

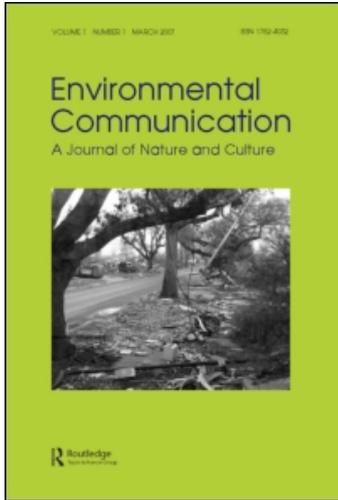
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Publisher Routledge

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Environmental Communication: A Journal of Nature and Culture

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information: <http://www-intra.informaworld.com/smpp/title-content=t770239508>

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Online publication date: 18 February 2011

To cite this Article Milstein, Tema(2011) 'Nature Identification: The Power of Pointing and Naming', Environmental Communication: A Journal of Nature and Culture, 5: 1, 3 – 24

To link to this Article: DOI: 10.1080/17524032.2010.535836

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/17524032.2010.535836>

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Nature Identification: The Power of Pointing and Naming

Tema Milstein

Pointing and naming is a basic practice of using communication to discern nature. This study illustrates connections between this symbolic action and ecocultural relations. I focus on a transnational site of wildlife tourism to explore ways nature identification has historically mediated perceptual, behavioral, and political transformations. I also examine contemporary practice, illustrating ways identification uses and meanings delineate endangered whales as unique, complex, intrinsically valued subjects, as well as generate humanature connections and protections. In discussing restorative implications and limitations for endangered species, I suggest dialectically integrating an ecological lens with the powerful individualizing discourse of nature identification.

Keywords: Nature; Culture; Identification; Ecological–Individual Dialectic; Southern Resident Killer Whales; Orcas; Whale Watching; Wildlife Tourism; Ecoculture; Ecotourism

Scholars have long argued that human symbolic relations with nature cannot be disentangled from material relations (Cantrill & Oravec, 1996; Cox, 2007; Cronon, 1996; Haraway, 1989; Milstein, 2007, 2009a; Williams, 1980/1972). In this vein, Escobar (1996) argues it is necessary to reiterate the connections between the making and evolution of nature and the making and evolution of the discursive practices through which nature is historically produced and known. In this case study, I argue that nature identification—or the strategic pointing to and naming of aspects of nature—mediates humanature¹ alignments. I attend to Escobar's call to reiterate connections by pinpointing the linkages among transformations in ecocultural discourse, perception, and practice.

The present case study whirls within the transborder Canadian–American Pacific coast region, a site in which orcas were once brutally captured by marine parks and

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which now is awash in the world's highest concentration of wild whale tourism. In examining the contexts and history of nature identification in this site, I illustrate ways original scientific uses of identification shaped fundamental changes, contributing to captures being declared illegal on both sides of the border and, more recently, to the first endangered species rulings in the world for an orca population. I also explore contemporary identification uses and meanings, both by tourists and by those people closest and most dedicated to the whales, and argue identification practices mediate perceptions of wild whales as unique, complex, and intrinsically valued subjects. In turn, identification discourse informs human-orca relations, protecting whales in some senses while also seeding and nurturing humanature connection.

I make a case that, though identification practices have cultivated profound cultural transformations, the practice has considerable shortfalls when it comes to endangered species' and ecological prospects. In response, I suggest integrating an ecocentric lens with the powerful individualizing lens of identification. This *ecological-individual* dialectic provides a both-and focal point, emphasizing both entity and collective, and providing a restorative way to further mediate ecocultural perception and practice.

The Insatiable Desire to Point and Name

I start with a notion expressed by a whale tour company owner and captain. As he looked out at tourists gathered on his boat deck interacting with nature in ways he had seen day-after-day year-in year-out, the captain said, "I think people have this insatiable desire to point at and name things. 'Oh, that's a . . . ' or 'What is that?'" During my four years of fieldwork, I considered the captain's observation, and examined this process of pointing and naming as a foundational act when it comes to material-symbolic human relations with nature. Pointing and naming can be seen as the basic entry to socially discerning and categorizing parts of nature. In this way, acts of pointing and naming generate certain kinds of ecocultural knowledge that constitute aspects of nature as considered, unique, sorted, or marked.

This seemingly elemental act of identifying and classifying nature certainly did appear to mediate particular ways of relating within my case site. Indeed, the practice and industry of wildlife-based nature tourism are based upon pointing and naming, showing and telling. Much of the communication I observed, often at the very basic level, involved tourists, naturalists, and captains pointing at a wild animal and naming it "a seal," "an eagle," or "a whale"—the act itself setting apart the named individual from the whole, or front-staging the entity and, I found in most cases, back-staging the ecology.

Scholars studying culture and nature point to the force of discursive abstractions as distancing and objectifying nature, further reifying human-nature binaries and exacerbating humanity's devastating ecological destruction (Abram, 1997; Lease, 1995; Valladolid & Apffel-Marglin, 2001). In an illustrative short story titled "She Unnames Them," Le Guin (1986, p. 193) describes a mythological Eve unnameing all

animals before leaving Eden, and finding the effect more powerful than anticipated: “They seemed far closer than when their names had stood between myself and them like a clear barrier . . .” While I tend to agree with such assessments of pointing at and naming individual animals according to abstract categories they stand in for (e.g. “seals” or “whales”), this study examines the restorative potential of a distinctive, highly individualizing act of identification.

In analyzing the ways identification practices mediate more nature-inclusive perceptions, more nature-aware practices, and more nature-protective policies, I turn to insights of other scholars for points of consideration. Stibbe (2001) focuses at the ecolinguistic scale on Western lexicon’s tendency to identify animals by mass instead of plural nouns, framing some animals as simply a unit standing in for a larger homogenous category and stripping them of individual consideration or intrinsic value (e.g. cattle, livestock, game, poultry). Harré, Brockmeier, and Mühlhäuser (1999) argue Western syntax largely positions humanature relations as binary and causal, identifying humans as agent and nature as object (e.g. humans “fertilize soil,” “channel a river,” “watch a whale”), and erasing non-human nature’s subjectivity and agency. Swidler (2001) more generally claims that culture works as a repertoire from which people extract meanings and cultivate capacities they incorporate into larger, more stable “strategies of action.” Nature identification, I argue, exemplifies one such strategy of action, at a minimum transforming both Western lexicon and syntax and their associated cultural meanings. In these and other identification means and meanings, I show how humans at times are able to speak strategically for a nature stripped of its voice (Plumwood, 1997).

