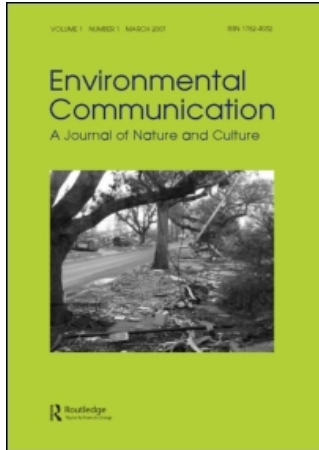


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When Whales “Speak for Themselves”: Communication as a Mediating force in Wildlife Tourism

Tema Milstein

The case study for this ethnographic investigation is communication within the highest concentration of whale watch operations in the world, located in transnational waters of the North Pacific. The author explores this Western cultural setting in an effort to expand upon the culturally and environmentally inclusive conceptual framework of communication as a mediating force of human–nature relations. The author finds that a range of study participants view communication as human–nature transactional. The interpretations point to ways in which Westerners in a wildlife tourism setting may value silence as communicative of a co-expressive existence with nature, may be frustrated by the limitations of culturally particular tools of language for conveying knowledge of or experiences with nature, may credit nature with “speaking” in ways that serve specific functions and may be used to justify tourism endeavors, and may position particular wildlife as icons that illuminate problematic human–nature relations or that isolate such wildlife from wider eco-cultural relationships.

Keywords: Culture; Nature; Mediation; Discourse; Ecotourism; Whale Watch Tourism; Wildlife; Human–Nature Relations; Ethnography; Participant Observation; Southern Resident Killer Whales; Orcas

Tourism has grown internationally in recent years to constitute the largest business sector in the world economy. Yet, as of 2004, ecotourism and nature tourism were growing globally three times faster than the tourism industry as a whole (The International Ecotourism Society, 2005). This essay examines a popular international site of nature tourism to explore how communication may serve as a mediating force of human–nature relations in burgeoning sites of intersecting cultures and natures.

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In particular, this study looks at wildlife tourism. Reynolds and Braithwaite (2001) define wildlife tourism as “an area of overlap between nature-based tourism, ecotourism, consumptive use of wildlife, rural tourism, and human relations with animals” (p. 32). The case study is a communication-steeped site of wildlife tourism located off the Pacific Coast of Canada and the United States. This transbordered marine environment supports the highest concentration of whale watch tourism in the world.¹

I explore this Western cultural setting in an effort to expand upon the culturally and environmentally inclusive theory of communication as a mediating force of human–nature relations. Within this conceptual framework, I situate the study in recent site-specific human–nature transformations and local and popular cultural framings of both captive and wild whales. Via ethnographic participant observation, I examine particular themes about mediation, finding that a range of study participants view communication as human–nature transactional.

My interpretations point to ways in which Westerners in a wildlife tourism setting may value silence as communicative of a co-expressive existence with nature, may be frustrated by the limitations of culturally particular tools of language for conveying particular knowledge of or experiences with nature, may credit nature with “speaking” in specific ways that serve specific functions and may be used to justify tourism endeavors, and may position particular wildlife as icons that illuminate problematic human–nature relations or that isolate such wildlife from wider eco-cultural relationships. I close with discussion about how these explorations might extend our understanding of communication as a mediating force of human–nature relations.

Communication as a Mediating Force

This research is part of a larger conversation within environmental communication and interdisciplinary circles in which a central objective is to interrogate how communication as a cultural text mediates human relations with nature (Cox, 2007). This approach follows theories that assert humans produce, reproduce, and resist both perceptions and praxis of nature through communication. Such a line of questioning acknowledges the role of power in the human–nature relationship in that humans have the opportunity to frame nature to evoke certain meanings, and these meanings, in turn, mediate environmental understanding and material practices.

In addition, the use of the term “mediate” opens exploration to processes extending beyond human discourse. A look at how communication mediates human–nature relations can include a study of not only human communicative processes but also communicative aspects of nature (Milburn interview with Donal Carbaugh, 2007). In this way, exploring the mediating role of communication also allows for an exploration of environmental co-presence, of nature as “speaking” and humans and nature in forms of conversation. This nature-inclusive view of mediation addresses concerns in the environmental communication field that a scholarly focus

purely on human discourse can sometimes serve to ignore or obfuscate nature’s agency, reproducing views of nature as mute object.

While these concerns are voiced in the field, little work has been done within or outside the field to empirically illustrate ways in which humans view nature as participating in the communicative experience. Exceptions include work by Basso (1996), Carbaugh (1999), and Valladolid and Apffel-Marglin (2001). Carbaugh (1999) ethnographically explores members of the Blackfoot tribe’s form of “listening” to nature as a cultural form of communication, and examines how this form of sensing nature supports a highly reflective and revelatory mode of nonverbal communication that opens one to relations between natural and human forms and provides protection, power, and enhanced knowledge of one’s small place in the world. Basso’s (1996) work on landscape and language among members of the Western Apache tribe examines how some tribe members evoke names of natural places to connect present-day personal occurrences to ancestral stories that occurred in and were connected to those places. Valladolid’s and Apffel-Marglin’s (2001) work on Andean cosmovision describes a multi-voiced nature–human conversation perceived within indigenous *campesino* culture as both creating and nurturing biodiversity—such communication assumes all the complication characteristic of the living world and involves the experiences and senses of all human and nonhuman “persons” in a conversation of reciprocal nurturance within the cycles of life.

