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## Persuasion Techniques in Books About Endangered Species

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The teaching of reading does not end with decoding and comprehension skills. It is important that critical reading skills are learned also. Detecting propaganda is one such skill that can be taught by using books on endangered species. Without skills in critical reading, it is possible for the reader to become lost and confused in the increasing amount of reading that must be done.

In school libraries one can find numerous informational books in which the life cycles of animals are discussed. Some of these books make a statement about protecting an endangered species. These books are a special class of informational books because they are more than a statement of fact, they are a plea for a belief; an articulation of a social value. "Contemporary concerns about the environment and endangered species of wildlife are reflected in a number of life cycle stories."<sup>1</sup> The authors use various techniques to make their case.

The techniques used by the authors to express this very modern concern vary. It should be mentioned at this point, that many of these books contain more than one method of persuasion. But for discussion purposes, I am selecting those books that seem to use one method to a greater degree than another. Usually the authors are very apt in their subtleness of writing while keeping the message at full force. One such device is to use *emotionalism*. In Robert McClung's *Black Jack*, the life cycle story of an alligator, the reader becomes involved with the 'baby alligator' in his struggle to grow up. "The baby alligator grunted in alarm and Old Min (the mother) came rushing to the rescue as fast as she could."<sup>2</sup> Then the mother is killed by the bad hunters and Jack is left all alone. Then we follow him as "Black Jack continued to have his share of narrow escapes."<sup>3</sup> This characteristic appears in several of McClung's books. In *Shag, Last of the Plains Buffalo*, one finds passages like, "Shag tried to get up but the effort was too much. He fell

back to the ground. The Indian squatted on his haunches a short distance from him."<sup>4</sup> In *Thor, Last of the Sperm Whales*, there is "His back was creased and bloody from the path of the harpoon but it would heal. He has escaped once more."<sup>5</sup> McClung uses this life/death struggle effectively to get the reader emotionally involved. He uses the human need for the feeling of safety to get the reader wanting this for the animals.

Another method is to use *photographs* and *facts* to explain the importance of the species to ecology. Wyatt Blassengame's *Wonders of Alligators and Crocodiles*, uses photos accompanied by statements of fact. "In many parts of the Everglades the 'gator holes may hold the only water available within several miles."<sup>6</sup> In such statements, the author goes on to explain the balance between prey and predator, the power of water in these ponds to sustain life, and the dependence of other animals on the alligator. The authors of books on endangered species definitely have a point of view and they carefully present fact and photos to sway the reader. This is usually a one sided presentation.

The third type which is the *appeal for natural beauty*, is fictionalized also and tends to be anthropomorphic, but it is different because it relies on its illustrations or photographs to portray the natural beauty of the animal. Gilbert Reswold's charcoal halftones do a fantastic job of showing the beauty of swans in Jane and Paul Annexter's *Trumpeter the*

1. Charolette Huck, *Children's Literature in the Elementary School*. (Holt Rinehard and Winston) N.Y. 1976 p. 547.
2. Robert M. McClung, *Black Jack* (William Morrow & Co. N.Y. 1967) p. 24
3. *Ibid*, p. 53
4. Robert McClung, *Shag* (William Morrow and Co. N.Y. 1960) p. 92
5. Robert McClung, *Thor* (William Morrow and Co. N.Y. 1971) p. 64
6. Wyatt Blassengame, *Wonders of Alligators and Crocodiles* (Dodd Mead and Co. N.Y. 1973) p. 49

*Story of a Swan*. My favorite illustration is the one accompanied by this description,

They were afraid of the unnatural looking water and huddled together on a shore. All around them was new fallen snow. The storm's wind still belled in the peaks above, yet currents of warm air came to them from the lake.<sup>7</sup>

The illustrations are powerful in bringing forth the wonder and awe for natural beauty. The use of photos in Patricia Lauber's *Who Needs Alligators* for this purpose however is somewhat of a let down. The attempt to capture the same feelings never quite meets the greatness of Reswold's illustrations. Even though the book contains color photographs, the author relies on words to form her point of argument:

Who needs alligators?