In a comparative case study of wildlife and identification, Sowards (2006, p. 59) argues that “(u)sing identification to connect to the non-human world is effective and important in destabilizing the artificial boundaries between culture and nature.” Sowards explores ways environmentalists and primatologists construct a rhetoric of identification to create common ground between humans and an endangered species, orangutans, via devices such as consubstantiality and animalcentric anthropomorphism. Burke’s (1950, 1984) notion of consubstantiality, or identification through shared substance, is one sort of identification device advocates used to seed greater humanature connections. In rhetoric about orangutans and humans, advocates drew similarities between origin stories, genetics/biology, and intellect/psychology. Similarly, Sowards found de Waal’s (2001) notion of animalcentric anthropomorphism, as opposed to anthropocentric anthropomorphism (e.g. “Bambification”), in use as a powerful discursive tool for creating positive identification. Animalcentric anthropomorphism emphasizes both continuities and discontinuities with humans (such as a new orangutan mother cuddling her newborn yet doing so on top of the rainforest canopy).

Sowards describes how advocates depended upon both these methods of identification to expand human connection and care beyond orangutans to other elements of their rainforest habitat. She argues identification with orangutans can provide strong motivation for protecting orangutan forests in Indonesia and Malaysia, as well as other environmental causes. Yet she also maintains, “humans may strongly identify with orangutans, but may not feel the same connection with

their habitats or with other species because trees and insects are too completely different” (p. 58). This potential lack of ecologically scaled identification is immensely important—in the case of orangutans or whales, human deforestation or degradation of the oceanic ecosystem is the respective major cause of their decline.

Nature Tourism Case Study

In the industrialized, technologized, largely urbanized West, most humans engage with what they find to constitute nature through various forms of nature tourism. Whereas tourism has grown in recent years to comprise the largest business sector in the world economy, responsible for 10% of the worldwide gross domestic product, nature-based tourism has grown three times as fast (The International Ecotourism Society, 2005/2006). Bolsters for the business include ecotourism industry claims of market-linked long-term solutions to the leading ecocultural challenges the world faces today. Yet recent studies point to risks perhaps outweighing benefits. For example, species ranging from polar bears to penguins are experiencing issues as serious as lower survival rates resulting from tourism’s introduction of increased stress levels and disturbance of daily routines such as foraging or sleeping (SERVICE, 2004; UNEP/CMS, 2006).

Nature-oriented tourism can range in form from zoo visits (Milstein, 2009b), to scenic drives (Wilson, 1992), to climbing Mount Everest (Frohlick, 2003), to ecojustice tours (Pezzullo, 2007). This study looks at a site of wildlife tourism, defined by Reynolds and Braithwaite (2001, p. 32) as “an area of overlap between nature-based tourism, ecotourism, consumptive use of wildlife, rural tourism, and human relations with animals” and argued by some to have succeeded in substituting the camera for the gun (Shackley, 1996).

The present Western case study site supports a multi-million dollar tourism industry and annually draws more than half a million people who hope to see a small number of endangered orcas called the Southern Resident Killer Whales (Koski & Osborne, 2005). The site is reflective of the global growth and distribution of whale tourism. Recent profound growth of whale watching, from a \$1 billion industry with 9 million watchers in 87 countries and territories in 1998 to a \$2.1 billion industry with 13 million watchers in 119 countries and territories in 2008, has led the International Fund for Animal Welfare (IFAW) to declare that whale tourism has shifted from a select niche market to a mainstream activity (O’Connor, Campbell, Cortez, & Knowles, 2009). North America is home to some of the earliest whale watching and claims the biggest piece of the pie at 50% of watchers and more than half the global income; yet whale tourism in other world regions is expanding at an even faster rate. The IFAW bills whale watching as non-extractive, potentially sustainable, and as making the case that a species’ protection within its habitat can derive a secondary benefit of significant economic activity in communities. This profound growth of an industry that introduces both potential benefits and risks drives my desire to take a closer look at the communicative forces at play in ecocultural relations in these sites.

In ethnographically exploring a particular communicative practice, identification, I attempt to “render scrutable that which is inscrutable” (Carbaugh, 1996, p. 54), examining the ways nature identification practice shaped and continues to shape human perceptions, practices, and policies toward whales. My methodological approach is aligned with Philipsen’s (1992) and Carbaugh’s (2007) emphasis on interpretation of observed discourse as it unfolds within a particular cultural setting, and with Denzin’s (1997) notion of critically engaging such forms of scholarly exploration. The observations, interpretations, and analysis that follow use these guiding tenets to tell accounts that attempt to illustrate what discourse means and what it does in particular contexts, connect private experience with public issues, strengthen our capacity to understand ourselves, and help position participant, reader, and researcher in the role of actor to effect meaningful and beneficial transformations.

This essay analyzes data gathered as a participant observer during summer tourist seasons from 2005 to 2008. My research platforms were whale watch boats, public shoreline watch sites, and a marine monitoring boat that monitored watchers in order to protect whales. I also conducted interviews, attended public meetings, and collected artifacts. Participants were tourists, as well as a wide range of people I term whale insiders, who comprised tour captains and naturalists, marine monitors, whale researchers, government officials, whale advocates, and islander locals who had regular interactions with whales. These insiders, while harboring different orientations and aims, were often in close communication with one another about whales and shared overwhelmingly similar views and uses of identification. Finally, the whales themselves were a group of three pods of ecoculturally distinct and iconic orcas.² The 89 largely salmon-eating orcas, and their ecosystem, currently face extreme human-caused crises, including devastating human overfishing of oceans that has all but removed their food source, deadly bioaccumulation as top oceanic predator of both point and non-point pollution that radically shortens their lives and drastically impedes their reproduction, and the compounding stresses of ever-increasing human vessel traffic and all its associated dangers.³

In the following sections, often using participants’ words, I relay how a particular form of pointing and naming emerged in this site, the major shifts in human–whale relations with which this act is credited, and how the initial scientific form of identifying whales continues today. I then examine how contemporary ways of perceiving and relating to whales are mediated by identification practices, looking first at tourist and then at whale insider communication.

