

Demystifying the Elaborate, Greenwashed Performance of ‘The Wilds’

Research Thesis

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Introduction

A couple on a drive to their safari tour in Eastern Ohio is greeted by a billboard displaying TV personality himself, 'Jungle Jack Hanna' – outfitted in safari attire, smiling with his animal ambassador Cheetah – pointing them in the direction of 'The Wilds.' A large sign emblazoned 'The Wilds: the largest conservation facility in North America' marks the entrance of the park. Sweeping views from the road and gravel parking lot only offer a glimpse at the expansive rolling hills they have yet to encounter on their safari tour.

The safari open-air tour bus looks as though the top half of a tan school bus had been sliced off, with a single tarp stretching from the front of the bus to the back, shading the passengers from the harsh mid-summer sun. A line forms to step up to the dusty bus: people with cameras, water bottles, sunglasses, and hats shading their faces. Chatter dies down as the tour guide charismatically introduces themselves in their brown, safari attire. The bus roars to life and begins its descent down a dirt road headed towards the open-pastures. The hazy afternoon sun lights up the lightly grassed hills and a trail of dust follows close behind the safari tour bus. The bus jerks back and forth from the deep ruts in the dirt road as it passes through the partitioned off enclosures.

The outline of tall giraffes are ever present against the open sunlit sky. Within the Giraffe enclosure, a Wildside Safari is taking place. A white truck – with The Wild's emblem on the side

– drives within feet from the tall giraffes, parking in their shadows. Guests sitting in the bed of the truck are now in the presence of a wild giraffe; in this moment, the two species share a space together, an ‘intimate co-presence’.¹ The tour guide gives the guests large chunks of lettuce to feed the animals. A man reaches out his hand to the giraffe and in one bite the giraffe grabs the lettuce with its tongue and enjoys the refreshing snack. The visitor swiftly reaches to pet the giraffe after it’s taken the stalk of lettuce. The other guests shoot their cameras and gather around to feed and pet the ‘wild’ animal.

This description is typical for one of the more expensive tours at The Wilds, which is the topic of my paper for today. The Wilds is a conservation institution, safari park, and breeding facility located an hour and a half away from Columbus in rural eastern Ohio. Its positioning in the Bible belt is important to note in the religious allusions made by The Wilds.

The connection formed over feeding a ‘wild’ animal seems deeply satisfying to the human visitor, even if it takes place in a concrete dome with sparse natural light, which is where many animals at The Wilds live in the wintertime.² The rhinos and giraffes that so willingly eat out of the hands of human visitors – making themselves vulnerable to their natural predators – create a utopic impression that human species and non-human species can coexist and live alongside one another. However, this obscures the deeply unnatural aspects of such experiences and of the power structures that underlie the human-animal interactions. The human visitors’ experience of bonding is a product of the animals’ bondage. By experiencing a sense of vulnerability when situated in close proximity to the giraffe and in feeding the animal, the human visitor may experience a very genuine joy in connecting on such a personal level with a non-

¹ The concept of “intimate co-presence” is described by Juno Salazar Parreñas in *Decolonizing Extinction*.

² Most visitors opt for the safari in the summertime and will never encounter these obscenely visible, concrete enclosures, where many animals are kept in cooler months.

human species. This experience fosters a closer connection between a human species and other forms of wildlife, ‘wild’ animals, and nature. A wild animal situated in its natural habitat or a habitat less intensively managed by humans, would not be generously eating out of the hand of its natural predator.

There are many safari tours offered at The Wilds: zip-lining, fishing, horseback riding, and overnight stays in luxurious yurts or cabins. The most common and the cheapest tour is the Open-Air safari tour, which is a simple tour around the safari park, costing \$20 for a two and a half hour tour. On this tour ride, animals will come up next to the tour bus, but these moments are always fleeting. Another, more expensive tour offered is the Wildside tour. However, on the Wildside tour, visitors are driven right next to individual animals or whole herds, engaging much more intimately with the wild animals. This tour costs \$125 per person for the same amount of time. This is one of the tours where visitors in a truck are driven right next to individual wild animals or whole herds. While there are many wild animals that guests see, guests on the Wildside tour are encouraged to feed and pet the giraffes and both types of rhinos in the park – the Southern White rhinos and the Greater One-Horned rhinos. On the Wildside tours, guests are still only around the animals briefly, yet they are brought closer and even granted the privilege of touching or feeding animals, suggesting that these intimate experiences are based on the premise of financial privilege alone.

The Wilds offers a seemingly wholesome and, in some cases, very intimate experience with exotic, endangered animals and nature. In *Savages and Beasts*, Nigel Rothfels gives a historical overview of Carl Hagenbeck, a famous exotic animal trader and the creator of ‘immersion enclosures’ which are the model of zoo enclosures today. Rothfels argues that many people came to Carl Hagenbeck’s famous animal park, erected in 1907, out of a “longing for

nature; they feel they have lost their connection to nature” (176). Carl Hagenbeck’s animal park not only “promoted the protection of the animal kingdom but also restored the essential humanity of men and women in a rapidly changing and 'dehumanizing' modern world" (176). Even though Carl Hagenbeck’s animal park opened over a century ago, I believe the same principles can be applied to The Wilds. Much has changed in the world in the past century and many would argue that the world has become more dehumanizing in our current historical moment. With technology so deeply saturated into all aspects of daily life, it would seem that people have lost a connection with nature. The Wilds offers human visitors a restored sense of humanity by facilitating a deeper connection to nature and satisfying nature-deprived individuals; in turn, this financially compels The Wilds to create a more utopic version of nature and façade of naturalness or wildness. This intricately woven and curated experience highlights certain aspects of its narrative while omitting others. Everything from the safari uniforms, ‘Jungle Jack Hanna’, and their cherry-picked success stories all create the dynamic narrative that The Wilds is justified as a conservation institution and is effectively performing their ethical obligation of saving species from extinction³. As a site of consumer entertainment, The Wilds provides a platform for human visitors to bond and interact with increasingly endangered animals without ever leaving the comfort of civilization. However, this obscures the deeply unnatural aspects of such experiences and of the power structures that underlie the human-animal interactions.

In the case of visitors feeding rhinos and giraffes, it is possible that the giraffes and rhinos are trained to approach the safari vehicles when visitors draw near with or without snacks.

³ More species are going extinct now than ever before in human history; the normal background extinction rate is 1,000 times higher than the typical extinction rate (Braverman). Human-induced extinction is what has led to the snowballing effect of the sixth extinction. It is for this reason of human-intervention, that the sixth extinction is unique from the prior five extinctions, “no creature has ever altered life on the planet in this way before” (Kolbert). The previous Big Five extinctions are the Ordovician, Devonian, Permian, Triassic, and Cretaceous.

It is critical to situate human-animal interactions within the power structures that remain invisible to many human eyes and disallow the animals an opportunity to escape the interaction. A wild animal in the context of its most natural landscape, or what is left of it, would not be generously eating out of the hand of a human, its natural predator. Instead, the wild animal would likely flee or fight back. However, within the given context of The Wilds and the enclosures that the animals live within, escape is impossible and combat would likely end in punishment or termination of the animal.

