

# Global Activism and the Visual Grammar of Nature

Author(s): Petra Rethmann, McMaster University

---

In the 1970s, the whale emerged as a global icon in environmental struggle. In my research on the making of the whale as a global environmental icon I look especially at images — photographs — to trace how not only the environment but, as a concomitant, environmental awareness, was "made." In these days it has become commonplace to argue that *nature*, or *the environment*, is not an empirical given but made and remade in a complex interchange of history, politics, and cultural imaginations. My research takes such contentions seriously, and expands the argument in important ways. While most scholars situated at the interdisciplinary juncture of environmental history, science studies, political ecology, and cultural anthropology trace "the environment" through texts, discourses, ideologies, and metaphors, I depart from this practice by focusing on the ways in which images, and their associated imaginations, have helped to shape the environment and the whale. Before the 1960s the most familiar image of a whale was probably that of a sperm bull putting up a fight, or perhaps a raft of dead whales. The development of new visual technologies in the succeeding decades, however, has helped to stage whales as a site of world-saving dreams, including spiritual transformation and social redemption. Drawing on the films of marine life shot by Jacques Cousteau in the 1950s, and the underwater recordings of cetaceans by William Schevill and Roger Payne in the 1950s and 1970s, Greenpeace, in particular, deployed images of wild whales to embark on a particular "guerilla war of resistance." I argue that these images were produced to generate a new historical moment, or, at least, to affect a current historical moment to set new forms of agency into motion.

In my analysis I am not simply interested in the fetish quality of these images (pro-whaling proponents frequently charge that such images are elevated to the status of a fetish), but in the forms of seduction with which these images display their dual power to manipulate and subvert. One of the most self-evident jobs of images or media is mediation (a process of social dispensation that is simultaneously enabling and constraining for a number of reasons). The photos that I analyze are powerful enough to draw viewers into the seduction quality (and fantasy) of both global environmental disaster and futuristic hopes. As whales, as figures of troubled nature, surge into view, viewers are drawn into scenarios of catastrophe, disaster, and end — the dark side of historical possibility. Yet in environmental discourse, the dialectical twin of catastrophe is hope, a forward-looking rhetoric, a good vision of the future. Situated at the border of the catastrophic and the romantic, the seen and the unseen, the photographs document the making of global awareness that not only concerns humans but also animals.

Greenpeace may have been at the forefront of what in the 1970s became known as the anti-whaling campaigns, but in recent years groups such as environmental investigation agency (eia), Animal Welfare Institute (AWI), World Society for the Protection of Animals (WSPA), Whale and Dolphin Conservation Society (WDCS), Campaign Whale, International Fund for Animal Welfare (IFAW), World Wildlife Fund (WWF), and the Humane Society of the United States, have followed. Scientists, especially cetologists, have become the allies of these groups. These alliances create a self-conscious global coalition that has the welfare of animals at heart. And in this process, they cast animals not only in the role of saviours but postulate them, too, as autonomous citizens of the world.

---

This is a pre-print version of **Global Activism and the Visual Grammar of Nature** by **Petra Rethmann** generated from the *Globalization and Autonomy Online Compendium*. The electronic original is available at [http://www.globalautonomy.ca/global1/Summary.jsp?index=RS\\_Rethmann\\_Utopia.xml](http://www.globalautonomy.ca/global1/Summary.jsp?index=RS_Rethmann_Utopia.xml).