Historical and Contemporary Contexts

In the past 50 years, Western human symbolic and material relations with orcas in this area have undergone major paradigm shifts. Orcas have transformed from mysterious or villainous creatures North Americans used for military target practice, to marine park performers profiteers captured for entertainment, to cultural icons advocates argue must be heeded as the pulse of oceanic health (Milstein, 2008).

Within this transformation timeline, many insiders credited an act of pointing and naming with allowing for a shift in the 1970s from deadly marine park captures of wild orcas to North American laws declaring captures illegal. This policy shift paralleled a transition in practice from tourists solely seeking out whales in marine parks to the birth of a tourism industry in which people experienced wild whales within their ecosystems.

Whales from the community under study were the first globally to be captured and displayed—and the first to perform in Sea World under the moniker “Shamu.” Davis (1997) and Desmond (1999) both examine communicative aspects of Sea World’s performances and the central role captive orcas play. They illustrate how performances construct human–whale relations largely in non-fearful and highly anthropomorphic ways. In this study’s wild whale site, some whale insiders referred to the first captive orcas as, in a sense, serving as ambassadors for wild orcas.⁴ Ironically, as captures killed and traumatized individual area orcas and devastated their populations, the captives helped create an atmosphere in which the public for the first time became concerned about whales. Instead of fearing or hating killer whales, people began to find they could relate to them.⁵

At the same time, participants in the study’s site witnessed captures. One former politician-turned whale activist spoke years later to a public gathering about his own personally transformative witnessing of a capture while out pleasure boating:

We all looked and went a little closer and realized that not only was there a pod of orcas but there was a big fishing boat, and a couple of smaller boats, and a sea plane that was buzzing in and out. And we realized that they were chasing these whales. We remembered that we had read in the paper that a permit had been given to Sea World to capture four killer whales in Puget Sound. They were throwing explosives off the speedboat to herd them. They drove the orcas into a shallow area where they could put the nets out and get the whales into the nets, and they were separating the family members. You saw the mothers and calves being separated and heard them calling to each other from opposite sides of the net. And the ones who were not captured would not leave; they hung around.

Such witnesses called the media to cover captures, including the above 1976 capture at Budd Inlet, and some organized area protests (Hoyt, 1981). In 1973, Canadian researcher Michael Bigg initiated a photographic census to provide orca population counts after realizing he could identify individuals non-invasively by unique variations in their dorsal fins and gray colored skin behind their fins called saddlepatches.⁶ Scientists found and conveyed the whales were dangerously scarce. Instead of the hundreds or even hundreds of thousands asserted to exist by marine parks and largely believed to exist by the public, scientists found only about 70 Southern Residents remaining—approximately 45 had already been captured or killed by marine parks.

The identification system, however, took scientists beyond initial quantification to discover other details that became points of connection. As scientists identified individuals, they began to notice who swam with whom and to deduce family relations. Scientists used an alphanumeric identification system to discern the

Southern Residents as three distinct families, or pods. They noticed offspring never left their mothers, leading to the recognition of the world's only truly matriarchal mammal. Scientists labeled the matriarchal pods the Js, Ks, and Ls and identified individuals in terms of family and individual identity—e.g. He's L57, so he's in L pod.⁷ An orca's individual number remains unique; when the orca dies, so does her number.

Thus, in the process of identification, scientists conveyed much more than letters and numbers. Messages of diminished numbers were packaged within the matriarchal discovery, a cultural detail that spoke to many people—and later within other discoveries, such as distinct vocal dialects used by each pod. Both these cultural details evoked notions of animalcentric anthropomorphism; though most humans are not matriarchal, matriarchy is highly regarded by some, and differing vocal dialects are quite familiar. Advocates circulated scientist messages, arguing the scarcity pointed to possible destruction of an animal with whom people were internationally and regionally becoming more connected—in response, both Canada and the USA outlawed captures. In the years that followed up until today, scientists have employed identification to study the stagnation of Southern Resident population numbers and to bring to light the risks they face. Indeed, without identification as a foundational tool, endangered species classifications on both sides of the border within the last few years would have been impossible.

In the tourist setting, more than 30 years after captures were outlawed, the identification discourse of unique individuality and cultural importance have had staying power.

A naturalist poses a question to a boatload of tourists: So, can you imagine being out here on the water say 30 years ago and you have all sorts of whales and you need to identify them. How would you do that?

When no one ventures an answer, she says: Dr. Michael Bigg, a Canadian researcher, figured out that you could photo identify them. In the process, he also learned things about their culture. He learned they were matriarchal. These big males you see out here are not the leaders. Their mothers are. And they have no mates. So how do they produce offspring?

Tourist 1: One night stands?

Naturalist: Pretty much, yeah. So, that would be the son there traveling with his mother. He's not a father.

Tourist 2: So the males are loners?

Naturalist: No, they live with their mothers. That's a nice looking healthy boy.

The naturalist draws connections between original scientist identification of whales and discoveries about whales' lives, specifically "their culture." As such, she connects the act of identification with coming to discern orcas as complex beings, directing tourists to apply this knowledge to whales in front of them and mediating visitor perceptions.

While naturalists commonly introduced identification to tourists on boats, other venues also taught identification processes. The US San Juan Island's Whale Museum and Whale Watch Park visitor center taught how to identify individuals exhibited in

painted or sculpted portraits. In both venues, visitors could push buttons and listen to individual orca vocalizations and learn to which letter pod the call belongs.⁸ In sum, nature identification practices helped mediate human nature in the past and continue to do so today. The following sections illustrate contemporary tourist and whale insider identification practices and mediations.