In this grandiose performance, The Wilds glosses over the stark reality of our current ecological moment and omits the multi-layered exploitation that is situated within the park grounds. Exploitation here goes beyond the captivity of animals, extending into the resource extraction embedded into the land's history. The deeply complex and elaborate performance of The Wilds as a conservation and entertainment institution demands to tell a story about loss, rescue, and utopia, while actually succeeding in little more than greenwashing. The performance is spearheaded by Director Emeritus and TV personality 'Jungle Jack Hanna' and CEO Tom Stalf. It is pertinent not to ignore the imperial impulse that is still deeply ingrained in safari institutions like The Wilds, especially since safaris and zoological institutions are a byproduct of a long history colonialism (Rothfels). Within The Wilds, the White Man is represented as the only human identity capable of controlling and saving the exotic 'other' and the wild, endangered animal. The iconography of Jungle Jack Hanna and the prestigious Tom Stalf are portrayed as the champions of the species they 'protect', thus perpetuating this ideological stereotype of men as dominating over nature (Merchant). A complex orchestration of greenwashing, renders any exploitation invisible. The success of The Wilds hinges upon the illusion of freedom, 'choice', and naturalness in the large enclosures. In this presentation, I aim

to unpack a slice of the narrative and history of The Wilds while attempting to demystify this deeply mystified institution.

The success of The Wilds hinges upon the illusion of freedom and naturalness in the large enclosures, situated in real grass, dirt, and sunlight. Carl Hagenbeck's animal park was the first of its kind to do away with bars and cages in favor of 'immersion enclosures' where the animals were separated from each other and from visitors by systems of moats, rock formations, and glass casings. The immersive quality of the enclosures creates a false portrayal of freedom granted to the animals. Similarly, the success of The Wilds is also contingent on the idea that these enclosures must be wonderful homes for the animals and that their homes here in Ohio must be far better than their natural habitats (Rothfels). The rhetoric used by The Wilds staff, website, and promotions offer up static representations of these species homelands as war-torn or threatened by poaching and habitat destruction.

The Wilds justifies its existence through their conservation efforts while capitalizing on the aspect that the species in their care are endangered, and so offering the increasingly rare experience of encountering endangered animals to visitors. A complex orchestration of greenwashing renders the multi-layered exploitative nature of the enterprise invisible. Exploitation in the Wilds goes beyond the mere captivity of the animals, extending into the ground beneath the safari park. The most curious part of The Wilds is that the deeply unnatural institution offers very *real* experiences for its visitors. In this thesis, I aim to unpack the narrative and history of The Wilds as a conservation institution, safari park, and breeding facility, and to highlight how this performance of greenwashing is constructed.

The History and Construction of the Wilds

To better understand the dichotomies characterizing The Wilds as a conservation institution first requires the background history of the land and its former uses. The green hills, wildflowers, and endangered animals that currently occupy the land that is The Wilds today were once part of a barren landscape said to resemble “the moon” (Neese n.p). The Wilds does not shy away from the land’s past life as a strip mine; in fact, this information is available on their own website, the promotional video “Welcome to the Wilds”, and is freely mentioned by tour guides on safaris.

The earth once yielded millions of tons of high-sulfur coal, strip-mined by the Central Ohio Coal Company, a subsidiary of American Electric Power (AEP). A placard in Miner’s Memorial Park, organized by the Ohio Historical Society, reveals that until the 1940s, the land that is now The Wilds was predominantly occupied by agriculture. When “harvests dwindled, the population declined, and land values dropped,” the Central Ohio Coal Company, a subsidiary of AEP, bought the land to extract valuable material below the grounds’ surface: high-sulfur coal (Ohio Historical Society).



Big Muskie, the world’s largest dragline machinery, stripping the earth from what is now The Wilds.

Before rhinos romped the open pastures, the largest ever walking dragline machinery – a Bucyrus-Erie 4250W ‘Big Muskie’ – was operated to strip away the crust of the earth. This behemoth once fit an entire marching band inside its grand shovel and weighed 27 million pounds, as much as 13,500 cars (Ohio Dept. of Natural Resources). It took two years to be erected and cost \$25 million, yet still functioned with high returns. Caterpillar – who bought out Bucyrus Erie Co. – mentions online that “in [Big Muskie’s] 22 years of service it removed twice the amount of earth moved during the original construction of the Panama Canal” (Caterpillar).

More efficient mining methods, tightened environmental restrictions, and a reduced demand for high-sulfur coal brought about Big Muskie’s fate (*The Daily Record*; The Ohio Historical Society). In 1977, the Surface Mining Control and Reclamation Act was set in place, requiring AEP to reclaim the lands once mining had been complete. Soon after, in 1984, AEP ‘gifted’ the 9,154 acres of land to The International Center for the Preservation of Wild Animals, Inc. (ICPWA), a 501c(3) non-profit now known as The Wilds. It is important to note that AEP advertised and continues to advertise this transaction as a charitable donation or a ‘gift’ instead of a legal obligation. The remaining strip-mined land that was not given to The Wilds was created into a massive public park called the ReCreation Lands. The Wilds is, in fact, not shy about acknowledging their past as a strip mine; perhaps the supposedly successful reclamation of the strip-mined lands supports the patriarchal notion of loss and rescue within The Wilds. However, a major piece of this narrative is entirely omitted by both AEP and The Wilds. Both institutions nod to the past of strip mining while leaving out that AEP never actually left and deeply exploitative resource extraction has, in fact, never stopped.

The ICPWA (The Wilds) and AEP attempted to secure funding to preserve Big Muskie as a tribute to the land’s past and to give visitors a history lesson, but the funds simply weren’t

available; preserving the machine would have cost millions of dollars. Since then, Big Muskie has been dismantled and effectively destroyed. Only its large shovel remains, which can be found in Miner's Memorial Park in McConnelsville, Ohio, several miles away from The Wilds, thus rendering the land's ecological past nearly invisible. Many were devastated by the dismantling of Big Muskie and the demise of the coal industry since this was the work of many locals' livelihoods. A video of Big Muskie featured on the History Channel, uploaded by rensaw8 on Youtube, is besieged with nostalgic comments by people who loved Big Muskie or who remark that it is a shame the machine was scrapped.

It is uncertain what happened to the lives of those who operated Big Muskie after strip mining was halted and the machine dismantled. This aspect of the land's history is undocumented by both AEP and The Wilds. We can only guess that the wealth that was brought into the surrounding rural areas by strip mining was greatly diminished. Nearly ten thousand acres of coal country was lost, allowing The Wilds and this state-of-the-art conservation facility to exist.

The transition wasn't smooth. As mentioned above, the barren land was even compared to the surface of the moon. In addition, when I visited, my tour guide mentioned that the land had been stripped to the bedrock, only allowing less than a foot of topsoil in some places for plant life to grow. The seismic shocks from strip-mining are still felt today and rewilding has in fact been impossibly difficult since the beginning of the project. The scenic rolling hills and reservoirs that visitors can now enjoy were literally sculpted and caricatured into the earth by Big Muskie.

The Johnson Visitor Center was the first structure to go up in 1989, and in 1992 the first animals introduced to the pastures were the Przewalski's wild horses, whom at the time had

already become extinct in the wild since the 1960s (“History”). Two years later, the safari tours began, but at this early stage there was still a heavier emphasis on conservation rather than entertainment (Neese n.p).