Anyone who likes watching alligators.

Anyone who likes being reminded of dinosaurs.

Anyone who likes the many animals that need alligator ponds.

Anyone who likes the earth to have many kinds of life.

In fact just about everyone needs alligators.<sup>8</sup>

Another type of persuasive technique used is *shock* as found in a blatant discussion of the slaughter of an entire species, pointing out the absence of a purpose for such an action. Ester and Bernard Gordon's *Once There Was A Passenger Pigeon* uses factual statements to show the horror man evoked. "They used large net traps, sulfur fumes and poisonous gasses, snares and shot guns."<sup>9</sup> The book is very brief and to the point.

The fifth type that I found is the discussion of the attempts made to save a threatened species from extinction. The authors show extensive efforts of many people in hopes of getting more to *jump on the band wagon*. *The Hunt For The Whooping Cranes* by J.J. McCoy is a lengthy, detailed description of the search for the summer breeding grounds of the crane in order to determine the dangers that they were encountering. It is written in the form of a detective story with the mystery almost going unsolved. The conclusion of the story is "... future generations of Americans and Canadians must assure the cranes adequate wintering and

summering grounds."<sup>10</sup> George and Ellen Laycock use the same technique in a different format in *The Flying Sea Otter*. Photographs and a short text show the efforts to move the otter in order to prevent overpopulation of an area and to promote new colonies.

Alaskan wildlife workers had two good reasons for moving some of the otters. Around the islands where the old female and her young were, too many otters were living for the food supply. . . And besides, moving some of them started new communities. . .<sup>11</sup>

The sixth was the *good vs. evil* struggle of the animals (good) against man and man's pollution (evil). Two examples are Jack Denton Scott and Ozzie Sweet's *That Wonderful Pelican* and Jane Bailey's *The Sea Otters Struggle*. In Scott and Sweet's: "We have drastically cut down the lifespan for many pelicans with our chemical poisons. But we also kill pelicans by our carelessness."<sup>12</sup> They imply that the survival of this bird relies entirely on its ability to cope with pollution. Likewise in Jane Bailey's: "Today's enemy for all life on the planet is the pollution of the environment."<sup>13</sup>

I think children could certainly be shown how these authors use persuasion to get their points across. It is important that they learn to think about what they read and to question what the author is saying. For without this skill they simply accept what is written as truth. They could compare facts presented by authors of books about the same species of animals and ask, If the facts are the same, why do the books seem different? If some facts are left out, why did the author do this? They could be shown how to compare dates of copyrights and discuss

7. Jane and Paul Annexter, *Trumpeter Story of a Swan* (Holiday House N.Y. 1973) p. 54
8. Patricia Lauber, *Who Needs Alligators*, (Garrard Pub. Co., Champaign, IL 1974) p. 63
9. Ester and Bernard Gordon, *Once There Was A Passenger Pigeon* (Henry Walch N.Y. 1976)
10. J.J. McCoy, *The Hunt For The Whooping Cranes* (N.Y. Lothrop Lee and Shepard 1966)
11. George and Ellen Laycock, *The Flying Sea Otters* (Grosset and Dunlap N.Y. 1970)
12. Jack Denton Scott & Ozzie Sweet *That Wonderful Pelican* (G.P. Putman & Sons 1975 N.Y.)
13. Jane Bailey, *The Sea Otter Struggle* (Follet Pub. Co., Chicago 1973)

society's feeling about the animal at that time.

They should also be told about the various propaganda techniques; emotionalism, one sided presentations, invoking a fear of consequences. Then they should be shown how these are put to work in the books that they have read.

These books reflect society's values concerning the environment. But there is always at least two sides to an argument. Such books as these should be examined for the side that they reflect. For without the development of critical reading skills our children will become mere reflections of what they read.

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