One striking similarity in the above examples is that each emanates from a study of indigenous cultures. I argue it is equally important to investigate how “the verbal is instrumental in knowing nature” and “how nature ‘speaks’” (Milburn interview with Donal Carbaugh, 2007, p. 1) within contemporary Western discourse, as such discourse is largely viewed as perpetuating and propagating not only Western but also often global notions and practices of humans as separate from and superior to a voiceless nature.

One way into such an investigation is with attention to the mediating force of everyday communication processes. As Cameron (1998) argues, meaning is not fixed nor handed down by fiat—rather, meaning is socially constructed, or continually negotiated and modified in everyday interaction. By looking at everyday discourse in a charged and visceral Western site of relations between humans and wild nature, my intention is to ground the investigation in the performance and negotiation of such communication in a culturally situated human–nature intersection and to interrogate the type of communication in which “the terms, rules, and premises of a culture are inextricably woven” (Philipsen, 1992, p. 131).

Pacific US–Canada Transbordered Whale Watching

The case study for this research provides an intensive microcosm of human–nature relations in cultural and environmental transformation. The tourism industry under study is largely focused on a community of endangered orcas (*orcinus orca*), or killer whales,² who frequent the waters of coastal Washington state and British Columbia. In the past 50 years, this particular group of orcas has undergone major discursive

shifts in human perception and praxis. Since the 1950s, these orcas have symbolically and materially transformed from dangerous villains targeted by military bombing practice and fishing industry bullets, to entertainers captured to perform for paying marine park audiences, to environmental icons sought out in the wild and heeded as the pulse of oceanic health. In November 2005, the pendulum of this human–nature relationship swung further when the US government followed the path of Canada and announced a surprise ruling designating the 80+ area orcas endangered under the Federal Endangered Species Act.

What explains the shift from bombing target to cultural and ecological icon? The answer, though only in part, is the rise of a tourism industry that has helped inform nature–human relations by providing a wider public access to the whales. This access has enabled a specific range of discourse about nature that this essay begins to explore.

In her work on the use of “toxic tours,” Pezzullo (2007) notes that though the “exploitive possibilities of tourism remain important to consider, tourism also suggests opportunities for embodied engagement, counterexperiences of everyday life, education, interpretation, and advocacy” (p. 50). Although the type of tourism under study here is not directed by a focus on environmental justice and instead by a largely conventional and likely more potentially exploitive commercial focus, wildlife tours do serve as unique communicative sites where tourists are brought in close proximity to nature, at times allowing for such opportunities of embodied engagement and such counterexperiences.

The regional whale watch tourism industry under study has substantively existed for just over 20 years. Founders of tours in the area were first and foremost concerned about the whales—Greenpeace, in fact, ran one of the earliest tours. When the initial commercial company began to offer regular tours shortly thereafter, the local American-based and scientific- and advocacy-focused Whale Museum worked closely with the company and supplied tour naturalists.

Whereas certain environmental justice groups appropriate tourism discourse to create a pragmatic way of communicating about injustices in their socio-economically and environmentally marginalized toxic neighborhoods (Pezzullo, 2007), whale watching efforts in this area began with similar pragmatic intentions. Unlike toxic tours, however, this form of wildlife tourism was not mainly focused on revealing environmental poisons introduced by humans (although the whales were and increasingly are full of these poisons). Instead, early whale watch tours were focused on the exciting experience of being near the whales themselves—an experience tour organizers hoped would help align tourists with the whales and, in the process, their plight against captures, harm, and pollution.

The focus on excitement and enjoyment of being around the whales makes it not surprising that whale watching quickly caught on as a commercially successful venture. Replacing Greenpeace-style efforts, small, profit-driven companies dedicated to bringing tourists to see the whales began to proliferate. In the mid-1990s, the movie *Free Willy* created a boom in area business.³ Concurrently, public whale watching from the shore at the American San Juan Island’s Whale Watch Park⁴

increased from the park's opening in 1984 to a contemporary count of 200,000 annual visitors.

Today, the transbordered area supports not only the highest concentration of whale watching but also one of the fastest growing whale tourism industries in the world, supporting a multi-million dollar Canadian and American tourism industry that runs about 100 tour boats and annually draws more than 500,000 people who hope to see the whales from sea, land, and air (Koski & Osborne, 2005). The industry, however, is also culturally and environmentally contested—it is seen both as a vehicle that has the potential to connect people with whales and their habitat and a threat to whales with the introduction of risks via engine noise, engine exhaust in their breathing zone, and increased stresses.

The community of endangered orcas⁵ central to this human activity, and to this study, was also the first in the world to be targeted for capture by aquariums and marine parks—and the first to perform in Sea World shows under the moniker "Shamu."⁶ Some study participants refer to these captive orcas as serving as spokespeople, or ambassadors, for their remaining wild relatives. Ironically, while entertainment industry captures of area orcas traumatized individual orcas and devastated their populations, the captive whales may have helped create an environment where the public for the first time was receptive to, and concerned about, whales.

In these captive settings, the mass public came close to whales for the first time. Performances constructed the human-whale relationship often in a non-fearful and highly anthropomorphic way. Instead of fearing or hating the whales, people began to find they could relate to whales and care about them. In this way, the orcas, in their embodied presence and interaction within particular human framing, helped mediate human perceptions of whales. This likely led the more politically attentive public to be receptive to concurrent non-entertainment industry messages about the human-caused dangers faced by wild whales.

