

Whales in Crisis

Introduction

Whales in Crisis is a National Geographic production. It runs for approximately an hour and tells a number of localised initiatives aimed at saving whales. Although it deals with some potentially controversial issues especially the impact of US Navy sonar on whale populations, it carefully avoids the radical position of organisations like Green Peace. It acknowledges that whales are under threat but it prioritises the notion that scientific research will ultimately make it possible to save the whales. Essentially, the documentary is a conservative text reflecting the conservative nature of the organisation which created it.

Summary

The documentary starts with an overview of whales and their precarious predicament in today's world. The focus then shifts to various local whale-saving initiatives ranging from the Arctic to Tonga. However, the primary focus story is of an attempt to save a family of beached Pilot whales. This story works as a type of framing narrative for the entire documentary.

Critique

Whales in Crisis undeniably highlights the plight of whale populations worldwide. Whether or not the documentary is seen as effective in promoting the preservation of whales depends on one's perspective or point of view.

If one has a conservative perspective on wildlife politics, then one is likely to see the documentary in a positive light. It demonstrates that across the world there are people standing up to defend whales. For example, academics are shown carrying out research on whales in the Arctic to track their movements. Ordinary people in the United States are shown responding to the plight of a beached whale family, giving up personal time and subjecting themselves to significant personal hardship to try and keep the beached whales alive. The US Navy is portrayed in a relatively ambiguous light. On the one hand they are seen as having a negative impact on whales. Their use of powerful sonar devices is shown as a major possible cause for whales beaching themselves. The argument is put forward that human sonar devices disrupt whales' communication and can even cause injury to whale sonar systems. However, when a researcher observes a situation where a pod of dolphins flees from a destroyer group, he calls the navy and the sonar is switched off. The representation of the navy as a sympathetic participant in the narrative is reinforced by interviews with navy personnel which emphasise that the navy is quite willing to change its policies if they are provided with enough scientific information to prove that sonar has a negative impact on whales. The underlying argument is that the type of systematic scientific research that is promoted by National Geographic will ultimately save the whales. While gathering all the required information may take a long time, the whale's long term survival is seen as a certainty.

If one has a radical perspective on wildlife politics, one is likely to be highly critical of the documentary *Whales in Crisis*. Radical environmental groups like Green Peace do not believe that it is enough carry out research in the hope that this might one day persuade organizations like the US Navy to change their ways. Green Peace believes in direct action as demonstrated by their systematic harassment of Japanese whaling ships. A radical environmentalist might even argue that approach represented by the National Geographic documentary in question might be worse than doing nothing because it creates a false sense of hope. There is no guarantee that individual initiatives will do any thing to change the systems that are causing the destruction of whale populations. The fact that the US Navy is first of all identified as one of the main problems with regard to whales beaching themselves and is then shown as being reasonable in limiting their use of sonar arouses suspicion. Either the navy is a problem or not. One suspects that a conservative American organisation like National Geographic would be unlikely to attack another conservative American organisation i.e. the US Navy. Ultimately, the *Whales in Crisis* documentary is

more about National Geographic trying to maintain good relations with other powerful American organisations than about saving the whales. The documentary is designed to give viewers a "warm and fuzzy feeling" without doing any thing substantial towards changing the conditions that are destroying whales. From a radical environmental perspective, Whales in Crisis is at best a cop-out and at worst, a lie.