Tourists and Whale Identification

On many boats, as tourists saw whales, they heard naturalists identify the whales by name as individuals.⁹ In the process, naturalists would often explain that tourists, too, could learn to identify individuals. Many naturalists gave basic explanations:

The saddlepatches are unique like human fingerprints. You can also identify using the knicks on the whales' dorsal fins.

Note the comparison here to humans, often employed to characterize orca identifier markings as unique. The association was likely evocative for listeners who would not necessarily perceive whale markings, but would perceive fingerprints, as unique. In addition, such comparisons were embodied, bringing human in line with whale body. Similar consubstantiality methods included stories exhibited in the Whale Museum about regional tribal beliefs that orcas are a tribe that walks on the land like humans at night; a naturalist and exhibit focus on orca brain size and intelligence as, at minimum, comparable to humans; educational evolutionary accounts of orcas and other cetaceans first being land mammals like humans and then choosing to return to the sea; and the Whale Museum's popular adoption program in which one can "adopt" individual whales with a monetary contribution and get photos and updates of them and their families. The latter practice in some cases forged potentially problematic notions of ownership (e.g. some children who saw orcas in person their family had "adopted" repeatedly shouted over others, "That's *my* whale."), but also forged potentially important ongoing close connections for tourists after they left their one-time whale experience.

Despite these devices of consubstantiality, for most one-time whale watchers, even individually identified whales remained indistinguishable. Here is a typical response after a naturalist identified a whale nearby:

Naturalist: There's J2, right behind us.

Tourist: How do you know? They just look the same. I'm proud of you.

While tourists practiced the basic act of pointing and naming (e.g. "There's a whale!") and heard how one could identify with a trained eye, they often expressed astonishment or disbelief when insiders identified individuals. Such reactions signaled interruptions of dominant Western notions of a homogenous othered species. Stibbe (2001) describes ways Western discourses tend to identify non-human animals via mass nouns, masking individuality, and producing categories of instrumentally valued animals. In stark contrast, naturalists often made it known

they were not looking at merely unique physical identifiers. For many insiders, as I describe in following sections, identified whales were intrinsically valued beings with stories, intricate histories, and at times personal connections.

Still, many tourists appeared to derive meaning from whale insider abilities to identify individuals. On one boat, two tourists showed interest in ID charts. The naturalist displayed orca family trees, then a larger image of an orca body to point out the unique saddlepatch.

Tourist 1: Do they identify each other that way?

Naturalist: I don't know. We know they have unique voices and calls, just like you or me.

Each speaker engages syntax that positions the whales as agents (Harré et al., 1999). In the context of identification, the tourist shifted whale from object to subject, moving the conversation from how humans as causal agents identify whales to how whales identify whales. In her response, the naturalist draws upon consubstantiality to explicate and highlight similarly unique human–orca qualities.

In contrast to whale watch boat tourists, who tended to be from further flung regions and countries, I observed a number of local Canadian and American private boat watchers who knew letter names of the Southern Resident pods, though they generally could not identify. Some also knew of specific well-known individuals. On the marine monitoring boat, when educating private boaters about whale-safe boating regulations, we would often first identify which pod was in the water with us. Identification at times appeared to directly affect boater behavior toward whales. For example, one day the monitoring boat approached a private boat that was speeding dangerously amidst whales and not following safety guidelines,¹⁰ instead aggressively pursuing whales. The driver ignored our hails, so we pulled up to slow him by our presence. He took our guideline brochure with a stern face without talking. When we identified the whales we were with, however, the boater's demeanor changed.

Monitor boat driver: This is J pod in front of you.

Private boater: Did you see Granny?

Monitor boat driver: Yep, Granny is out here.

The boater's unyielding expression transformed to a smile. After he departed, his behavior around whales was more respectful; he kept at a distance, slowed. It appeared likely identification of Granny, the 99-year-old matriarch of J pod and a whale he knew by name and pod affiliation, mediated a change in behavior. Here were no longer merely whales to pursue, but the leader and eldest of the pod and her offspring. Granny's name was also easy for visitors to remember and it enfolded her matriarchal position into a culturally comprehensible package, eliciting similarities with humans, in this case familial relations, and likely mediating points of connection and even empathy.

In sum, many tourists learned about identification in ways that evoked consubstantiality in uniqueness and embodiment, and mediated ways of speaking to position whales as subjects and agents. Though naturalist identifications of

intrinsically valued individuals elicited interruptions in dominant Western paradigms of othered animals, most tourists had never encountered wild whales before and they continued to “just look the same.” Repeat visitors, however, with existing whale knowledge would at times change to more respectful behaviors when whales were identified, pointing to ways identification may mediate not only perception but also practice.

Whale Insiders and Identification

Most whale insiders referred to identifying whales as “IDing.” Insiders at times made their own claims about how this particular act mediated ecocultural relations. Insiders also demonstrated specific cultural uses of nature identification. I cluster these claims and uses into three themes: Identifying whales helped protect them, helps connect people to them, and helps people keep track of them.

Identify to Protect

The notion that identification helped protect whales from marine entertainment industry capture was expressed face-to-face, in books written by whale advocates and researchers, and at times by naturalists to tourists. I provide a tour example and explore it in some depth to more closely analyze the syntactical and lexical nuances surrounding one naturalist’s uses of identification to protect.

Naturalist: Knowing who the animals are was everything. People were claiming there were thousands, even hundreds of thousands of whales. But once we could ID them, we realized, ‘Gosh, there are only about 100 whales here. We have to stop capturing them.’ They had captured 50 whales already in this area. And the real sad thing is, of those 50, only one survived. They live an average of only five years in captivity. At Sea World, they call ‘Shamu’ all the orcas they have. And replace dead orcas with a new orca and call that orca ‘Shamu’ to trick people into thinking this is one whale.

Tourist 1: Are we still capturing them?

Naturalist: No, it was outlawed in the US, so they moved the capturing to Iceland. In 1997, Japan did a capture of five orcas; only two are still alive. The last capture was in Russia three years ago—two whales died in the capture, one female survived and died two weeks later. These whales are not suited for capture for many reasons.

Tourist 2: I didn’t know they still live with their moms.

