

Beyond Film Impact Assessment: *Being Caribou* Community Screenings as Activist Training Grounds

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This article draws from a multiyear study of the impact of *Being Caribou* to propose a model of how social movements build participation and leadership through community film screenings. From 2004 to 2005, hundreds of thousands of people saw *Being Caribou* at volunteer organized community and house party screenings that served as activist training grounds for the Alaska Coalition's Arctic Refuge campaign. Drawing on media history and civic engagement research methods, I establish how these screenings built on previous movement storytelling efforts and infrastructures to knit communities and organizations together; deepen investment in Arctic Refuge protection; and strengthen the skills, organizing capacity, and "leadership-in-practice" of a broad swathe of individual activists.

Keywords: documentary film, *Being Caribou*, film impact assessment, civic engagement, social movement storytelling, engagement organizing, infrastructure

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The day following the 2016 U.S. presidential election, a delegation of Gwich'in leaders from northern Canada and Alaska traveled to Washington, DC. They knew exactly what they had to do: share their stories of life on the land with the Porcupine caribou, speaking from the heart to urge protection of the caribou calving grounds in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge (ANWR). The delegation met with high-ranking members of the outgoing Obama administration, and with as many incoming members of Congress and aides as they were able. Working closely with allies in nearly 1,000 conservation, sporting, faith, indigenous, and labor member groups, united through the Alaska Wilderness League's (AWL) Alaska Coalition, within a week the effort brought on side 37 of the 41 U.S. senators needed to filibuster the incoming administration's plan to open ANWR to oil and gas leasing (Tobin, 2016).

The effectiveness of "caribou stories" in swaying legislators is remarkable. It has also been a long time coming. Gwich'in and their allies have fought to protect the Arctic Refuge for more than a generation, despite at times seemingly insurmountable odds. This article interrogates that success by examining the movement storytelling practices and movement storytelling infrastructure that supported the Alaska Coalition efforts through a crucial period that parallels the present. In late 2004, facing the reelection of a prodrilling president leading Republican majorities in both houses of Congress, Gwich'in and the AWL initiated an intensive, tightly focused campaign to protect the Arctic Refuge through a series of extremely close congressional votes. That campaign was anchored by a large-scale living room screening drive of the documentary film *Being Caribou*.

The following analysis focuses on the processes of social movement storytelling that underlay this living room screening campaign. It describes how the flow of energy and ideas from *Being Caribou* were taken up in the life of a social movement. Through attending and organizing Arctic Refuge storytelling activities, individuals, communities, and organizations became more invested in the movement to protect the Arctic Refuge, identified more closely with its story, became more imbricated in its relationships, and strengthened their skills and organizing capacity through active participation.

This article takes a long view on how *Being Caribou* screenings acted as activist training grounds, helping to grow an effective social movement in exceptionally challenging times. After briefly introducing the *Being Caribou* project, I review the limitations of film impact assessment and other current frameworks for evaluating whether and how a film effects social change. The next section situates *Being Caribou* not as an isolated film, but as part of a genealogy of Arctic Refuge stories and multimedia storytelling efforts that circulated through the Alaska Coalition over a number of decades. These accreted onto preexisting community organizing practices, reinforcing the circuits of connection between organizers. Over time, these practices solidified into a movement storytelling infrastructure that was reactivated and reinvigorated as organizers began planning *Being Caribou* screenings. Across the Alaska Coalition, screenings became opportunities to build activist leadership and mobilize a nationwide grassroots volunteer constituency. I expand on the specificities of this process by focusing on community screenings in 2005 in Whitehorse, Yukon. In closing, I reflect on what structural insights about social movement storytelling processes offer to the "meaning-making ecologies" (Cox, 2015) of transformational social change.

***Being Caribou* and the Limitations of Film Impact Frameworks**

Within film impact scholarship, *Being Caribou* is repeatedly cited as an early example of a social purpose film taking advantage of a changing media landscape to powerfully extend its reach (see, e.g., Friesen, 2014, 2016). Released in late 2004, *Being Caribou* tells the story of a young couple, Leanne Allison and Karsten Heuer, as they travel by skis and on foot, shadowing the Porcupine caribou herd as it treks to calving grounds in the Arctic Refuge. Using footage from a solar-powered video camera Allison brought on the journey, Allison and Heuer document caribou migrating through snowstorms and past predatory grizzly bears and wolves, dangerous river crossings, and other day-to-day hazards.