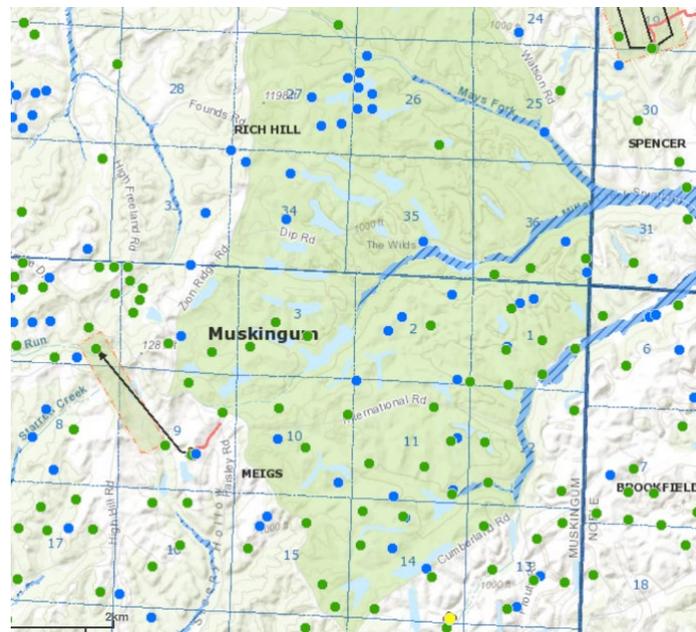
In addition to donating nearly 10,000 acres of land to The Wilds when it was first established, AEP reclaimed and rewilded the rest of the strip-mined land, turning it into a public recreational park, dubbed the ReCreation Lands. AEP has won awards for their rewilding efforts, as seen on billboards in the ReCreation Lands, such as the Edison Electric Institute’s ‘National Land Management Award’ and The Sign of Sustainable Forestry’s ‘Ohio Tree Farmer of the Year’ award, both received in 2000. A plaque in Miner’s Memorial Park describes AEP’s ReCreation Lands as a “30,000-acre wooded wonderland and an outstanding example of [AEP’s] environmental stewardship” (The Ohio Historical Society). In light of this larger background, and with the lands’ history in mind, we can see that a narrative is continuously formulated of destruction, reclamation, and even utopia, which comes to represent the master narrative as one of “loss and rescue” (Hufford), terms that resurface with some insistence in The Wilds’ conservation facilities and AEP. For example, the language of ‘wooded wonderland’ is a strangely utopic means of describing forest that was entirely gutted by strip-mining. What is entirely omitted from the safari tours, and The Wild’s and AEP’s websites, is that AEP never actually left. While they ‘gifted’ the land, they kept the mineral rights.

“The Wildlife/ Sacrifice Zone”

At the far end of The Wild’s gravel parking lot and across the street stationed between some large brush is a rusted-out oil well. If one isn’t truly paying attention, one would never notice. Even if visitors did notice the oil well, who would question the authority of ‘North

America’s Largest Conservation Facility’, The Wilds, promoted by TV personality Jungle Jack Hanna himself? Visitors like myself may push the sight of rusty oil wells to the back of our minds; certainly, they must be abandoned artifacts leftover from the past.

Public databases and a short drive around the neighboring land tell a different story. From The Wilds I drove around the area with the intention of visiting the ReCreation Lands and Miner’s Memorial Parks. Conventional wells dot the landscape – far from the main road, right off of the road, or even erected in locals’ front yards.



Map of wells extracting oil and gas in and around The Wilds.

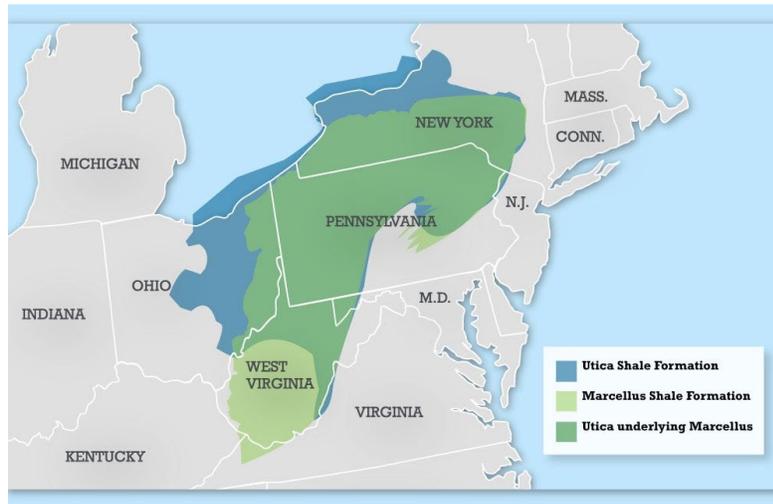
Some of the wells look frozen, completely stationary, while others deliberately hum, slowly moving a rusty rod in and out of the ground. All of the wells are paired with large, unmarked, cylindrical containers. The map above pictures active wells and undrilled wells dotting the landscape surrounding The Wilds and even appearing on the property itself. The green dots represent active oil wells that are extracting gas, oil, or water from the ground and the blue dots constitute the wells that haven’t yet been drilled.

This may be shocking news to a visitor of The Wilds because the institution speaks of its past as a strip mine without any reference to the drilling that is currently occurring. Visitors may raise the question: why would a conservation institution like The Wilds allow such drilling to take place? Even though AEP ‘gifted’ the land to The Wilds, they kept the *mineral rights* and can still drill for valuable natural resources below the earth’s surface, namely oil and natural gas, without need for consent from The Wilds. AEP leases out the mineral rights that encompass The Wilds and the land beyond. In these scenarios The Wilds is at the mercy of the company that purchases those rights.

During my experience visiting the The Wilds, on the open-air safari tour in the summer and on the Wildside tour in the winter, I don’t recall seeing any wells on my tours; yet they clearly exist, as the map demonstrates. No visitors seem to make a fuss about wells either, which leads me to wonder how The Wilds is concealing these structures from their visitors.

Unsurprisingly, The Wilds discusses natural resource extraction in the area as though it were merely part of the past, even when it is clearly still active. A promotional video titled “Welcome to the Wilds” and narrated by Jungle Jack Hanna displays short clips of the land when it was strip mined, then quickly moves on to the construction of The Wilds and the first pastures erected. Nothing in their promotional videos or timelines hint to the fact that the wells on the property and surrounding land are still used to extract resources beneath the ground. Timelines reveal the history of the land as a strip mine, yet omit the interwoven nature of The Wilds as a ‘Wildlife/Sacrifice Zone’, a term coined by Joseph Masco in *Nuclear Borderlands*.

The Wilds and the surrounding areas lie at the crosshairs of the Utica Shale formation and the edge of the Marcellus Shale Formation making it an extremely lucrative space for valuable energy reserves. The Marcellus Shale has been described as the ‘Saudi Arabia of Gas’ (*Gaslands*) and the Utica shale formation is even larger.



Map of the Utica and Marcellus Shale Formations which overlay The Wilds.