Of course, the messages of these captive orcas were and are highly mediated by the corporate entertainment industry. The symbolic-material packaging at Sea World, for instance, constructs the visitors' experience with orcas as a "magical," "touching" experience that brings the worlds of nature and humans together (Davis, 1996). While the present study is focused on the role of communication in wild whale tourism, studies of the cultural and performative components in captive whale tourism provide insight into cultural constructions that serve to inform experiences of wild whale watching.

Davis (1997), for example, argues that Sea World embeds corporate messages in particular representations of nature and in the living creatures it displays, arranges, and choreographs, including Shamu. Yet, while nature is packaged as a commodity for sale in its own right, nature is also in another sense not just another product. Oceanic nature culturally carries particularly salient meanings. The theme parks' constructed underwater worlds "can seem especially remote, deep, and endless, free of boundaries and limits. Such nature visions promise transcendence of the polluted and conflictual social world on land, even while we realize that they are in fact

terrestrial and artificial, highly processed commodities” (p. 30). Davis examines Sea World’s framing of captive orcas as both a free and powerful wild that humans long to connect to and as a trademarked and fetishized commodity that people consume through the character of Shamu. These two dominant themes at Sea World “simultaneously sacralize and trivialize Shamu: the whale is simultaneously a transcendent being and a souvenir” (p. 223).

Desmond (1999) points to other methods of symbolic transcendence of nature–human divides employed at Sea World, including the incorporation of orcas into the cultural ideals of the heterosexual family structure. In one Shamu show, for example, the finale involves an orca sliding out of the pool and a trainer placing a small child from the audience on the broad back of the whale. At the same time, audience members hear a soft-rock song that earlier accompanied an appearance by “Baby Shamu,” an orca calf born in captivity. The final image of the human child safely astride Shamu on dry land with the “Baby Shamu” song accompaniment symbolizes both predominant themes of the marinepark show at once: the “crossing of the species (hence, nature/culture) border, and the emphasis on family as the paradigm for all relationships” (pp. 234–235). These two themes bridge divides between water and land, human and animal, and performance space and audience, and this bridging constitutes the fundamental utopian appeal of the show.

While such commercially appealing representations can serve to inform tourist experiences of wild whale tourism, they are not reflective of orca realities or wild orca–human relations. Perhaps not surprisingly, orcas do not organize themselves within Western heteronormative human family structures. Instead, orcas organize themselves in extended, highly cohesive, multi-generational matriarchal pods that the captivity of orcas deeply disrupts. And such an experience of a human sitting on a whale would be highly illegal in the wild under North American marine mammal protective acts.

Methods, Texts, and Interpretations

In 2008, I entered my fourth year as a participant observer within the whale watch tourism scene. During summer tourist seasons, I observe communication taking place in American and Canadian waters on whale watch boats of all sizes (from kayaks to 60-person tour boats). I also volunteer and observe on a marine monitoring boat that monitors the international whale watch industry and educates private boaters about whale watch guidelines. In addition, I observe communication on land at American shore-based public whale watch sites.

I have gathered and coded more than 1,000 single-spaced typed pages of fieldnotes on the communication of three main groups: naturalists and captains in the whale watch industry who serve as guides and translators in this human–nature intersection; marine monitor staff and volunteers who serve as moderators between the marine life and the increasing number of humans drawn to them; and tourists who often arrive conveying their own preconceptions and sometimes negotiate new meanings during their brief experience. The fourth group I observe are the orcas

themselves—the largest species of the dolphin family, the top predator in the oceans, and a matriarchal and highly vocally sophisticated mammal who is also the most widely distributed mammal on earth (Elder, 2001; Osborne, 1999). These whales generally serve as the living discursive touchstone for my observations of human communication. Study participants also include others engaged with the whales and the flora and fauna of their habitat, including island locals, state and federal government workers, scientists, fishing industry members, and First Nations tribe members.

In the following sections, I describe, interpret, and discuss particular themes I have generated from my observations of these participant groups. These themes, which illustrate issues of communication as a mediating force in human–nature relations, include the notion of an absence of words (in two very different forms: first, expressive human silence and, second, a perceived cultural lack of words to adequately express one’s experience with nature), the notion of whales who “speak for themselves” and this belief’s centrality to tourism endeavors, and the notion of whales as icons and the range of communicative work done by iconic status.

The Absence of Words

While the site for this case study is notable in part because of its abundance of communication about human–nature relations, many participants appear to associate particular meaningfulness with not talking and, at times, express the notion that “no words” exist to express understandings, emotions, or meanings. Such statements, widely distributed among a range of participants and situations, exhibit specific notions about communication as it mediates human–nature relations. I look at two quite different forms of the absence of words, each a communicative phenomenon in its own right: participant meanings of silence, or expressing oneself by not speaking, and participant experience of not having words when choosing to speak.

Silence. One naturalist talks about a particular moment on a whale watch boat:

Like this mother I saw playing with her baby. She lifts him up, over and over, and you can hear her saying like, “Oh, you’re so cute, you’re soooo cute.” And nobody talked while that was happening.

During this human–nature encounter, all the passengers on the boat were silent for an intimate and recognizable moment the naturalist describes as one whale playing with her baby. Silence here, as highlighted by the naturalist, appears to connote a collective human sense of a shared experience with the whales. The naturalist characterizes this moment by describing what “you can hear” the mother whale “saying” to her baby. Here, while the people are silent, the naturalist characterizes the whales as in active communication.