The naturalist situated the act of identifying as being in a causal relationship with mediating perception and practice of whale protection. In doing so, she not only asserted former perceptions about whales were effectively dismissed with identifying, but also clearly equated identification with the “knowing” of another species and assigned this “knowing” the utmost importance in terms of resultant human-to-whale action.

The naturalist followed with numerical descriptors—e.g. 50 Southern Residents captured, one survivor, five-year mortality rate in captivity, multiple Shamus. These numbers of captivities and deaths of individual local wild whales were juxtaposed with marine park practice of naming a succession of captive orcas “Shamu,” evoking

human-caused whale morbidity, public deception, and a disregard for individual whales. Using identification of wild whales as her foundation, the naturalist mediated a particular perception that directed tourists to view Sea World's practices of replacing prematurely dead captive orcas simply by naming the next Shamu as disturbing trickery to fool "people into thinking this is one whale."

While I found in many cases tourists did not respond to a naturalist's information that was particularly sad or depressing (such as overview information about captures, deadly orca bioaccumulation of human-created toxins, or massive human reduction of orca prey), in this context, where a naturalist *explicitly paired identification information with information about destructive human actions toward orcas*, tourists appeared more eager to ask questions. The first asked, "Are we still capturing them?" using the subjective pronoun "we," including, and perhaps reproaching, herself in capture practices. In explaining that captures have moved to other countries, the naturalist again individualized whales by providing numbers and sexes of those captured and killed. The second tourist's seemingly out-of-place response ("I didn't know they still live with their moms") was informed by the naturalist's previous matriarchal details related to identification, which mediated his syntax via the lens of orcas as subjects with moms.

After the tour, I told the naturalist she had elicited the most visitor response about captivity I had observed. She responded by explaining certain goals she associated with her statements—in particular, to mediate perceptions of whales and the tourism experience.

Naturalist: It's important visitors understand the whales are not put here to perform for us. They are not circus clowns. They're wild animals. It's important for people to know why we're out here.

As such, she employed identification to be protective not only in relating the scarcity of whales due to capture, but also by negotiating perceptions of whales as existing in their own right. In doing so, she positioned whale tourism as serving a protective function.

Identify to Connect: Feeding a Connection that Already Exists

For some insiders, identification was a key part of nurturing ongoing personal relations with whales. I first focus on Kent, a whale researcher revered by many insiders for a superb ability to identify quickly and accurately. Kent's story is both representative and exemplary: IDing was part of his daily practice as with many whale insiders, and he also was one of an elite group (which included a few select researchers, tour captains, and monitors) who the insider community turned to for the last word in ID disputes. If Kent said it was a particular whale, it was. One research assistant described the following scene from a coastline home the whales often swam by.

Last night, the sun was setting and the whales—the hydrophone was on—and they were filling the house. It almost brings you to tears. It was amazing. So, Kent's on the porch calling off the letters for the logs <chuckles kindly>—just like they're

his children. He wouldn't go to a party the other day because he was worried there was a chance he was going to miss a chance to ID some whales.

Insiders often described Kent's use of identification as mediating close, even familial relations with whales, at times in preference to socializing with people. Kent already had identified Southern Residents for nearly two decades when we interviewed.

The times have changed since I began, but the whales are still the same. It's fun seeing the kids get born and I have to stick around to see what they grow up to look like, how they turn out. And now, the babies I knew have kids of their own. It's fun seeing how everyone's doing every year. You know the big male who came by so close? When I first saw him he was 2. It's fun to see him grow up.

Here, Kent expressed relationally far more than merely identification of individuals by alphanumeric term. He mediated a very personal sense of connection, one that appeared strengthened through the act of identification over time and through the concurrent ability to follow unique individuals through their lifetimes.

Other whale insiders spoke of identification in personally connected terms. One naturalist discussed other insiders' ID abilities with admiration.

Some people can look at the whales and go, 'There's so and so, and so and so, and so and so,' as they come out of the water. For them, looking at the fins and patches is like looking at friends' faces.

Here again, IDing is characterized in terms of intimacy. The analogy of "friends' faces" positioned these parts of an orca as beloved familiar characteristics that signify close, positive relationships. Relatedly, early in my fieldwork when I was learning how people identified orcas, I was still land-oriented, used to see whole bodies of animals (including humans) and wanting to see faces to identify others. I had mentioned to one marine monitor that fins and saddlepatches were not a place my terrestrial eyes were trained to look. One day on the monitoring boat, J1, or Ruffles, surfaced nearby, his 6-foot-tall distinctively wavy dorsal fin rose grandly out of the water. Immediately, the others on board said, "J1," in unison. The volunteer turned to me.

Volunteer: I was thinking about what you said—that we ID by fin. It seems impersonal compared to the eyes or face, or seeing what they are doing under water.

Me: Does it seem impersonal?

Volunteer: Well, no, not to me.

The parts of an orca that to tourists, or landlubber newcomers like me, might have appeared as just another fin or smudge of gray, to insiders were inextricably connected to unique individuals. During my fieldwork, in getting to know water and whales, I experienced a transformation in how I understood the meaningfulness of identification acts. I first was often overwhelmed by the litany of alphanumeric or nominal names I heard each day; I scrambled to write them, often lost track, and grew frustrated I could not connect names to particular individuals or knowledge. As time passed, I began to recognize names and bodies of more regularly discussed whales and was able to become more observant, in part observing that prolonged practices of identification mediate ways of knowing that are both the means and ends of forging caring orientations to another species.

Identify to Connect: Seeding a Connection

The belief that identification could forge new human connections with whales was especially evident in insider interactions with visitors. The Whale Museum and other tourist educational forums centrally featured exhibits on the identification process in publically accessible formats. For instance, the museum devoted a wall to family trees of orca IDs and its gift shop sold laminated ID charts. These family trees and charts included an additional element not found in official ID charts used by insiders. Here, culturally gendered colors of pink, blue, and green or yellow tinted the alphanumeric/name plates to illustrate, respectively, female, male, or pre-puberty sex still unknown. This act of animalcentric anthropomorphism imposed Western visual codes on whale bodies, but also served to create possible points for visitor connection based on the cultural ease with which they could identify sex.