Natural gas has become more popular recently as it emits less CO₂ than other non-renewables such as high-sulfur coal, which has a more negative environmental reputation. Methane, a far more potent greenhouse gas than CO₂, is released into the atmosphere in tons when natural gas is processed and transported (Wylie x), not exactly the ‘green’ alternative that it is made out to be. This trend in natural gas has caused an increase in the amount of Hydraulic Fracturing (also known as fracking and hydro fracking) currently sweeping the country. In her book *Fractivism*, Sarah Ann Wylie writes that “from 2000 to 2014 shale gas production increased from near zero to approximately 40 billion cubic feet per day, making the United States the largest natural gas and oil exporter” (ix).

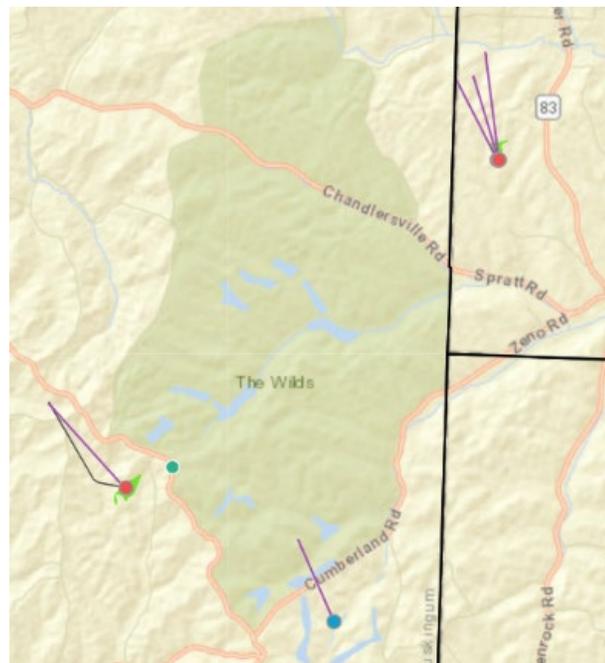
Hydraulic Fracturing is an extremely invasive form of resource extraction: a hole is drilled thousands of feet into the earth and then drilled horizontally. Natural gas or ‘tight gas’ is trapped in shale formations; which must be extracted using *unconventional* drilling methods. To extract these previously unreachable reserves of natural gas, little fissures are created thousands of feet below the topsoil through the high-pressure injection of water mixed with sand and a multitude of synthetic chemical mixtures. The pressure fractures the shale and the sand props open the fissures, making natural gas and oil from “previously unreachable preserves” possible (Wylie; Gaslands).

Ethical disposal of the wastewater is absolutely critical to the wellbeing of residents and wildlife living near to the well pad being fracked due to various toxic chemicals known to exist in fracking fluid. Cement casings are utilized to “prevent” contamination of aquifers and groundwater, but statistically speaking 5% of all cement casings fail immediately and 50% fail after 30 years, which can leak fracking fluid into the ground without any sort of containment (*Gaslands*).

Gaslands is a documentary directed and produced by Josh Fox who met and interviewed individuals who sold their mineral rights and whose water had been contaminated by fracking occurring nearby to their homes. Most of these individuals interviewed were from rural Pennsylvania, also above the Marcellus Shale. In the most severe cases, people have been able to light their faucets on fire and were recommended to vacate their homes due to the high levels of Methane present, which could cause their home to explode. People Fox met with experienced neuropathy, irreversible brain damage, and nearby creeks and rivers turned up dead fish.

Sarah Ann Wiley’s *Fractivism* also speaks on the issue of health complications for individuals living by “gas patches”, areas “devoted to drilling for natural gas reserves” (1). She

instead visited Rifle, Colorado to meet Rick Roles and other locals. Rick's property had 19 natural gas wells on his property and had experienced what was described as a "classical chemical sensitivity" where he experienced numbing in his limbs, pain, and problems of memory. Wiley notes that animals experience complications from contamination as well. Rick Role's goats "developed growths on their necks and gave birth to sacs of water" (3).



Map of unconventional wells extracting natural gas and oil using hydraulic fracturing, or fracking.

These narratives have become extremely relevant within the context of the fracking that is taking place just outside The Wilds. A map of the area from Fracktracker displays two actively producing hydraulic fracturing units as framing opposite ends of The Wilds. A third well sits just south of the property, which has obtained a permit, yet is not in production. These well pads are relatively new as they have only received permits in 2011, 2012, and 2013, respectively. All of these wells lie within a mile of the property of The Wilds.

A drive into the park does not reveal any of these structures as they are closeted by tree lines and effectively hidden from sight. The green dot on the map is where the entrance to the

Wilds is situated and also where The Wilds receives its water source, concerningly close to a well pad that has been fracked. With fracking taking place as close as a half-mile away from some of the enclosures, it isn't far-fetched to speculate the possibility of toxic chemicals breaching the enclosures where legally protected animals are held in captivity. The idea of freedom for the animals crumbles here, as we take note that in the face of potential contamination and toxicity, the animals would not have the choice to flee if they wanted. The Wilds is incapable of fully protecting the animals they are conserving due to the possibility of leeching toxic chemicals.

This poses a very clear and especially stark threat to the breeding success of the Southern White rhinos. Approximately 1000 chemicals could be used throughout the process of fracking an oil pad, including many known or suspected endocrine-disrupting chemicals (Kassotis et al 256). A promotional video "Happy New Year from The Wilds" highlighted that they received the Edward H. Bean Award's top honors in 2017 for its success in breeding Southern White rhinos, highlighting the first fifth-generation rhino ever born outside the wild. This is very unique since most breeding centers have a difficult time breeding this species. Studies have found that Southern White rhinos are particularly sensitive to Endocrine Disrupting Chemicals (notably more than Greater One-Horned rhinos), and that these chemicals can actually disrupt their reproductive cycles (Tubbs).

The conventional and unconventional drilling for natural gas and oil in the present moment is an aspect of history that is effectively denied to visitors through its absence, helping to construct and reproduce the idyllic image of nature that is captured in the "rolling hills and abundant lakes" (The Wilds 2011) as described by Jungle Jack Hanna.

Strip mines are an eyesore and pose highly visible threats to the environment. However, unconventional well pads can be entirely hidden behind tree lines and in rural spaces that are seldom frequented. Low land values and its rural location also make the destruction and threat of contamination of these ecological spaces acceptable for many. Fracking and its invisible pollutants do not pervade the urban cosmopolitan space, and the constant production and outpouring of invisible toxins are not televised.

Masco's *Nuclear Borderlands* highlights the concept of "social anesthesia" (9) in the context of nuclear energy or warfare and its radioactive aftermath. Social anesthesia is instrumental in normalizing the impacts of each new level of destruction, which shapes the reception of these aftermaths for individuals living around well pads. Social anesthesia is notably present for those working at The Wilds, who are aware of the destruction taking place so close to the animals they work to protect and conserve. Nuclear accidents produce "zones of exclusion", known spaces for radiation exposure, like Chernobyl. In the context of fracking, well pads are drilled without the need to make public the chemicals they use. There is no testing of what toxins are being emitted into the atmosphere or if there is a possibility of groundwater contamination.

A 2004 EPA study, with notable conflicts in interest, found hydraulic fracturing to be safe, making it exempt from the Safe Drinking Water Act. There are currently no legal requirements for companies to publicly disclose the chemicals used in the process as well as the impact on drinking water (Wylie 4-5).