One local speaks of a different kind of shared experience and its associations with silence:

They are just so spiritual. I was at Lime Kiln [Whale Watch Park] once when a superpod came by. After they left, we were walking back to the cars with these other people who saw them. And there was this silence as we walked; we all knew we had shared this experience.

Here, silence appears to connote a collective knowing with other people who happen to be at the park when a superpod (all three family pods of Southern Residents) swims by. In this sense, the sharing of “this experience” with nature is unspoken, and conveyed by the silence. Silence, here, also appears to connect to the local’s sense of the “spiritual.” As such, the collective silence may allow for the expression of and immersion in the spiritual.

The two examples above refer to moments of meaningful collective human silence with whales and with each other. Participants also at times characterize instances of individual silences as referring to meaningful experiences with whales. One local speaks about another person’s experience.

I know this woman with a kayak and she and her husband cut out the bottom and put Plexiglas in so she can take photos. This orca swam under their boat and looked up at her. She just saw this big eye looking at her and this body slide by. I’m sure the whale was curious, ‘What is this thing?’ They were talking to me about it, and the husband was behind, steering, and didn’t have that view and could talk fine. But she was beside herself. She couldn’t talk. She was speechless trying to tell me about it. Later she wrote me an email and said that she could write about what happened, but she still couldn’t talk.

The speaker in this case situates the woman’s silence as not merely a choice but as an inability to talk, a sense of speechlessness. In this case, we cannot know whether the woman who had the experience chose not to speak. What is clear is that she presented herself as speechless after a particularly close experience with an orca. Here again, the teller of the story situates the orca as a communicative participant, positioning the whale as curious and questioning.

As a participant observer, I had experiences with silence and with breaking silences about experiences that were particularly meaningful to me. I provide one further example that includes my internal as well as external dialogue to explore the notion of silence and, in this case, the deliberate choice to be speechless. The following is an excerpt from fieldnotes on a whale watch tour near the start of my fieldwork:

I see a baby swimming close to an adult female. As the adult rises out of the water, the baby is pressed to her side. They come right up next to the boat. The baby must be under a year, born this summer, as her/his markings are orange instead of pure white. I’ve only heard of this newborn orca color, but I’ve never seen this orange color vividly before and can’t quite believe it. I am amazed as they rise just below me at the side of the boat and the baby is now pressed to the adult diagonally over her back. This time, the adult rises higher than before, flipping the baby forward, tail almost over head. I gasp, delighted with what I’ve just witnessed only a few meters away. I am alone at the rail since whales are all around us and people are looking in every direction. I look for someone to tell, but don’t find anyone who seems to have seen it. So, I say quietly to whoever is nearby, ‘Did anyone see that baby just do a flip over the adult?’ No answer to a question that wasn’t really aimed

at anyone. But I immediately and distinctly feel that this speaking on my part reduced some power of the experience.

While I felt a pressing need to verbally share the experience, I also directly experienced a sense of loss after speaking. My words did not do justice to my feelings at that moment. In fact, the words I chose encapsulated the moment in partial meaning, situating the whales as separate visual objects instead of as connected somehow, as I had felt, in a more expansive and meaningful co-presence. After this, when I had future moments in which I felt connected in some way in the presence of the whales, I often chose not to communicate verbally with other people. My silences may or may not have communicated meanings with the people around me, but my silences had particular intrapersonal meaning, serving to keep the emergent significance of moments with the whales internally intact.

From my observations, I interpreted that study participants at times see silence as mediating a shared experience with whales or other people, or as mediating an experience shared with whales that could not or should not to be shared with other people. The meaning of silences also sometimes includes the notion of listening to whales in active communication or the notion of a spiritual element of being in the proximity of whales. In each sense, a certain human–nature relational meaningfulness is measured by a lack of verbal communication among people.

“*There are no words*”. While some participants characterize silence as meaningful, many choose to talk. In this talk, one theme that arises is a notion that there is a shortage of words or vocabulary to convey adequately this nature–human intersection. I offer a few illustrative examples.

A tourist speaks just after a whale surfaces particularly close to the whale watch boat, close enough for her to hear the whale breathe.

The neatest part I think is hearing the whale. There are no words. Cool, awesome, that just isn’t enough.

A whale advocate, Lou, talks about another whale advocate named Gail and how he perceives her relationship with the whales.

Gail gets that whale energy. She gives me a look that says she knows what I’m talking about. You can see it in her eyes. But she doesn’t have the words. She doesn’t have the language to express it . . . It exists in other cultures, like Hopi, aboriginal languages, Tibetan, and other languages influenced by Buddhism.

A local speaks of a recent experience:

A whale came so close to the shore; I could have reached down and touched them. I don’t have words. What do you say? It was awesome. I just don’t have the vocabulary < 3 second pause > I mean, they are so different. Iconic. It’s moving.

Each participant describes not having the “words,” “language,” or “vocabulary” when it comes to giving voice to one’s own experience, knowledge, or feelings of being near or relating with whales. Lou asserts that, in contrast, some other cultures do have the words; in this way, he notably situates the communication resources available as culturally particular.

I offer one additional example provided by a whale watch boat captain who speaks of his experience and what he maintains other people on the boat experience at times with the whales.

The whole world makes sense for a moment seeing these whales. A lot of people would call it a religious experience, but it's more than that. All the puzzle pieces fit together. And you try to explain it to someone and it's gone—but you never forget it.

Here, the captain asserts that communicative attempts to convey deeply meaningful or clarifying encounters with the whales defy description. However, despite this ineffable quality, such moments remain internally intact.