Banting (2013), Monani (2012), and Smail (2016), among others, offer rich discussions of the narrative and visual strategies deployed by the *Being Caribou* film and books, which aim to portray the herd's journey as arduous enough without further threats from oil and gas development. However, textual analyses are rarely revealing of how audiences interpret films or act on these interpretations. As Brereton and Hong (2013) demonstrate in their review of extant ecocinematic research, there are "severe disparities between general hypotheses made by scholars concerning 'greening audiences' and the reality on the ground" (p. 174).

In contrast, film impact research speaks directly to questions of how audiences respond to social purpose themed films. Such research first came to prominence as the *Being Caribou* project itself was taking shape, just as documentary films were beginning to achieve unprecedented success in the North American film marketplace (Arthur, 2006; Renov et al., 2005), with wildlife and expedition themed films such as *March of the Penguins* doing particularly well (Rich, 2006). At the same time, documentary film production and distribution were transforming because of increasingly accessible technologies, growing collaborations with advocacy groups and social movements, and shifts in funding models toward more crowdsourcing and nontraditional not-for-profit sources such as tech moguls (McLagan, 2012). Rather than rely solely on commercial or even independent distribution networks, filmmakers and videographers began to extend traditional models of participatory video projects to include iterative and/or interactive participatory processes, facilitated by new uses of social media, that incorporated community forms of distribution designed to ensure a film's real-world impact.²

The mid-2000s saw the rise of Participant Media, the Fledgling Fund, BritDoc, Working Films, and a number of other *filmanthropist*³ individuals and organizations that sought to capitalize on these shifts. Some produced films, some funded film outreach and distribution, and some helped filmmakers develop strategies for community engagement. All shared some variation on the mandate of the Active Voice Lab to help "filmmakers, funders and communities work together to start the conversations and relationships

² Gregory (2012), Hight, Nash, and Summerhayes (2014), and McLagan (2012) all touch on ways social purpose filmmakers have changed their practices in response to these structural transformations in the film industry. Lynes (2012) and Rodríguez (2011) situate newer participatory media practices in relation to antecedent community video and arts praxis.

³ This term is a conflation of the terms *philanthropist* and *filmmaker*, and refers to social entrepreneurs such as Jeffrey Skoll, former president of eBay and founder of Participant Media.

that lead to lasting, measurable change" (GoodPitch, n.d., para. 1). All believed that by supporting the circulation of documentaries and other story-focused media within an emerging multiplatform mediasphere, they could grow public awareness and impact social and political issues.

McLagan (2012) describes the growing influence of such filmanthropists on the world of social purpose documentary as they began to develop and apply their own social issue film-funding models. Drawing on both the language of social entrepreneurship and the processes of evaluation used by more traditional philanthropic foundations, organizations such as BritDoc and Participant Media began to develop qualitative and quantitative metrics to assess the social impact of films, and to use them to assess the returns on their investments. Funders developed prizes, such as the BritDoc Impact Award, and processes, such as BritDoc's GoodPitch events, that encourage filmmakers and "changemakers"—foundations, philanthropists, nongovernmental organizations, media organizations, policymakers, and businesses—to adopt results-driven, social entrepreneurial frameworks for social purpose filmmaking.

Over the course of the last decade, film impact assessment has mushroomed, becoming the purview not just of filmanthropist organizations, but also of major foundation funders working with university-based research institutes.⁴ Increasingly, organizations are harmonizing this work, creating large repositories of impact assessment reports, methodologies, and case studies.⁵ Concomitantly, social movement actors have increasingly come to critique filmanthropist influence and the underlying assumptions of film impact models.⁶

Film impact assessment frameworks rely significantly on quantitative metrics, especially big data metrics such as social media "shares" and online petition signatures, supplemented by qualitative methods such as focus groups, audience surveys, and ethnographies (Barrett & Leddy, 2008). Such assessment frameworks measure only short-term impacts, and their implementation tends to reproduce structural inequalities. Particularly for more marginalized communities and organizations, the significant administrative burden and extra labor needed to satisfy increased funder reporting requirements take scarce resources away from work that produces community benefit (Roburn & Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in Heritage Department, 2012).⁷ Smaller and less professional groups that are less of a smooth fit with the dominant

⁴ For example, the Ford and MacArthur Foundations and the National Endowment for the Arts fund American University's Center for Media and Social Impact.