However, compared to radioactive zones, there are no fences stopping people from visiting and the chemicals remain entirely invisible from the public eye. Masco describes the patchwork of radioactive spaces as an "archipelago of contaminated sites" and references this as a "geography of sacrifice" (311) which similarly resembles the maps and countryside dotted with

conventional wells and the hidden fracking well pads. There aren't any notifications or fence-lines when entering sites whose air and groundwater are contaminated by fracking; instead the industry and the EPA has effectively inhibited this from occurring. The layers of conservation and environmental destruction are invisibly overlaid, creating the contradictory space of The Wilds as simultaneously a "wildlife reserve/sacrifice zone" (Masco 314).

It is important to our argument that this background is rendered invisible in any publications authored by The Wilds. They certainly are aware of the fracking taking place immediately surrounding the conservation area, evident in news articles relaying their excitement that Anadarko Petroleum had decided to not drill into The Wilds acreage in 2013. I suspect this is the well pad south of the park which received its permit in 2013 but is not an actively producing site. However, two active well pads still frame the outskirts of The Wilds, operated instead by Artex Oil Company. In short, The Wilds is still not safe from potential groundwater contamination.

The complacency that The Wilds publicly plays in the fracking occurring just outside the park is entirely intentional and a part of their narrative and performance they craft as "North America's Largest Conservation Park", which is proudly displayed at their entrance. However, their complacency and exclusion of this information is not surprising. Publicly advocating against these oil companies would chip away at their image as a space of pristine nature and their overarching narrative of "loss and rescue" (Hufford). Instead, Jack Hanna and Tom Stalf idealize the land that constitutes The Wilds by relentlessly comparing it to the middle of Africa. Tom Stalf mentions in a news piece by 10TV that when he looks at pictures taken of the rhinos at The Wilds he struggles to remember if he was in South Africa at the time or at The Wilds. Another

news piece from the *Columbus Dispatch* in 2018 records Jack Hanna comparing The Wilds to “The Garden of Eden” (Neese n.p).

With knowledge of such environmental destruction occurring just outside the park’s premises, it is impossible to buy into Hanna’s comparison. Yet, when visitors see the lush green hills and have the opportunity to see exotic, endangered animals, it is possible that they take his expression at face value. The narrative crafted by Jack Hanna and Tom Stalf about The Wilds continues to perpetuate the idea of the land as being idyllic and conveniently situated in civilization. However, the reality is that the conservation institution cannot escape or reconcile various forms of exploitation that it experiences and perpetuates, to which Hanna and Stalf respond with deafening silence⁴.

ReWilding and Ecological Conservation

After The Wilds received the 9,000 acres of reclaimed strip mine, rewilding was the first thing to take place. Big Muskie contoured the landscape and spread the leftover topsoil over the land before it was given to The Wilds. As was mentioned earlier, the topsoil in some places was as thin as less than a foot between the surface and the bedrock. This makes it extremely difficult for rewilding to take place as trees may be unable to root deeply into the ground. In addition, the soil was stripped of its natural minerals, making it nearly inhospitable to any sort of plant life.

⁴ The Wilds, which is under the financial wing of the Columbus Zoo, is also situated under the guidance of their highest paid administrators, including CEO Tom Stalf and Director Emeritus Jack Hanna. Both individuals earn around half million dollars every year running the The Columbus Zoo as a non-profit organization (Charity Navigator). Expenses for the Columbus Zoo are high, yet when profits are balanced, the administrators still take home high-paying salaries in comparison to the minimum wage laborers who work at the facilities and the animals bred in captivity. Animal breeding can be a highly lucrative business in addition to the revenue from visitor entertainment. The Wilds pays nominal taxes because of their status as a ‘charitable organization’, and typically pays close to nothing in taxes on a yearly basis.

The interesting aspect of their rewilding practice is their choice to re-wild hundreds of acres into prairie, which is not a native landscape to Eastern Ohio.

The interesting aspect of their rewilding practice is their choice to re-wild hundreds of acres as prairie land and the fact that these prairies do not overlap with the animals' enclosures. They justify this decision by saying that prairies are an endangered habitat in Ohio, which is true, but prairies are only native to western Ohio. Before the land was a strip mine or even agriculture, the original pre-settlement habitat of the region was forested. In its current nutrient-deprived state, rewilding to forest habitat may be close to impossible, which may have swayed the decision to create prairies to be preserved. Alissa Neese, who wrote a detailed news piece for the *Columbus Dispatch*, writes that "restoration ecologists are studying how well native prairie grasses reclaim former mining sites; the plants are now being reintroduced into other damaged areas in southern Ohio" (Neese n.p). The decision to rewild the land as a prairie may also be an attempt to stimulate nutrients back into the soil. However, the fact that a choice can be made on what kind of habitat to rewild that is essentially a "wasteland" is in itself a very odd phenomenon.

My tour guide told us a story that when the Wilds was attempting to revitalize the soil with nutrients, management decided to introduce Autumn Olive, indigenous to East Asia. The decision to introduce this species was based on the idea that this plant species has the ability to enrich the soil with nitrogen and could potentially replace nutrients in the topsoil. After its introduction, Autumn Olive began to spread uncontrollably, which now has to be shoveled out in large patches to prevent it from spreading further.

During their study on prairie habitat, ecologists discovered that the shrubs popping up were driving away rare bird populations that draw in some of the visitors from across the country

(Neese n.p). With this discovery in mind, staff members began to remove these unwanted plants in order to keep the rare bird populations returning to the area and the visitors attending.

In taking a closer look at the history of the land, it is not difficult to see that the stunning views of the landscape that have been compared by Stalf and Hanna as grasslands in the middle of Africa or as “The Garden of Eden” are in fact a postindustrial landscape, perpetually and intensively managed by humans. Ideally, the Wilds feels as though one is on a safari in the middle of Africa or “horseback riding in Montana” (10TVEditor), but in reality The Wilds is quite distant from this idea of a ‘pristine wilderness’. Instead, it is an intentionally curated construction of what consumers think of when they hear ‘safari park’ or ‘open-air enclosures’, closer to a simulacrum of nature rather than a place that is natural in and of itself. The creation of this idyllic-looking landscape is critical in the formation of the woven narrative created by the conservation institution. The fact that The Wilds removes shrubs from their prairies being preserved shows that the land is not being ‘rewilded’ as advertised. The land is instead being preserved in a way that appears ‘wild’ and ‘natural’, while being anything but the opposite, an intensively managed nature preserve.

The Wilds is a unique zoological institution in the sense that it does not attempt to recreate the animal habitats. Most zoos are divided into still general sections such as The Arctic, East Africa, The Congo, and so on. Instead, the Wilds’ topography is reminiscent of Carl Hagenbeck’s animal park⁵ that lumped animals into one of two singular exhibits, The Arctic and

⁵ Carl Hagenbeck’s animal park contained two enclosures, The Arctic and the Grazing Animals enclosures. The Arctic included animals from colder climates in an enclosure intended to model the Arctic’s environment. The enclosure of grazing animals was heavily critiqued by spectators for lumping animals from around the world into a single enclosure, which was very confusing for spectators (Rothfels). The Wilds is similarly misleading by comparing the animal park to the ‘middle of Africa’ when many of the species are not from Africa. Not to mention the plentiful ecological diversity within Africa as an entire continent.

the grazing animals enclosure. In the latter exhibit, animals were brought together from many different parts of the world under the general notion of an enclosure for “grazing animals” (Rothfels).