In pointing out ways in which the words and explanatory tools available are in some ways insufficient to convey experiences, relations, realizations, or feelings one has with whales, speakers implicitly and explicitly make visible certain Western cultural boundaries. In such cases, verbal communication appears to be a limited cultural resource in socially mediating human–nature relations. Simultaneously, some speakers characterize the particular human–nature meaningfulness they experience as internally enduring.

Whales “Speak for Themselves”

On one whale watch boat, I stand next to a tourist visiting from Virginia. I ask why he and his family came on the tour, and he frames his comments by first saying that he and his partner are environmentally aware. The two of them want to expose their kids to

cool, interesting things in nature. Things they might not be able to see later. We knew our kids would be interested in nature once they saw the whales. You can't help but be entranced by the whales. Those are things that kind of speak for themselves.

The participant asserts that wild endangered whales, by their very communicative presence, have the ability to interest people not only in whales, but also more widely in nature or the environment. In this section, I focus on this notion that whales “speak for themselves,” a notion I identify as a central underlying claim of whale watch tourism. Sub-themes under this claim include whales bringing people *in touch* with nature, whales influencing people *to learn* about whales and ecosystems, and whales evoking a desire in people *to protect* whales and their habitat.

In touch. One tourist, a government official who used to be a member of Greenpeace and was involved in its original whale tourism activity in the area, is on a whale watch tour a couple decades past those Greenpeace days. It has been several years since he was last whale watching and I ask how he feels on this day.

There's nothing like when you see people react when they see those animals. Seeing the joy and excitement—it really does seem to bring people in touch with the natural world just to see something so magnificent.

The participant appears to confirm his original notion in Greenpeace years earlier that whales, via their physical wild presence, would touch the tourists, and that tourists, in turn, would feel more in touch with the natural world.

Another tourist, seeing the orcas for the first time, speaks of the whales bringing him in touch with nature in a particular way.

To have the ocean as your environment—the whales remind me there are beings, there are animals, that can do that.

In this utterance, the speaker credits the whales with bringing him in touch in an embodied sense. Here, the speaker is reminded that the ocean is habitat. He situates the whales as subjects (first as “beings,” then as “animals”) who bring him in touch with this forgotten knowledge.

To learn. I tell one orca researcher about how I have heard from participants that whales bring people in touch with nature and he introduces another theme, that of whales leading people to learn.

You mean how these guys are converting people? You know, people can be dismissive of this—‘Oh, everyone’s into the charismatic megafauna.’ But the reality is that most of the time this is what gets people hooked and they start to learn everything else related to them, and their ecosystems.

One local provides a personal example of this phenomenon:

When I first came here to the islands, I saw the orcas and I was like, ‘Oh!’ I fell in love. I wanted to learn as much about them as I could.

This local, who had moved to the island with no naturalist experience and no previous knowledge of whales, took a marine naturalist training course after encountering the orcas and became a naturalist on a whale watch boat.

A tourist who lives in the Pacific Northwest and had seen orcas once on a private boat before her whale watch tour, describes her first experience this way:

It was after seeing the orcas last time that I started learning about them. It was sort of cliché when I saw them—they were jumping around. There were so many of them and they came up to the boat. It was so cool. Then I did a lot of research on them.

Here, the speaker describes the orcas as active and interactive. She characterizes her interest in learning as being sparked not just by their visible presence but also by their dynamic, expressive, and at times interactive presence.

To protect. The final sub-theme in this section is that of whales evoking a desire in people to work for whale and environmental protection. I observed this notion of protection expressed only by those working in and around whale watching and not by tourists themselves.

A naturalist speaks to me about her goal with her communicative work on the tours:

I want the tourists to attach to them; it’s important. Because when there’s an oil spill here or we have global warming, I want them to vote to protect these whales and everything that matters to them.

Similarly, a docent closes his talk with tourists at Whale Watch Park by expressing his wish:

I hope you'll leave with a real passion in helping these whales in years to come, whether through voting or your pocketbook, so that we keep these whales here, so they're here when your grandchildren and their grandchildren come back. There's only 89 orcas remaining and there could be an oil spill.

Both these participants connect tourists' possible senses of attachment to or passion about the wild whales with a desire to protect. In this sense, by forming a connection with whales, they assert tourists would also form a desire to save them from harm. The naturalist's statement hinges on the biocentric notion of visitors protecting whales for the whales' sake while the docent's statement hinges on the anthropocentric notion of visitors protecting whales for the sake of future human generations.

A Tentative Central Tenet of Nature Tourism

The perception that wild whales "speak for themselves" and, in so doing, bring people in touch with nature, inspire people to learn about nature, and motivate people to protect the whales and their ecosystem, reflects a central notion of the whale watch industry. Similarly, other forms of wildlife, nature, and ecotourism endeavors foreground such a belief: That people exposed to certain living elements or places in nature will feel a connection, that this connection will lead them to want to learn, and, in turn, to protect that animal, plant, or place, and its ecosystem (Bulbeck, 2005; Muhlhausler & Peace, 2001). As such, this view that charismatic aspects of nature "speak for themselves" serves as a core tenet, and largely empirically unsupported justification, that underlies the educational mission of environmental tourism.

