

ECOLOGY ON VIDEO

Animals, Animals, Animals. National Film Board of Canada, 1995. 71 mins., \$19.95 VHS. ISBN 0-7722-0509. **Planet Earth: Caring for our Environment.** National Film Board of Canada, 1995. 26 mins., \$14.95 VHS. ISBN 0-7722-0526.

The National Film Board of Canada has taken a well-known ecological slogan and reduced, re-used and recycled several films from its backlist to produce these two video compilations aimed, presumably, at teachers wanting to cover environmental issues in the early grades.

The five short films in *Animals, Animals, Animals* all contain absorbing footage of animals ranging from Beluga whales, wolves, bears and bighorn sheep to the wildlife that can be found within Vancouver city limits. Cinematography of this kind is, for most people in industrialized societies, children included, what constitutes "nature." The Discovery Channel, Disney and National Geographic provide thousands of close-ups of wild animals and birds, often in dramatic encounters with one another. To judge by these films, a walk in the woods is as gripping as any movie from the "action" section of the video store. Yet anyone who spends long periods in "nature" can attest that, even in real wilderness country, actual encounters with wild animals are rare. The essential pleasure of the experience derives, not from high drama, but from close observation of minutiae.

Of these five films only the sixteen minute *Wild in the City* sets out to show that "nature" is not merely to be found in remote areas or in national parks. Exploiting Vancouver's mountain backdrop and ocean frame, it shows us raccoons, coyotes, skunks, deer and waterfowl going about their daily business in harmony with the city's human inhabitants. The voice-over commentary appears to suggest that the animals can adapt almost infinitely to human activities and to the built environment, "Despite the changes to the natural environment wild creatures remain," proclaims the commentary in the opening sequence. But in most cities, Vancouver included, deer crash through plate glass windows or are mowed down by city traffic, skunks are forced into malodorous confrontations with dogs, and coyotes are inclined to kill and eat pet cats. Tellingly too, the one wild animal that is always seen as a threatening intruder when it appears in Vancouver's mountain suburbs, the black bear, is not mentioned. While I wouldn't suggest that *Wild in the City* should have included all such examples of disasters and carnage, it would have been helpful if the approach could have been less blandly optimistic about human/animal interactions.

All about Bears, excerpted from a longer 1985 film *Bears and Man*, provides a better balance in dealing with problems in human/animal interaction. It deals with the issue of "spoiled" bears in national parks whose taste for junk food, often fed to them by park visitors, has made them a danger to themselves and to any human beings they encounter. While the commentary, read by Bronwyn Drainie, is understated, the film footage gives the lie to any notion that a bear can be outrun or outclimbed, and the images of a station wagon ripped apart both inside and out by a bear looking for food should serve as a warning to the unwary.

In both compilations the films without commentary are by far the most effective. Noticeably too, voice-over commentary will date a film more readily than the visual footage. The 1974 film, *Wolf Pack*, has some visual elements that give away its vintage, particularly the invasive use of the camera and lights into a whelping den. The commentary, however, combined with the laboriously matched-to-action soundtrack, is what marks the film as belonging to another age. All wolves, pups and adults alike, are “he,” with the single exception of a female whelping or rearing young. In preparation for whelping she even “cleans out the den” while “he and the pack look after the food supply.” Similarly, the emphasis in the commentary is relentlessly on competition and a Darwinian “struggle for existence.” Today, wildlife films often reflect the more recent view of wildlife biologists that co-operation among species members and even between species plays a larger role in enabling creatures to survive and reproduce.

If I were to pick a single short film from these two compilations as being of lasting value in environmental education, I would choose the *Journey of the Blob* from the *Planet Earth* collection. The ten minute film shows how a “blob” introduced into a stream by an experimentally-minded boy travels to the sea, becomes vapour in the atmosphere, then rainfall, travels into the water supply to eventually appear literally in the boy’s own backyard when he’s filling a paddling pool with a hose. While I think the film would have had more educational value if we had seen the boy flush the blob down the toilet in the opening sequence rather than put it directly into a stream, this film still does a fine job of showing the connectedness of natural systems and could lead to a very productive classroom discussion.

Despite their shortcomings and tendency to soft-centredness, most of the films selected for these two collections can still serve as valuable springboards for discussion if the teacher has a good grasp of ecological principles. But for many viewers, nature will continue to seem remote from everyday experience and disconnected from the consequences of our actions.

Gillian Thomas is in the English Department at Saint Mary’s University and teaches a course on *The Writer and Nature*.

PIGS MIGHT FLY—*BABE*, A FILM ABOUT HIDDEN POTENTIAL

Babe, MCA Productions, 1995.

The movie version of *Babe*, based on the story by Dick King-Smith, is a triumph of the imagination, both in its form and in its content. If the story of a pig who wanted to be a sheepdog and succeeded were not inspirational enough, the clever animals — real and robotic — the brilliant human cast, and the singing mice who move easily from “Blue Moon” to snippets from *Carmen*, remind us that movies can make anything possible.

With a premise like that of E.B. White in *Charlotte’s Web*, King-Smith and the screenwriters George Miller and Chris Noonan manage to convince us that