Even though the native habitat to Eastern Ohio was of forest not prairie, there is perhaps no other ecosystem besides prairie that could survive in this space, now stripped of its natural minerals. With that in mind, perhaps rewilding the land into a prairie is the most natural habitat accessible in the given location. The other odd phenomenon at play is that The Wilds is not attempting to recreate the Sahara, East Asia, or the Arctic. Prairie and reforestation conservation efforts in fact do not even overlap *within* the animal enclosures. Many of the enclosures have perfectly mowed green lawns, not prairies or forest. If the animal enclosures themselves were to be rewilded into prairie or forest, then the tours would become less revealing for visitors because the animals would have shrubs and trees to hide behind. In the naked landmasses that make up many of the enclosures, the animals are entirely visible, not only making it easier for paying visitors to watch but also for zoo management to intensively manage the species.

The enclosures at the Wilds are thus grassy, barren lands. The green grass-covered grounds are enough for the visitors to view the enclosures as natural spaces, while not questioning the unnatural barrenness of the enclosures themselves. Most of the enclosures feature a small manmade pond as a water source, or perhaps a manmade gazebo for the animals to shade themselves under. Very few of the enclosures include any trees at all, further allowing for close scrutiny from the zookeeper and safari spectator. In her text *Wild Life*, Irus Braverman describes this kind of visibility as one of the many manifestations of a “biopolitics”, as a close and scientific-management of non-human bodies. Since, The Wilds is not attempting to recreate

these animals' natural habitats, these enclosures are instead closer to a simulacrum of nature rather than a place that is natural in and of itself.

Breeding and Animal Conservation

The Wilds has not only been described as a conservation facility and safari park but also as a breeding facility. Its emblem pictures a cheetah and a Southern White rhino amidst a few blades of grass. The grass represents the rewilding and habitat conservation occurring in the space while the image of the cheetah and rhino symbolize the successful breeding that has taken place at the Wilds, especially in the case of protection and conservation of these two species.

As mentioned earlier, in 2017 The Wilds received the Edward H. Bean Award's top honors for its success in breeding Southern White Rhinos, highlighting the first fifth-generation rhino ever born outside the wild. This may seem like a great achievement for conservation practices. However, Irus Braverman brings to light the fact that animals experience greater difficulties during repopulation efforts when they have become more generationally removed from their native range, specifically because they do not experience the pressures of natural selection in captivity. Braverman points out that many of these conservation facilities breed to repopulate zoos, not necessarily the wild. This holds true in the case of the Wilds for many reasons. The first is that it is highly unlikely that a fifth-generation Rhino will ever be released into captivity, since it likely would not survive because it is so far removed, generationally-speaking, from its native range. In fact, The Wilds has sent eleven Southern White rhinos to other zoos, but none have been reintroduced into their native range in South Africa. Of the eleven that had been sent away to other zoos, "some were older non-breeding females which

needed to move on to ensure space for younger females, others were males that needed a new home before they presented a challenge to the breeding males or to make room for new bloodlines” (*The Wilds*). This statement, which is available on The Wild’s own website, proves that the only value in Southern White rhinos at the breeding center lies in their ability to breed and to be bred. This is relevant for the cheetah breeding facility as well.

A lesser known fact about repopulation efforts is that most reportedly fail (Braverman). The Wilds has advertised their attempts to repopulate certain species like the Scimitar-horned Oryx while omitting whether or not the repopulation effort succeeded. For example, a promotional video uploaded by the Wilds highlights their efforts to aid in the repopulation of the Scimitar-horned Oryx in Northern Africa. The Wilds traveled to Chad in summer 2017 in a collaborative effort to repopulate the species that was once extinct in the wild (The Wilds 2018). Perhaps this project is still in progress, but the opaque front that conservation institutions like The Wilds put up isn’t uncommon and is not helpful in analyzing The Wild’s role as a conservationist.

In the same promotional video that highlights their repopulation efforts for the Scimitar-horned Oryx, the Wilds never misses the opportunity to talk about all the new zoo babies that have found their homes at the Wilds. Breeding success is a very common discourse among conservation institutions who heavily engage with the public, zoos in particular. Zoo babies are made famous over social media and grant the zoo social capital as the stewards or even champions of that given species. In addition to all of these conservation achievements, The Wilds was also the first to use artificial insemination, also known as cryogenics, to successfully breed Persian onagers (The Wilds 2010).

As relayed by my tour guide when I visited, most of the animals one will see at the Wilds are actually not owned by The Wilds. Instead, many of the species are on loan from other institutions. This is where the breeding side of the zoo comes to the forefront. The Wild's care services are leased out by other zoos, in the hopes of successful breeding that would allow that zoo paying for The Wild's services to ship the babies back home to their institution.

In summer 2018, a cheetah gave birth to five cubs at their cheetah breeding facility (The Wilds 2019b), raking in extensive publicity for The Wild's breeding success. However, I find it unproductive and misleading to constitute the repopulating and sustenance of zoo organizations as a major conservation feat for the populations in the wild. The cheetah breeding center at the Wilds is one of the best in the world at producing cheetahs, but not necessarily for repopulating them in the wild.

In the Carnivore Center, there exists the cheetah breeding facility and what staff refer to as the 'show yard'. Male and female adults are separated: the male cheetahs stay in the show yard for visitor spectatorship, while the females remain in the breeding facility. When it is time to breed the species, a male cheetah is taken by a zookeeper to the Breeding Center where the female cheetahs remain. A central aisle runs through the middle of the different partitioned-off enclosures, which is where the male cheetah is paraded to test if the female cheetah is interested. If the females are uninterested, then the facility will ship in new male cheetahs from other conservation facilities to see if the females will be interested in them instead.

This oddly simple yet revolutionary idea of female 'choice' is an aspect that makes the Wilds cheetah breeding facility one of the best in the world. With cheetahs being such an iconic, exotic, endangered species, it is likely that zoos across the country pay top dollar to lease out The

Wild's care services, making it a highly lucrative business while objectifying the female cheetah's body as a reproductive center.

In order to protect the biodiversity of species, The Wilds will often exchange animals between zoos to prevent inbreeding from occurring. The stress inflicted upon animals during inter-zoo exchanges isn't well documented. The Wilds advertises without any details that the other animals naturally breed in the open pastures, creating the pretense that the segregated enclosures jointly construct a harmonic environment.

The key to sustaining The Wilds as a facility generating profit is saving these animals to a point where the Wilds can continue to sustain their populations in captivity, yet not to the point where these animals lose their unique markers as being 'endangered'. The Wilds profits off the endangered status of these animals, both in visitor spectatorship and in leasing their care to breed endangered species. Indeed, the increasingly rare experience of encountering cheetahs, rhinos, and giraffes up-close is what makes the intimate tours at The Wilds so expensive.