Within this study site, some whale watch insiders discuss the tenet with tentativeness. One park ranger says of people's love for the whales: "The idea is that if they love it, hopefully they'll protect it." Similarly, a whale tour company owner and boat captain says, "I think showing the whales helps. I *hope* it helps." These more cautious expressions characterize the tenet as one that is an "idea" and one based on "hope." This tentativeness, or communicative qualifying of whales speaking for themselves, can also be observed in the earlier example of the tourist comment that whales "*kind of* speak for themselves" (emphasis added). Others at times challenge the tenet, pointing to its overuse as a justification for tourism or questioning its cogency. Here's one local couple:

Him: I forget, do we like whale watching?

Her: Well, many people are tremendously touched by the experience and feel more connected to the environment from it—

Him: That drum's been banged; that's overdone. Is that really true? Do people really feel changed or are we just harassing the whales? It's a business.

A whale advocate further complicates the tenet. He characterizes issues he sees as standing in the way of people seeing beyond the whales to learn about and protect their ecosystems.

The New Age community views the whale as a symbol of a doorway to deeper comprehension of nature, as our link with nature. They view every part of nature this way: grass, butterflies. But whales are an easier doorway. However, whales end up becoming the entirety, not just the doorway, but the entirety that the doorway opens up to. In whale watching, there'll be the person who stays under the whole time and doesn't want to see the seal or the water and comes up only to see the orca, then goes back down again. They confuse the messenger with the message.

In this case, the advocate characterizes the whales speaking for themselves as the "messenger" and "symbol of a doorway," as well as "our link with nature" and "a deeper comprehension of nature." However, he also expresses the notion that, in contrast to whales evoking such expanded human-nature connection, learning, and protection, the platform of whale watch tourism can also support selective and limited listening. The advocate references New Age discourse, much as many of the above speakers indirectly reference ecotourism discourse, revealing that these statements circulate within other Western cultural discourses about human-nature relations and protection, informing and being informed by them.

Orca as Ecological and Cultural Icon

The notion of the whale as an icon ties in closely with the above theme. Similarly, participants asserted the iconic positioning of orcas led people to know about them and led to human interest in endangered orca and ecosystem recovery. However, unlike the theme of whales who "speak for themselves," this icon theme did not position whales themselves as having the power to connect people with nature. Instead, this theme positioned whales more as metaphoric representations of the human relationship with nature. As one Canadian whale advocate puts it:

The orcas are these precious markers. We are realizing, it is rising in our consciousness, that we are destroying our environment. And we realize the orcas will disappear. They represent our waking awareness of disappearing and destroying nature, of our subduing culture.

The speaker situates the orcas as not only markers of ecological balance, and in this case especially imbalance brought into being by humans, but also as representations of a budding ecological awareness within humans that connects directly to human cultural relations with nature.

In addition, participants characterize the iconic metaphoric positioning as mediating people's understandings and experiences of the actual orcas, as well as governmental policies toward the orcas. In one example, a marine monitor answers a private boater's basic questions about the whales, including, "What kind of whales are these?" As we steer away from the private boat, I comment that in my observations it is unusual to talk to boaters who do not know about the whales at all. Usually, at a

baseline, private boaters know they are seeing the distinctive black and white markings of orcas. The marine monitor agrees and expresses the notion that the orcas' iconic status usually serves to bring them into people's awareness: "Yeah, people are usually at least a little knowledgeable. They *are* the Washington state marine mammal and they're in the media constantly . . ." In another example, a Washington state government official at an international scientific and governmental symposium on the area endangered orcas, positions the orcas' regional level iconic status as a primary drive for interest in the whales' protection: "I'm going to explain the role and interests of the state in orca recovery: First of all, of course, they're a Northwest icon." The official goes on to also discuss the importance of orcas as the top oceanic predators and to explain that from the "conservation of killer whales as an apex predator we are likely to benefit multiple species in the area in which we live." Iconic status here represents a multi-valenced human-whale connection, including both a culturally iconic status in which state and region are in a sense symbolized by, and therefore responsible for, the whales, and an ecologically iconic status in which protection of orcas as apex oceanic predators is likely to improve conditions for the wider ecosystems in which multiple species including humans ("we") live.

The use of iconic representations of orcas in examples thus far appears to be mutually beneficial for human-nature relations. They affirm situations in which human cultural and ecological consciousness, knowledge, and recovery are connected to the whales' presence and well being. Similar to whales who "speak for themselves," however, some study participants express the notion that iconic status has the potential to mediate limited human-nature relations that are not mutually beneficial, relations in which people miss "the whole story." As one whale watch captain puts it:

I think the whales, like all the wild animals we get to see here, are fascinating. Because of their size, their impact, they're an obvious focus. But the seabirds and the sea lions are all amazing and really really interesting. So, actually when we don't have orcas available, I think people get to see a lot more of what actually goes on in the islands. When the whales are here, they're seeing what they want to see, the whales, but they're missing the whole story.

The captain points to an emphasis on orcas creating a sort of tunnel vision instead of an inclusive vision that involves other marine life or a more expansive view that takes in broader human-nature relations in the region. Much like the critique by a participant in the previous section in which the whale may be interpreted mistakenly as the message instead of the messenger, here, the speaker expresses the notion that a focus on whales could serve to distract people from a more interconnected, perhaps more ecologically encompassing story.

