship to nature. Rather than fully engaging this issue, however, the film relied

¹²⁸Watson, *Walt Disney’s Vanishing Prairie*, 10.

¹²⁹Watson, *Walt Disney’s Vanishing Prairie*, 22–24.

¹³⁰Wolfram Kaiser and Jan-Henrik Meyer, ed., *International Organizations and Environmental Protection: Conservation and Globalization in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2017); John McCormick, *Reclaiming Paradise: The Global Environmental Movement* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), 25–46.

¹³¹Rachel Carson, *Silent Spring* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1962); Ted Steinberg, *Down to Earth: Nature’s Role in American History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 248. On the development of the concept of ecology, see Simone Schleper, *Planning for the Planet: Environmental Expertise and the International Union for Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources, 1960–1980* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2019); Donald Worster, *Nature’s Economy: A History of Ecological Ideas* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994); Anna Bramwell, *Ecology in the 20th Century: A History* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1989); Robert McIntosh, *The Background of Ecology: Concept and Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

¹³²Warde, Robin, and Sörlin, *The Environment*, especially 73–95.

¹³³Steinberg, *Down to Earth*, 248.

on the approach the Studios had developed for the *True-Life Adventures* series. Cinematically, this formula was astoundingly successful. *The Vanishing Prairie* received the 1955 Academy Award® for Best Documentary Feature, the series' seventh Oscar®.

Finally, the *True-Life Adventures* consistently anthropomorphized non-human animals, although to varying degrees across individual titles. *The Living Desert* provides a memorable example with its scorpion square dance, as does the film *Water Birds* when it portrays a gannet as “embarrassed” by being caught stealing seaweed from another bird’s nest. The *Water Birds* comic book takes anthropomorphism further, claiming, “The daily lives of penguins differ little from the daily activities of humans,” while the *Bear Country* comic book describes its two protagonist bear cubs as “patient,” “mindful,” “inquisitive,” and “eager.”¹³⁴ *Beaver Valley* similarly ascribes human traits to animals. The film’s narration characterizes the beaver as “nature’s own engineer,” for instance, and “the valley’s number one citizen,” while otters are described as “fun-loving” and “happy go-lucky.”¹³⁵

Although critics denounced anthropomorphizing fauna as “Disneyfying” nature, Disney made it clear that he did so for the specific purpose of fostering sympathy toward animals.¹³⁶ “In approaching the problem of story telling,” he explained, “once we have the basic footage, we use the same technique to be found in the Disney cartoons. We look for personality, and we do this for a reason. If audiences can identify *themselves* with the seeming personality of an animal, they can sympathize with it and understand its problems better.”¹³⁷ One of Disney’s writers highlighted this method as central to the Studios’ wildlife filmmaking process. “Any time we saw an animal doing something with style or personality,” he described, “say a bear scratching its back—we were quick to capitalize on it. . . . Or otters sliding down a riverbank—humorous details to build personality. This anthropomorphism is resented by some people—they say we are putting people into animal suits. But we’ve always tried to stay within the framework of the real scene. Bears *do* scratch their backs and otters *are* playful.”¹³⁸ Of this method of nature documentary filmmaking, one critic concluded simply that Disney was “bent on demonstrating the human aspects of animal life. Animals, he says, have tender feelings, intelligence, and even a sense of humor.”¹³⁹

¹³⁴August Lenox, *Walt Disney’s Water Birds and the Olympic Elk* (New York: Dell Publishing Company, 1956); August Lenox, *Walt Disney’s Bear Country* (New York: Dell Publishing Company, 1956). Other films and comics, especially those produced later in the series, are less reliant on anthropomorphism as a plot device. As film historian Leonard Maltin observes, critics assessed the series’ final films, such as *The Jungle Cat*, as “Mr. Disney’s best—intimate, tasteful, strong, and matter-of-fact.” Maltin, *The Disney Films*, 174.

¹³⁵*The Living Desert*, Walt Disney Productions, 1953; *Water Birds*, Walt Disney Productions, 1952; *Beaver Valley*, Walt Disney Productions, 1950.

¹³⁶On the so-called “Disneyfication” of the natural world, 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: Essays on Disney’s Edutainment Films*, ed. A. Bowdoin Van Riper (Jefferson, NC: McFarland and Company, 2011), 173–82.

¹³⁷The Walt Disney Studios, *The Story of Walt Disney’s True-Life Adventure Series*, 8.

¹³⁸De Roos, “The Magic Worlds of Walt Disney,” 178.

¹³⁹Louis Berg, “Disney’s Greatest Gamble,” *Los Angeles Times*, March 15, 1953, H36.