The Wilds posts many videos on their Youtube account featuring newborn babies, along with other promotional videos. One is particularly striking, featuring Southern White rhinos roaming out of their indoor enclosure into the snowy outdoors. The video is overlaid with playful music and a caption reminding viewers that "the rhinos always have access to their barn if they want to warm up. It's their choice to come outside and play!" (The Wilds 2019)

The perception of freedom and choice in the animals' daily lives masks the fact that these species are still roaming behind fence lines, intensively managed by human beings, and anticipated to reproduce. Artificial insemination is an unnatural means of reproducing animals at zoos, yet is very common, such as in the case of the Persian Onagers at The Wilds.

Sperm banks, breeding facilities, and databases manage the lives of these animals yet remain invisible to ordinary visitors. In other words, The Wild's depicts a rosy image of happy animals who love their environments. Their successful propagation stands in as the measure for the animal's happiness and health (Rothfels 201). It is unclear if The Wilds is actually conserving species or if they are simply repopulating other zoos. With that in mind, it is an unconvincing argument that the specialized treatment and reproduction within zoos is actually doing anything to help their respective species living in their natural habitat ranges. These populations have been described as a 'hedge against extinction' in much of The Wild's literature as well as other readings promoted by zoos. When species are generationally removed from their native habitat, it makes it more difficult to repopulate in the wild. With that being said, it is unclear as to how the populations at The Wilds are truly hedges against extinction, especially since it will be nearly impossible to repopulate in the future due to their removal from selective environmental pressures. These facts lead us to wonder if The Wilds can really be called a conservation institution or if the title is an elaborate mode of greenwashing.

The "Making Live and Letting Die" of Wildlife Conservation

Placing visitors "in the heart of Africa" to witness the spectacle of exotic creatures, the Wilds chooses to exhibit, conserve, and advertise the most exciting and therefore profitable species. This is most obvious in The Wild's emblem representing a cheetah and a Southern White rhino. When visitors take the more expensive Wildside Safari, they are given the opportunity to feed and see the conservation facilities of the most popular animals. Visitors on

these tours are brought to the cheetah breeding facility and the giraffe and rhino barns where they are allowed to feed the animals.

The types of exotic animals in captivity are selectively curated with only 28 species, all of which are vulnerable, endangered, extirpated, or extinct in the wild. Out of the 28 species that are home to the Wilds, 22 are land mammals, 4 are birds, while the American Burying beetle and Eastern hellbender solely represent their classes of insects and amphibians respectively.

The Eastern hellbender and the American Burying beetle are interesting cases in the sense that they are both endangered species that are native to Ohio and the neighboring regions. The American bison is another local animal conserved in The Wilds that has been extirpated from the area. Yet unlike the Eastern hellbender and the American Burying Beetle there are no advertised repopulation or reintroduction efforts in the Ohio area. It is an interesting circumstance that the only species The Wilds is attempting to reintroduce within the local area – the Eastern hellbender and American Burying beetle – are physically quite small and are unlikely to affect local human societies in the same way that reintroducing an animal such as the American bison or even Black bears would affect the environment. Black bears are endangered in Ohio, yet there are no efforts to ‘save’ this local carnivorous species. The choices made in deciding to conserve certain species are therefore a form of curation. The decisions to save certain species are just as important as the decision to not save others. In the context of the “Sixth Mass Extinction”, these decisions to “make live” or to “let die” are critical for the survival of species within an unraveling environment. Perhaps in a similar way that The Wilds will not repopulate American bison or Black bears from the local environment, The Wilds will not repopulate other large megafauna in Asia and Africa due to the effects on local human societies.

This also goes for The Wild's decision to exhibit almost solely exotic megafauna. More than 75% of the species being conserved and kept in enclosures at The Wilds are land mammals. These are the species that visitors become the most excited about when entering zoo spaces, the species that draw in crowds. Perhaps the zoo would not be as profitable if they exhibited more species that spectators don't care as much to see, but their decision to not conserve any reptiles, only one amphibian, or any small land mammals illuminates where The Wilds is most interested in investing their dollar. This is especially sobering, considering that amphibians are experiencing the highest rate of extinction out of any other animal class. With that in mind, all species in all habitats are important for the homeostasis of their respective ecosystems. Conserving a small number of species in an isolated habitat, that of The Wilds, will not save the environment or wildlife from the record extinction rates in human history. Many amphibians suffer from data deficiency and will possibly experience 'silent extinction'. The choice to not conserve or repopulate more amphibian species can lead us to the assumption that The Wilds is more okay with seeing a small amphibian go extinct, rather than a Southern White rhino or a cheetah. However, the conservation decisions actively decide which species are 'fit' for the ark and which ones are unnecessary for our ecological future.

Sometimes zoos phase out species when they are unfit for public spectatorship or are generally incompatible with the zoo environment. Notable in this context, The Wilds is in the process of phasing out one of their species, the Indochina Sika deer. This species of deer from Vietnam is very flighty and runs away from tour buses whenever they draw near. People are typically unable to see the animal and it becomes stressed too easily to be in an institution like the Wilds. This species of deer is endangered and legally protected, however these attributes are rendered meaningless because the animal is simply unfit for public spectatorship.

When animals are phased out they are typically given to other institutions who have that species in captivity, alternatively they let the species die of old age. According to my tour guide, there are few, if any, other institutions in the country that have populations of Indochina Sika deer because they live in herds, so in the case of this species, they will remain in their enclosure at The Wilds until they die of old age. In the context of the sixth mass extinction, more species are going extinct ever before in human history and the background rate of extinction is 1000 times higher than the normal rate of extinction.

Their active decision to not save or conserve this endangered species of deer represents many instances of zoo curation, where primarily crowd-pleasing animals, such as cheetahs and rhinos, are conserved and displayed to eager visitors. In the context of the impending Sixth Extinction, these decisions to “make live” or to “let die” are critical for the survival of species within an increasingly, unraveling global environment.

Animals within captivity are celebrated online and within their enclosures, but that is only insofar as they are safely contained in human-controlled environments. Interesting in the context of this argument, Terry Thompson, living close to The Wilds in Zanesville, had fifty-six exotic animals in captivity on his residence. He claimed to manage a small ‘wildlife preserve’ out of his home, keeping his animals in small cages. Animals held in captivity included Bengal tigers, lions, Black bears, Mountain lions, Grizzly bears, a baboon, wolves, leopards, a Grey wolf, and a monkey. Several prior reports of animal abuse and neglect never led to any intervention in his operation. In the fall of 2011, he let all of these animals loose and was found dead with a gun wound on his property. Many of the animals were still on Thompson’s property when local enforcement arrived, yet they immediately shot and killed almost all of the animals

on-site. Jack Hanna described this awful situation as a “Noah’s Ark wrecked” (quoted in Jarman, n.p).

This event goes to show that exotic and endangered animals are only valuable and worthy of living when they are either safely managed in human-controlled environments or far from civilization in their ‘natural’ habitats. When any species poses any sort of threat to humans or to the ordered status of human society, they are rendered not only disposable but also killable, even if the species is legally protected in every other ‘managed’ scenario. The unpredictable and uncontrollable nature of wild animals, particularly carnivores, is able to create chaos and uncertainty in an orderly civilization. That chaos is not allowed and must be snuffed out at all costs. An officer after the event is cited as saying that “public safety was [their] #1 concern” (quoted in Jarman, n.p). School was cancelled while enforcement searched and effectively ‘hunted down’ the remaining animals that had been let loose. Authorities planned to use a patrol helicopter with a thermal-imaging camera to hunt down the wild animals but their plans were rained out. Early in the following morning, SWAT officers searched for animals with night-vision goggles.