Discussion

In framing analysis in terms of ways communication mediates human-nature relations in this particular Western wildlife tourism site, I have tried to be receptive to using the concept of mediation in ways that allow for exploration of both how human communication is instrumental in knowing nature and how nature "speaks"

(Milburn interview with Donal Carbaugh, 2007, p. 1). This exploration is especially important at a time when Western cultural perceptual frameworks have overwhelmingly situated nature as separate, other, and mute, allowing for and in some ways encouraging environmental practices that are exploitive and destructive. My hope, in part, was that a site of tourism initially sprung from dedications to align people with nature and contemporarily transformed into a more commercial venture would provide a case study of complex mediations, informed both by consumer approaches to nature and, at the same time, by what Pezzullo (2007) describes as opportunities in tourism for embodied engagement with nature and possible counterexperiences of interpretation and advocacy. In fact, both notions of human communication as instrumental in knowing nature and nature as "speaking" were prevalent within this site.

Ironically, study participants situated the absence of verbal human communication as instrumental in knowing nature and did so in two very different ways. First, some participants situated silences as particularly meaningful, as connoting both collective and individual senses of meaningful nature relations or experience and as allowing for such meaningfulness to remain internally whole, or emergent. This emergent, unspoken meaningfulness is somewhat analogous to what Oravec (1981), in her generative environmental communication essay on John Muir's writings, termed the "sublime response," in which one experiences apprehension in the immediacy of a vast natural place, a sense of overwhelming comparative personal insignificance akin to awe, and ultimately a feeling of spiritual exaltation. Included in this sublime response is an attunement to "the natural eloquence of the environment" in which Muir's mountaineers, for instance, knew the mountains' "thousand voices, like the leaves of a book" (p. 252). Similarly, those who experienced the sublime response to whales often spoke of the voices of whales. However, the whales differ from the vast complexity of the natural scenes Muir tended to describe. Instead, we see a sublime response to the presence of magnificent beings.

In addition, whereas Muir wrote about such responses to impart an appreciation of nature, in contrast, here individuals often chose to keep such responses to themselves. This site-specific Western notion of silence and spirituality may have parallels with Carbaugh's (1999) interpretations of Blackfoot tribe members' form of "listening" to nature. Carbaugh describes such listening as a form of sensing nature that supports a reflective, revelatory mode of nonverbal communication and opens one to relations between nature and human. Similarly, participants in this study, including myself, appeared to deliberately engage in such reflection, revelation, and relating with nature in their silences.

Second, in expressing the very different notion of a shortage of words, vocabulary, and language when it came to wanting to use verbal communication as a tool for sharing one's knowing of, or relating with, nature, participants put forth the notion of linguistic limitations. Here, people attempted to speak of experiences of hearing a whale breathe, of "whale energy," of being close enough to touch a wild whale, and of the whole world making "sense for a moment seeing these whales." While we again can see parallels with the sublime response and with the Blackfoot form of listening

providing a sense of protection, power, and enhanced knowledge of one's small place in the world, participant statements also reveal a discursive struggle within a Western cultural setting of attempts to speak about meaningful forms of knowing nature and communicative hurdles to putting this knowing, or relating, into the culturally available vocabulary.

Carbaugh and Boromisza-Habashi (2005) put a name to this ineffable meaningfulness, which they call "an expressive co-existence with nature, albeit one of an un-namable kind" (p. 12). They typify expressive co-existence as moments that fill one with awe and inspiration, moments that are transcendent and adamantly real, if in some ways indescribable. While participants in this case study appeared to characterize silence as conveying such collective and individual senses of expressive co-existence with nature, at times participants also very clearly struggled against the ineffable.

Some speakers asserted that the inability to put some of their most meaningful experiences with nature into words was a distinctly linguistic or cultural inability. Further, some claimed certain other cultures do have "the language to express" such ineffable human–nature knowledge and experience. In this sense, a Western cultural setting may set communicative limits on certain particularly meaningful forms of expression of human–nature relations. At the same time, some other cultural settings and perceptual and communicative resources may allow for such discursive mediations of an expressive co-existence with nature.

Valladolid's and Apffel-Marglin's (2001) study of one culturally particular form of co-expressive communication provides contrast to and insight into the present study's findings. These indigenous Andean *campesino* scholars write of their community's cosmovision of a multi-voiced nature–human conversation perceived as reciprocally constant, as both creating and nurturing biodiversity, and as a core characteristic of the living world. This conversing among nature and human is not perceived as literal (necessarily linguistic) or as metaphorical (purely conceptual). Instead communication among all aspects of nature, which the authors acknowledge may be difficult for Westerners to fully comprehend, is vitally and engagingly real and radically non-anthropocentric. Valladolid and Apffel-Marglin argue that, in contrast, Western representational thought, or modern thought, is thoroughly anthropocentric; as nature and human are perceived as separate, communication is largely reduced to human dialogue, to the word.

In contrast to this Andean culture's conversation of biodiversity that engages humans and nature, in the present study's Western site, attempts to communicatively share one's experience of humans and nature in conversation or human–nature expressive co-existence necessarily assumed forms of abstract verbal representation and purely human-to-human interaction. Valladolid and Apffel-Marglin argue that it is precisely this Western form of knowing, a post-Cartesian representational thought paradigm, that separates the knower from the known, the external from the internal world, the symbol from the symbolized, and the organism from environment. In this Western wildlife tourism setting, attempts to verbally represent meaningful nature–human experiences often disappointingly became moments of verbally encapsulating,

abstracting, and separating the speaker from the entity of which s/he spoke, attaining the opposite effect of the meaningfulness of the experience in which the speaker sensed communion, or unity, with another aspect of nature.