Indeed, tourists often used anthropomorphism in response to insiders identifying whales. Unlike insiders' more general strategic use of consubstantiality, such as fingerprints, tourist descriptors were often more acutely anthropomorphic. An example from the monitoring boat with a private boat when two nearby whales were sexually interacting:

Monitor boat driver: These two nearby whales are of L pod. One is a female in her 50s and the other is a male in his 20s.

Private boater: A December-May romance.

The boater, a woman also in her 50s, responded to specific sex and age details accessible only because of identification and likely evocative in part because of her own cultural positioning as a middle-aged woman. In turn, she used the details to inform an interpretation of whale-to-whale relations. While anthropomorphism is often inevitable and can be highly problematic in its anthropocentric form (for example when used to mask non-human animals' important distinctiveness), it can also, in its animalcentric form, be used strategically to find positive points of connection with the more than human world (de Waal, 2001). Here, the boater used personally salient cultural framings as points of positive identification.

Identify to Keep Track

Insiders identifying whales often sound like people catching up on mutual friends or acquaintances. In such communication, some people are more frequently the topic of conversation than others. A similar phenomenon takes place in discussions about the Southern Residents—some whales are more popular. One such whale was L57, or Faith, a young adult male, who during the part of summer 2005, was traveling with K and J pods instead of his own L pod. This was notable, as orcas usually stay with their matriarchal pod. L57 also was at the end of puberty, a fact of utmost importance on site where orca numbers were dwindling and many adult males were suspected by scientists to be sterile or dying before reaching full reproductive maturity due to exposure to persistent human-created toxins (Ross, 2000, 2006).¹¹ Likely, due to L57's status as a hope for the reproductive future, insiders often remarked on him being a

particularly handsome whale and some discussed having a “crush” on him. When L57 was traveling with K and J pods, one researcher said:

At first we were joking and giving L57 a hard time that he was getting some. But then we noticed that he was hanging out with the other males consistently [*he lists whom; I don't catch the IDs*] and having guy time. He has no family members. His mother died and he doesn't have an uncle or siblings.

Here, identification was used to keep track in a particularly social way, both among speakers and in terms of framing L57's own social experience. Identification-based knowledge of L57's familial history centrally informed communication, as did heteronormative anthropomorphic assumptions. Important here, too, is the unspoken but implicit use of identification to keep track of a population's health by focusing on a key individual.

Insiders' shared knowledge about human-caused ills facing male whales led to many indirect discussions about health status (e.g. “J27 is looking really good. He's going to be a good looking whale.”). In addition, as many calves die, often due to drinking bioaccumulated human pollutants in their mothers' milk, insiders closely followed births and status of babies. Identification talk on and off the marine radio always peaked when insiders spotted calves. The flurry of identification around young males and babies signified insider concern for this endangered community's survival, and exemplified ways insiders implicitly connected identification and ecological interdependence in high-context settings.

Instances of using identification to keep track, however, were not limited to especially vulnerable whales. Insiders used identification to keep track of the range of orcas who traveled in the area, discussing particular groups or individuals often as they came into view, and creating logs for their own or others' research. Another day at Whale Watch Park, Sally and Tom, volunteers who helped officially ID orcas, were recording photos and IDs as K pod passed. Sally spoke, IDing the leading whale as Lummi, the then oldest matriarch among the Southern Residents. Sally took Lummi's photo and Tom wrote down Lummi's alphanumeric ID. The orcas were swimming very fast with the current. Tom and Sally's voices were excited and happy. Several times, they made statements such as, “Do you know who that is with so and so?” and “That's interesting!”

While IDing served official and unofficial regulatory purposes of keeping track of orca population numbers and individuals in ways that might point to their well-being as an endangered group, IDing on a day-to-day level also provided a basis for insiders to check in with lives of individual whales and families, to storytell about whales' lives, and to socialize with one another about whales—beings with whom speakers shared a particularly deep connection. As mentioned above, sometimes this particular kind of IDing sounded like catching up on mutual friends (e.g. “Do you know who that is with so and so?” “That's interesting!”). In these ways, communication around IDing and keeping track was often distinctly personal, enjoyable, and clearly centered on familiars.

Discussion

As mentioned, wildlife tourism is a practice and industry based upon pointing and naming, showing and telling. This study focused on a particular transnational case, one that revolves around an endangered species and has the highest concentration of whale tourism in the world. In this place, I focused on ways identification practices and meanings shaped ecocultural relations. My interpretations of the history, contexts, and contemporary uses of identification are in league with Carbaugh's (1996) assertion that such case studies enable both a comparative assessment of available means for understanding and evaluating nature and an analysis of the attendant attitudes such discourses may cultivate and constrain. In what follows, I first explicate cultivations in the form of symbolic–material transformations, focusing on the inter-relations of discursive, perceptual, behavioral, and political change. I then outline an important constraint, the near absence of the ecological, and explore implications of an ecological–individual dialectic.

Whale insiders associated the original identification act of assigning each whale a unique alphanumeric term with a cultural paradigm shift, as mediating important perceptual transformations not only about population numbers, but also about whale uniqueness, relations, and lives. In turn, a supportive climate emerged for change in practice and policy (from unregulated deadly industry captures to North American anti-capture laws). Whale researcher Alexandra Morton (2002, p. 148) succinctly summarizes this linkage between symbolic identification and material change: “A wondrous thing happens when an animal moves from population status to individual standing: It can no longer be treated with impunity.”

If one views culture as working like a repertoire from which people draw meanings and cultivate capacities they integrate into larger, more stable “strategies of action” (Swidler, 2001), study participants can be understood as using nature identification to mediate particular meanings and create larger strategies of action, including to protect, connect with, and keep track of whales. Indeed, this examination of identification practices helps elucidate ways in which culture is put to use to produce perceptions of and practical alignments with nature.

In contemporary identification practice in this site, we saw whales move from mass to count noun; instead of animals who represent the category of whale, many encountered individuals with unique histories and relationships. Identification usage disrupted a dominant Western ideological assumption that each non-human animal is a replaceable categorical unit with a contrasting notion of intrinsically valued individuals (Stibbe, 2001). In addition, identification mediated syntax and associated meanings, shifting whales from objects one sees to complex subjects one caringly considers (“she” or “he” or “they still live with their moms”). Whereas Harré et al. (1999) argue syntax in Western discourse can obstruct clear thought about humanature, framing relations as causal with humans as agent and nature as object, in this Western case study identification practices positioned whales as active agents and sometimes interactive subjects.