Disney and his writers, producers, and directors were intentional in their anthropomorphic approach to wildlife filmmaking and, in hindsight, portrayed animals in idealized social and cultural contexts particularly accessible to post-World War II, suburban, middle-class Americans. As Cynthia Chris writes, the wildlife film genre, perhaps even more than other cinematic genres, “presents itself as an objective record of ‘natural and obvious meaning’ when it is in fact, like any other representational medium, a carefully chosen, framed, edited, and narrated set of signs.”¹⁴⁰ The *True-Life Adventures* were no exception. Scholars have described the films as a “cultural canvas” that Disney and the American public used to paint “an array of Cold War concerns and values.”¹⁴¹ In these analyses, Disney’s “sentimental version of animals in the wild” epitomized the “universal ‘natural’ family as a cornerstone of the American way of life.”¹⁴² Whether following the narrative form of the life cycle of a particular species or the kinds of life in a particular geographic area, all of the *True-Life Adventures* involve nuclear families confronting predatory threats.¹⁴³ Survivors are depicted as wise, hardworking, and disciplined. Mothers, in particular, are represented as caring and protective. Disney insisted that he did not ascribe these human values to animals but, rather, that they were natural animal behaviors to which humans had not been properly attentive. “For family devotion and parental care,” he observed, “the beaver, the bear, and many other animals and birds can teach us lessons. The antics of courtship, male rivalry, the training and feeding of the young provide movie plots, and prove that the animals can and do solve problems of family life much like our own. Animal behavior often reveals the instinctive beginnings of the deepest, most basic human emotions.”¹⁴⁴

Framing the natural world as imbued with post-World War II suburban “family values,” the *True-Life Adventures* nurtured a belief among viewers that animals deserved respect. Anthropomorphism, however, cut both ways. Representing animals as characteristically human, the *True-Life Adventures* failed to depict them as part of a fragile ecosystem over which humans had significant leverage. Portraying beavers as “industrious” and “stubbornly persistent” and polar bear cubs as “having a sense of humor” undoubtedly facilitated viewers’ affiliation with wildlife, but it did little to elucidate humanity’s place within the biosphere.¹⁴⁵

Conclusion

Even before the premiere of the final *True-Life Adventures* film—*Jungle Cat*—in 1960, the critical and commercial success of the series and related media ignited an explosion of wildlife filmmaking and television programming. In 1957, the British Broadcasting Company (BBC) established its Natural History Unit. In 1963, the National Broadcasting Company (NBC) premiered its long-running series, *Wild*

¹⁴⁰Chris, *Watching Wildlife*, xix.

¹⁴¹Watts, *The Magic Kingdom*, 305.

¹⁴²Mitman, *Reel Nature*, 110–11.

¹⁴³Chris, *Watching Wildlife*, 30.

¹⁴⁴Disney, “What I’ve Learned from the Animals,” 23, 106.

¹⁴⁵The first two characterizations are taken from *Beaver Valley*, Walt Disney Productions, 1950. The last is taken from *White Wilderness*, Walt Disney Productions, 1958.

Kingdom. Hosted by Marlin Perkins and Don Meier and sponsored by the Mutual of Omaha insurance company, the series aired for many years on Sunday evenings immediately before the Disney program.¹⁴⁶ Also in 1963, the National Geographic Society launched its first television program. Two years later, it featured its first wildlife film, *Miss Goodall and the Wild Chimpanzees*. In 1968, *The Undersea World of Jacques Cousteau* premiered on ABC.¹⁴⁷ Within a few years, national television audiences in the United States were able to choose from eleven different wildlife and natural history programs.¹⁴⁸

Since then, wildlife film has become an integral part of television and motion pictures. In 1996, Discovery, Inc. and BBC Worldwide partnered to launch Animal Planet, a cable channel dedicated exclusively to programming about wild animals and domestic pets. Academy Award®-winning, feature-length wildlife films also regularly appear in theaters, such as Luc Jacquet's 2005 *March of the Penguins*. Coming full circle, The Walt Disney Studios returned to the production of nature films in 2008 when it established an independent film unit, Disneynature.¹⁴⁹ In January 2020, the *New York Times* reported, "There has never been more to watch for fans" of the wildlife film genre, with roughly 130 original nature series airing across network and streaming services in 2019.¹⁵⁰

This is not to say that The Walt Disney Studios were solely responsible for the growing popularity of wildlife film and television programming over time. It is worth noting that in 1934 *The Private Life of the Gannet*, a ten-minute film written and directed by British evolutionary biologist Julian Huxley and depicting a colony of Northern Gannets, was the first nature documentary to win an Academy Award®, for Short Subject (One-reel). The movie barely earned back its production costs, however, casting doubt on the commercial viability of wildlife films. *The Sea Around Us*, based on the Rachel Carson book of the same name, won the 1953 Academy Award® for best documentary feature-length film, and three years later Jacques Cousteau won for *Le Monde Silence* (The Silent World), based on his book of the same title. None of these films had the power of the Disney distribution system behind them, however, and remained confined to their critical success.

The *True-Life Adventures* established conventions for nature documentaries that inspired filmmakers and informed generations. In 1982, the Public Broadcasting

¹⁴⁶Perkins had written Disney a decade earlier to express his thanks and appreciation for the opportunity to show excerpts of *The Living Desert* on his *Zooprade* television program. Letter from R. Marlon Perkins, Director of the Lincoln Park Zoological Gardens, to Walt Disney, Nov. 9, 1953, Folder: The Living Desert, Box: A1563, WDA.

¹⁴⁷Bousé, *Wildlife Films*, 70–76.