Perhaps in part to acknowledge expressive co-existence in a discursive form, participants in this site conveyed notions of ways nature "speaks" in the idea that endangered wild whales "speak for themselves," bringing people in touch with nature, as well as inspiring people to learn about whales and their habitats, and motivating people to protect them. Some participants only tentatively posed the notion that whales "speak for themselves," and some argued that others missed the whales' expansive ecological message, mistaking the culturally popular messenger for the message. Participants also disputed whether this tentative notion was enough to condone a commercial tourism industry. Indeed, this claim, a central tenet of much nature tourism, is one that remains inadequately tested, yet must be reliably empirically supported if continued as a justification for tourism industries that can, and often do, negatively impact nature and wildlife.

Participants' iconic positioning of orcas as cultural and ecological metaphors of human-nature relations exemplified ways in which the verbal is instrumental in knowing nature. This iconic status, put into communicative practice, was at times characterized as positive for human-nature relations, in serving to inform perceptual shifts and protective policy. For instance, the orcas in their ecological positioning as apex predator and cultural positioning as beloved contemporary totems were seen by whale advocates as serving as "precious markers" of a human-nature relationship that implicated a Western culture centered around the practice of "subduing" nature. Iconic status, however, also served to popularize the whales to the extent that participants were blindered from perceiving wider ecological relationships.

In both cases of whales "speaking" and serving as icons, a dialectic emerges: on one pole are wild whales as a profound "doorway" to complex human-nature interrelations and on the other pole are wild whales as a deadend serving as the entirety of touristic points of focus isolated from ecological relations. The doorway-deadend dialectic in this Western wildlife tourism setting has distinct parallels to one found in marine parks by Davis (1997) in the discursive and performative framing of captive orcas as both a free and powerful natural wildness that humans long to connect to and as a trademarked fetishized commodity humans consume through the character of Shamu. In this "transcendent being"–"souvenir" dialectic, Davis found a simultaneous sacralizing and trivializing of captive whales.

The circulation of a related doorway-deadend dialectic within a wildlife tourism space helps to illustrate a pervasive Western lens that both informs and is informed by popculture constructions of orcas in entertainment industry discourse, New Age discourse, and wider nature tourism discourse. The deadend pole of the dialectic, reinforced by the souvenir celebrity status of orcas in marine parks and by a commercial focus on orcas in whale watch tourism, can serve to detach whales, both wild and captive, from their ecological and familial connections within nature. Depending on the situation, the discursive bounce between doorway and deadend may serve to either encourage or confound eco-cultural knowing that could be

gleaned from whales who “speak for themselves” through their communicative presence or are positioned thus through their iconic status.

In addition, within the doorway pole of the doorway–deadend dialectic, we can see parallels with Basso’s (1996) ethnographic exploration of Western Apache tribe members’ use of names of natural places to connect present-day personal occurrences to ancestral stories that occurred in and were connected to those places. In evoking the iconic status of the orcas or the notion of whales “speaking,” Westerners position whales as symbolic of present-day occurrences and environmental stories that can open doorways to issues of human–nature connection. Whereas Basso interpreted Western Apache use of natural place names as doing certain communicative work that was culturally beneficial for the community, such as helping people tie their story into other community stories or providing people comfort and answers to their concerns, in the present study’s site Western cultural use of the orca as icon or the cultural notion of whales “speaking” do certain communicative work that can be mutually beneficial for nature and humans, such as tying the orca–human story into wider nature–human stories of environmental relations or providing justification for a progressive shift in governmental policy.

This essay was directed by the environmentally and culturally inclusive concept of communication as a mediating force of human–nature relations. In exploring this conceptual framework through ethnographic attention to everyday communication in a much sought after Western tourism site of intentional human interactions with wild nature, my aim was to add to the ways we view communicative and cultural experience with nature. Indeed, this study points to interesting ways in which Westerners in a wildlife tourism setting experience nature “speak” and experience both verbal and nonverbal communication as instrumental in knowing nature. In their silences signifying spiritual or co-expressive existence with nature and in their frustrations over a cultural lack of vocabulary to convey often profound human–nature moments, many study participants highlight communication’s vital role in the culture–nature intersection. In their cautions against people mistaking the messenger for the message, or missing the nature for the whale, many also imply that though whales may “speak for themselves” and through their iconic status, the extent to which human listeners perceive their relations with nature is both culturally and situationally dependent.

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Notes

- [1] Whale watching, a form of highly popular marine wildlife tourism, increased in worldwide participation by an average of 12.1% per year between 1991 and 1998, and money spent on whale watching has increased at an even faster rate. The most recent available global numbers for whale watching are from 1998; in 1998 alone, tourists spent more than \$1 billion worldwide, an 18.6% increase from 1991 (Hoyt, 2001). With these increases have come amplified human presence around wild whales, policy and management issues, and studies examining tourism’s possible negative impacts on whales (e.g., Bain, Smith, Williams, & Lusseau, 2006).
- [2] Although 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 in this study to reflect participant and popular Western naming practices.
- [3] Whereas regional whale watch tours grossed just over \$10,000 (USD) in annual ticket sales in 1985, by the end of the 1997 season, sales approached \$5.7 million, with 81 commercial boats from both sides of the border annually carrying more than 250,000 passengers to the whales (Osborne, 1999).
- [4] The official state park name is Lime Kiln Point State Park.
- [5] The community of orcas who frequent this region are called the Southern Residents, and comprise three tight-knit matriarchal pods who move in tandem with their main diet, the migrating salmon.
- [6] “Shamu” is the performance name given to the succession of orcas who replace orcas who die at the various Sea Worlds. Most captive orcas die extremely prematurely, whereas, in the wild, females can live into their 90s and males into their 50s.

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