The act of identification also opens channels to listening to nature (Carbaugh, 1999), illustrating that abstract nature representations can have restorative potential despite important concerns expressed by Abram (1997) and others, and even in categorizing forms such as alphanumeric codes. Identification combined with phenomenological intersections in whale watch settings mediated particular moments of meaning: whales surfaced to breathe and their identifying fins and backs necessarily pierced the air, creating not only profoundly sensible humanature but also, to the receptive, multi-faceted messages of individuality and connection. Identification became a way of sensing and, at times, a means to strategically speak for nature, effectively voicing those who are not heard and challenging anthropocentric orientations (Plumwood, 1997).

Tour naturalists and visitor centers used identification to convey nature's messages about orca scarcity, matriarchal cultures, and the ills of captures, often invoking consubstantiality (Burke, 1950, 1984). In comparing whale identifier markings to "human fingerprints" or orca dialects to human, human and whale became aligned in embodied similarity. Human-orca shared substance was also evoked in biological, cultural, and mythological forms. Sowards (2006), who argues an emphasis on consubstantiality can help overcome human-nature binaries, found similar forms in her endangered orangutan study. One comparative example includes regional First Nations tribes positioning orcas as a tribe that walked on the land at night and Indonesian indigenous people considering orangutans human descendents who chose to live separately.

In this site, consubstantiality did at least two types of transformative work. First, through identifying via shared substance, people recognized individuals in another species as unique. Second, consubstantiality both reinforced and seeded human association with whales, constructing embodied and existential similarities. This phenomenon reflects Burke's notion of identification, which points to rhetoric being used in a range of ways to pursue alignment, or to move away from human states of isolation (Burke, 1950; Heath, 1986).

Most one-time tourist positive identification experiences depended additionally upon animalcentric anthropomorphism, which de Waal (2001) argues can be a powerful tool for creating positive identification and Sowards (2006) also found prevalent in orangutan identification. Educational settings employed animalcentric anthropomorphism to seed connections with whales, and visitors independently used personally salient cultural tropes. Scientists packaged early public messages of dire orca population drops within discoveries of orca matriarchal culture and, later, distinct pod dialects, details that evoked notions of both similarity and respected difference.

Insiders were less reliant on anthropomorphism in their identification practices and more likely to highlight social interdependence, both human to whale (people were able to "know" and feel connected to whales) and whale to whale (whales were engaged in complex relations). Though Harré et al. point to syntax patterns in many non-industrial cultures' languages possessing more refined resources than European languages for framing reality as interdependent instead of causal (for particular

examples, see Armstrong, 1995; Valladolid & Apffel-Marglin, 2001), using English in Canada and the USA, insiders framed human nature reality as interdependent. They did so most notably to mediate connection with whales and to keep track both for social and, implicitly, whale survival purposes. Nearly entirely missing in identification practices, however, were framings of ecological interdependence.

This case study illustrates nature identification as an important symbolic act that cultivates material change, yet constraints emerge when it came to ecosystemic change. I posit these cultural constraints are largely ideological, contextual, and embedded in Western ecocultural discourse. In order to challenge these constraints, I suggest strategic integration of an *ecological–individual dialectic* in identification practices. This dialectic would emphasize both collective and entity, both interdependence and uniqueness. For wildlife tourism to live up to its restorative claims, the industry must affect ecological perception and practice, and engaging powerful identification practices with ecocentric discourse could be highly effective. Scientists in their research and whale insiders in communication among themselves come closest to employing an ecological–individual dialectic, but the use is implicit, high context, and/or opaque to the wider public.

While the whales, and their ecosystem, face extreme human-generated ecological crises, speakers did not overtly link identification discourse with information about whales' endangered status. Identification's emphasis on the individual as opposed to population may not fit with culturally accessible endangered species discourse. Yet endangered species rulings might encounter more public understanding and compliance if the forces of both identification and ecocentric discourse were integrated into communication outreach at a public scale. Such communication would differ remarkably from existing endangered species discourse, which has long emphasized the population over the individual—yet neither populations nor individuals will survive if their ecosystems are not rightly perceived and protected as endangered, as well.

Another possible constraint is that, though identification's focus on the individual may frame whales as subjects, in familial relationships, and unique and intrinsically valued, the cultural discourse of the individual does not appear equivalent for other elements of the ecosystem. Instead, the culturally celebrated whales become unique focal points set against a varied yet consistently anonymous environmental backdrop (Milstein, 2008). In fact, identification practices appear not only to discern particular parts of nature as unique, but also as especially marked and considered, producing notions of special parts of nature, independent and separate from a less special ecosystem. Alphanumeric IDs or individual names do not grace the salmon upon whom orcas depend, the ocean currents they navigate, or the kelp beds within which they feed. Whales, and other global charismatic megafauna, claim a culturally cherished status, enjoying and enduring focused attention. This production is remarkably anthropomorphically similar to ways Western industrialized humans have largely differentiated themselves as especially unique and separate from a natural environment. Such hierarchical and binary discourses of individuality, while potentially valuable when more closely considering an aspect of nature (be it whale

or human), may supersede discursive channels that inform narratives of complex interdependence and reciprocity, narratives that are imperative if entire ecosystems, their interrelated parts and processes, are to flourish.

Sowards (2006) argues that advocates assume positive identification will motivate those who strongly connect with an endangered species to also care for their ecosystems, yet that positive identification with one species is no guarantee of similar connection with their habitat. It's abundantly clear, in the cases of orcas, orangutans, and other endangered species that their survival depends upon positive identification that radiates beyond individual to ecosystem. A tremendous opportunity may lie in an ecological–individual dialectic to effectively integrate an ecocentric lens with the individualizing and connecting lens of identification, especially in humanature sites where identification practices have had such notable effects. One implication of this study is a suggestion for naturalists, researchers, government officials, and others who interact directly with the public or policy to more *explicitly take up individual animal's stories in interwoven ecological contexts*. Such ecologically overt uses of identification could bring the power of knowing and relating to nature into ecoculturally restorative alignment.