¹⁴⁸Bousé, *Wildlife Films*, 80.

¹⁴⁹As scholars such as Scott Hermanson have also noted, the development of Disney's Animal Kingdom Theme Park (one of the four parks comprising the Walt Disney World Resort in Florida) can be directly linked to the depiction of nature in the *True-Life Adventures*. Indeed, one of the park's goals was to grow beyond what a film series could offer by placing guests in natural surroundings and encouraging them to become their own cinematographers. Scott Hermanson, "Truer Than Life: Disney's Animal Kingdom," in *Rethinking Disney: Private Control, Public Dimensions*, ed. Mike Budd and Max Kirsch (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2005), 206; Melody Malmberg, *The Making of Disney's Animal Kingdom Theme Park* (New York: Disney Editions, 1998).

¹⁵⁰John Koblin, "As the World Heats Up, Nature Shows Sizzle," *New York Times*, Jan. 21, 2020, B1.

Service (PBS) premiered the first episode of a thirty-minute nature television program called *Wild America*. Produced and directed by wildlife photographer Marty Stouffer, the series, which ran for over a decade, documents the behaviors and habitats of North American flora and fauna. In his prologue to the series' companion book, Stouffer describes a moment of recollection as he filmed two Rocky Mountain bighorn rams locked in battle. "As I looked at the rams," he writes, "puffs of vapor steamed from their nostrils as they prepared for another charge. Suddenly something else, something deeper, flashed through my memory." He continues, "I remember being six years old, perched on the edge of my seat in a darkened movie theater, staring up from this same angle and this same distance, as two bighorn rams reared up and lunged toward each other on the screen in front of me. The name of the film was Walt Disney's *Vanishing Prairie*, and it had affected me powerfully at the time."¹⁵¹

Similarly, Emmy Award-winning filmmaker Nathaniel Dorsky identified the *True-Life Adventures* as sparking his interest in film. "I had started to make films when I was around ten or eleven with an 8mm camera," he reflected. "I was very influenced by the Disney 'True-Life Adventure' nature series, like *Beaver Valley* and *Nature's Half Acre*. They were the first time I saw, for instance, flowers growing in time-lapse. They were very photographic films, held together with music and narration. Both films went through the four seasons, and for some reason I was very taken with that."¹⁵² With a preponderance of examples such as these, one scholar has concluded, "Disney's influence on those who followed in the nature film genre was far reaching. There is no question that the large number of nature films and television series—now staples of cable television—have been visibly shaped by the Disney formula."¹⁵³

As important as the *True-Life Adventures* were in establishing conventions for wildlife filmmaking that remain recognizable today, the documentaries had an equally profound influence on students' understanding of nature—and they did so as the number of young people in the United States skyrocketed. Between 1940 and 1965, the US population ages five to thirteen almost doubled, resulting in approximately one-third of all Americans being under fourteen years of age.¹⁵⁴ While these children and youth learned about the natural world from a range of sources, the *True-Life Adventures* were one of the most widely accessible. Reaching many of these seventy-eight million baby boomers (including Marty Stouffer and Nathaniel Dorsky) "in theaters and on television, as well as in the classroom," Margaret King concludes that the *True-Life Adventures* exerted a cultural influence "far wider than Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* or the Sierra Club."¹⁵⁵

Indeed, The Walt Disney Studios' concept for the *True-Life Adventures* films so "completely won the public," declared Robert de Roos in *National Geographic Magazine* in 1963, that they became "a solid part of the curriculum . . . not only in

¹⁵¹Marty Stouffer, *Marty Stouffer's Wild America* (New York: Time Books, 1988), 4–6.

¹⁵²Scott MacDonald, "Sacred Speed: An Interview with Nathaniel Dorsky," *Film Quarterly* 54, no. 4 (Summer 2001), 3–4.

¹⁵³King, "The Audience in the Wilderness," 64.

¹⁵⁴Thomas D. Snyder, *120 Years of American Education: A Statistical Portrait* (Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics, 1993), 12.

¹⁵⁵King, "The Audience in the Wilderness," 61–62.

the U.S. but abroad—including countries under Communist control.”¹⁵⁶ Given student, teacher, and teacher educator enthusiasm for the films, de Roos’s observation is hardly surprising. It was also most likely not overstated. Yet as this study demonstrates, the *True-Life Adventures* films were just one component of the *True-Life* media with which young audiences engaged. Many students may have viewed the films upon their release in theaters, but many more may have seen a movie or its spin-off in 16 mm or film-strip format in schools, libraries, church youth groups, or at home. Or they may have watched them on television or read a *True-Life* book or picked up a Dell Nature Classic or seen a daily *True-Life* comic. Over time, Walt Disney even incorporated the *True-Life Adventures* into his highly successful theme parks. Given this range of options—and The Walt Disney Studios’ remarkable capacity to extend the reach of the original films—the *True-Life Adventures* were a paramount source of environmental education for students for well over three decades. They continue to shape our thinking about the natural world in the twenty-first century.

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¹⁵⁶De Roos, “The Magic Worlds of Walt Disney,” 162.