This scenario demonstrates that even though endangered animals may be legally protected, human animals are protected in every scenario and placed above the lives of all other animals, endangered or not. When dangerous, uncontrolled animals get loose, they are not only pose a threat for locals but also become a national security issue.

In comparison with the event that took place outside The Wilds, the main grounds of the safari park are entirely absent of predators and carnivores at the top of the food chain. Instead these animals are located in a very different section of the park, more closely resembling a zoo, a kind of gated community for the high-profile animals, including cheetahs, dholes, and African

Painted dogs. They are quarantined from the rest of the animals by a tree line outlining the perimeter and a metal, electronically manned gate.

This decision to keep the predators in a different part of the park makes sense practically because it is doubtful that safari rides taking place throughout the afternoons would be safe with predators. However, the isolation of predators at the Wilds is more significant than that. By separating the predators from their natural prey, The Wilds is supporting their elaborate performance, depicting a more utopic nature. In this sense, The Wilds is not attempting to simulate nature but instead creating a better version of nature, where animals do not hurt each other, where food is plentiful, and everyone is well taken care of. These characteristics of harmony and non-violence are not present in natural habitats. Many of the animals in the larger part of the safari would constitute a cheetah's prey. What would happen if the cheetahs were allowed to prey on the other zoo animals? People may get offended, angry, or sympathize with the animal that provided a meal. Our human's idea of food has been entirely sterilized as most of what we eat comes in prepackaged containers, far away from any sort of animal death. In our increasingly complex, global society, humans have become so far removed from the food on their plates that many never think about the individual animal's fate. Much of what we eat is prepackaged in plastic wrap and looks nothing like the animal it came from. With this logic, it would be absurdly offensive to witness such a killing in a conservation park by a predator, even if it is entirely natural.

As a result, carnivores are fed animals that had been humanely killed so as to not offend visitors. Companies specialize in distributing dead animals to zoos, like dead mice or other small animals. Yet, by giving these animals food that has already been killed, they are relieving the species of their natural, selective pressures in the wild. Without experiencing the pressures of

natural selection and being fed and monitored daily, the animals may easily lose their ability to survive in the wild, thus making it more difficult to repopulate the species (Braverman).

In light of the Indochina Sika deer being phased out due to its unworthiness for the institution, the “Zanesville massacre,” and the partitioning off of the predators from the potential prey, The Wilds emerges as a deeply *unnatural* space, despite their claims to being a ‘Garden of Eden’ or metaphorically transporting visitors to Africa.

Conclusion: The Wilds as an Elaborate Performance

The Wilds situates consumers in a far-off place in the ‘middle of Africa’ while conveniently remaining within state-lines and ‘civilization’. This form of exotic tourism benefits from the species status as exotic, endangered, vulnerable, or even extinct in the wild, because of the increasingly rare experience of encountering endangered wild animals up-close. The fantasy and fetishization of the exotic other is perpetuated by placing the concept of wilderness in distant-lands and by placing the exotic, endangered animals in a fenced in space.

In the same way that zoos construct fake rocks with speakers that project noises into exhibits, The Wilds also heavily constructs the enclosures that create animal habitats, even as they heavily advertise the unique experience of visiting a space that could be mistaken for the African wilderness in the middle of Ohio. A sense of naturalness is encapsulated in The Wilds: the insects are real, the grass and dirt is real, and artificial light is replaced by natural sunlight and rain. Of course, The Wilds is in fact anything but untouched, pristine wilderness. Enclosures are constructed in a way that remains invisible or is denied in the minds of visitors excited for their safari experience. The enclosures and preserved prairies are simply postindustrial

landscapes that are in a perpetual state of human management, as a “sacrifice zone,” and a zone of captivity. However, in saying this I do not intend to privilege pristine wilderness, as this would discount the meaningful experiences with nature in spaces that are neither pristine nor untouched.

Taking into account the ecological history, of destruction, reclamation, and successful reproduction of endangered animals, a master narrative is woven of loss and rescue that effaces this zone as a place of sacrifice and captivity. The portrayal of The Wilds in the media creates a pretense that it is a place to experience harmonious wildlife. The idea of coexistence amongst humans and non-humans is carefully constructed to create a utopic simulacrum of nature: a ‘Garden of Eden’.

The Wilds does little to benefit the lives of the animals they keep in captivity, let alone their respective populations in their natural habitats. It is unconvincing that simply keeping endangered species populations at The Wilds is effectively ‘advancing conservation’, as they claim in their mission statement. In this sense, the grand performance of The Wilds is an extremely complex form of greenwashing. Visitors are thrown success stories about animal reproduction, without an accurate portrayal of the exploitative violence that follows when female animal bodies are only seen as valuable as long as they reproduce. The mask of The Wilds easily falls away when simple questions are asked: what are animals from Africa, Asia, and the Middle-East doing in the middle of Ohio? Or why does The Wilds so fervently insist that the animals experience freedom, ‘choice’, and happiness in their homes at The Wilds?

The greenwashed performance of The Wilds as a champion of the species they ‘conserve’ really creates a more idyllic representation of nature, instead of simulating naturalness itself. This idyllic version gives humans the privilege of experiencing an alternate, utopic reality where

they can coexist alongside animals who willingly eat out of their hands. Although the human becomes vulnerable in that single moment of being in ‘intimate co-presence’ with that species, it is not the same vulnerability that the animal experiences on a daily basis. The threat to society that these animals pose is what keeps them in human-controlled spaces like The Wilds. The moment that the animal acts like an animal is when the curtain is closed and their lives are in a space of uncertainty, as we can see from the Zanesville massacre and even the recent killing of Harambe at the Cincinnati Zoo. Spectators should be suspicious of insistent claims of The Wilds as uniquely bestowing freedom upon the animals they keep in captivity.

Even if The Wilds could be described by visitors and human employees as idyllic, it is important to follow up by asking: ‘for whom’? When questions are posed that dismantle the narrative of genuine freedom, choice, and this idea of utopic wilderness, the façade of The Wilds crumbles, revealing an image that visitors may find uncomfortable or even alarming. For it is in The Wild’s best interest to omit certain parts of their narrative while highlighting and even distorting others. This grandiose performance is fueled by the returning paying-visitors who are granted the very privileges that are advertised as being available to the animals in captivity: the experience of freedom, choice, and utopic nature. The human visitor experiences these privileges only at the expense of the animals in captivity.

In conclusion, we can argue that the “Sixth Mass Extinction” is a product of fundamental transformations in the world in which The Wilds is situated. The lives of hundreds of species are at stake in the potential snowballing effect that the Sixth Mass Extinction could pose to currently delicate ecosystems. Extinction is entirely normal every now and then. However, the current background extinction rate is 1,000 times higher than the normal background extinction rate (Braverman). The Wilds is not making any significant effort to alleviate these changes. Instead,

it only addresses the symptoms of climate change and species loss, such as creating populations of animals as hedges against extinction. In doing this, *The Wilds* is only “treating the symptoms of species loss not the causes” (Braverman 69).

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