In one example I presented, a naturalist effectively used identification to guide tourists to make linkages among personalizing individuality of whales, implicating their own role in humanity's wider capture practices, and positioning whales as wild creatures not "circus clowns." While this example does not entail pressing ecological risks, such as human-caused pollution, overfishing, and vessel traffic, explicit pairing of identification practice with more systemic information about human destructive actions did successfully engage listeners in some dialog, mediating perceptions that informed one form of whale protection.

The ecological–individual dialectic likely would meet cultural and contextual resistance. Whereas scientists currently employ identification as a research baseline to pinpoint individuals to study ecocultural impacts and insiders implicitly use the dialectic in high-context conversations about particular whales, the ecological–individual dialectic needs to be more overtly and publicly engaged in settings such as wildlife tourism. Yet commercial nature tourism generally does not include challenges to one's lifestyle or deep questioning of the world as one knows it. It is one thing as a tourist, expecting to be entertained first and educated second, to learn whales are unique familial individuals, but quite another to learn the continuing existence of 99-year-old Granny (J2) or handsome and hopeful Faith (L57) is at profound risk, that practices of one's species are to blame, and that one must and can work to change these practices at individual and systemic scales. Such challenging public discourse, however, is what is needed to culturally shift from a place of complacency to a place of readiness for essential alterations in how we perceive and behave as inter-related parts of the biosphere.

Future research should examine potential uses and implications of an ecological–individual dialectic. In addition, studies should probe constraints. For instance, how might the dialectic falter in cases of less individually identifiable aspects of nature, such as salmon or giant squid, or how might normative frameworks for identification

practices, such as anthropomorphism or ownership, foreclose ecocentric discourses? Future exploration also might consider the complexities of nature identification by examining individualizing acts in a wider range of locations and contexts, and with flora or fauna beyond orcas and orangutans. If, as the tour captain remarked, “people have this insatiable desire to point at and name things,” continued research will help further illuminate the ways such foundational communicative acts of nature discernment serve to mediate perceptions of and practices with the living world.

Notes

- [1] I use the compound terms *humanature* and *ecoculture* throughout my writing as a way to reflexively engage human and nature, ecology and culture, in integral conversation in research as they are in life. These symbolic moves are turns away from binary constructs and notions of “the environment” and turns toward lexical–reciprocal intertwining. These moves are in league with Haraway’s (2008) use of “*naturecultures*” to encompass nature and culture as inter-related historical and contemporary entities.
- [2] Though orcas are technically dolphins, they are popularly referred to as whales. As a range of study participants, from government officials to scientists to tourists, also overwhelmingly referred to orcas as whales in conversation, I refer to them as such to reflect participant and popular Western naming practices.
- [3] Such vessel traffic dangers range from oil tanker spills, to military vessel sonar testing, to the increased and intensive presence of whale watch boats creating engine exhaust in breathing zones and other stresses that may also hinder hunting of a now meager fish supply.
- [4] Wild orca researchers argue against ongoing captivity as no scientific evidence supports exhibitor claims that conservation education provided to spectators is effective in changing behaviors in ways that benefit wild whales or their habitats, and as wild whale research is not contingent on information learned from captives, whose artificial environment, lack of space, and dead fish diet make them inappropriate proxies for wild counterparts (Belli, 2010).
- [5] An example of a strategic use of communication to mediate cultural perception can be seen in advocates’ similarly timed highly successful push to change popular naming of this species from killer whales (a moniker handed down from Portuguese and Spanish descriptive naming of whales who kill whales, “whale killers,” which was not transposed in translation for English usage) to an abbreviated version of their scientific name, *orca*. Though the Latin-derived *orca* means belonging to the realm of the dead, negative connotations do not append popular Western usage. No reports exist of an orca fatally attacking a human in the wild and only two exist of physical contact between wild orca and human: one in the 1970s of an orca biting and immediately releasing a surfer and one in 2005 of an orca bumping a child’s chest in four feet of water and immediately rushing back out to deeper water (Belli, 2010). Therefore, advocates argue, the name killer whale has been both misleading and prejudicing.
- [6] Researchers using Bigg’s identification schema have compiled annual photo-identification inventories of the Southern Resident population since 1973 (The Center for Whale Research, 2009). Many of the area’s approximately 100 whale tour boats carry updated photo identification charts on board as a form of reference among whale insiders and with tourists to identify which whales they are seeing. Marine monitoring boats also carry this chart onboard. Whale insiders who go to San Juan Island’s Lime Kiln State Park, also called Whale Watch Park, also at times carry this chart with them. The charts arrange whale photos in family trees. Births are marked, as are deaths.

- [7] An orca's number also generally identifies the generation, as the earliest orcas identified received the first numbers (e.g. the 96-year-old matriarch of J pod is J2, while whale insiders identified J45 as a newborn calf of J11 in 2009).
- [8] As briefly mentioned, researchers have found that, though the orca pods often intermingle, each of the three Southern Resident pods maintains a distinct dialect. This information about orca communication points to emergent directions for considering communication outside the human realm.
- [9] Many naturalists and other insiders used alphanumeric identifiers as well as names that insiders and later the public have given individual whales via international contests now run by San Juan Island's Whale Museum. While comparisons of name and alphanumeric identifier use are very interesting in terms of ecocultural relations (including issues of anthropomorphism and individuality, and of the cultural and social capital embedded in objective scientific naming versus subjective naming), space does not allow me to adequately address these important differences in this article.
- [10] While at the time of this interaction, these guidelines were voluntary, as of 2008 safe boating guidelines around the whales became both county and state law and likely were on their way to becoming national law on both sides of the border.
- [11] Male whales die from pollutants much sooner than females as females inadvertently pass on some of the toxins inside their bodies to their nursing offspring. The majority of firstborn wild orcas die, likely as a result of this intense intake of human-introduced pollutants from their mothers' milk. Without new reproductively viable males, the endangered Southern Resident orcas are in great peril.

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