⁵ See, for example, the StoryPilot project (<https://storypilot.org>) and the Measurement Tools repository at the How Do We Know? initiative hosted by Active Voice Lab (<https://www.activevoice.net/how-do-we-know/home>).

⁶ Whereas I have focused on social movement critiques, a number of other literatures have much to offer the broader project of enriching conversation about film impact frames. Of particular note are ecocinema studies, environmental communications, literature on community and participatory media, cinema and media studies of "useful cinema" (Acland & Wasson, 2011, p. 3), and the mix of academic research and gray literature on documentary activism (Turnin & Winton, 2014).

⁷ BritDoc's Impact Field Guide and Toolkit's (<http://impactguide.org/>) 46-page "We Love Evaluation" section, which includes a mock budget with 10% of resources allocated to evaluation, offers a good example of a funder making an evaluation culture a significant expectation within its granting framework.

organizational assessment culture also may face additional pressures to adopt standard designs and methods and to prime their work toward activities that are assessable. In addition, assumptions of scalability and replicability rarely hold true cross-culturally. For example, although the Fledgling Fund–supported outreach campaign for *The Cove* was highly successful by Fund metrics, public dialog and media coverage in Japan focused far less on ending the slaughter of dolphins and far more on whether the film’s depiction of Japanese fisher people compared with the “White savior” film protagonists was racist (Heise & Tudor, 2014).

Filmanthropist approaches exclude the influence of the philanthropic process itself from their analyses of “impact.” However, this naturalization of the relationship between philanthropy and social change work in North America is periodically and powerfully challenged by social justice movements. For instance, in *The Revolution Will Not Be Funded*, the INCITE! collective vigorously critiques the “nonprofit industrial complex,” foregrounding the deep, inherent, and irresolvable contradiction of a capitalist philanthropic model that seeks to stimulate grassroots participation through imposing a top-down practice in which financial resources and associated decision-making power reside outside the grassroots community (INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence, 2007).

Filmanthropy is particularly vulnerable to such censure as it originated with technology moguls closely allied with start-up culture. The Skoll Foundation website (funder of Participant Media) describes its approach as focusing on social entrepreneurs who “scale” their impact by leveraging media and storytelling, creating “innovations and models . . . ripe to deliver outsized impact and drive large-scale change” (Skoll, n.d., para. 4). A recent major filmanthropy research report directs documentary producers to develop “flexibility to respond to emerging opportunities,” adopt “design thinking” that is “solution-focused,” strategically identify “target audiences and stakeholders,” and conceptualize their projects via a “logic model”—including resources, key outputs, activities, and short- and long-term outcomes” (Clark & Abrash, 2011, pp. 11–12).

In my research with Gwich’in and Inuvialuit communities and Alaska Coalition groups, such forms of “retail environmentalism” (Kohm, interview, September 18, 2013a) seen to be rooted in a capitalist consumer culture of quick fixes and instant gratification, engendered deep suspicion at the community level. Gwich’in were not interested in “flavor-of-the-month” collaborators, but in partners with a long-term commitment to the Arctic Refuge and to respecting the autonomy and wisdom of the many thousands-of-years-old Gwich’in culture.

Social movement actors are increasingly contesting “social impact” narratives that credit gifted individuals and sudden innovations, discounting movement labor that establishes and maintains the spaces and networks that social purpose films rely on for community distribution and community action. Such critiques stress the long, slow work of community organizing in creating transformational change. In September 2014, the Fledgling Fund published an open letter acknowledging this resistance:

The vast majority of social issue documentaries and their engagement campaigns are entering into a community (however small or large) of activists, leaders, organizations and coalitions that have laid groundwork long before the films and campaigns were

conceived and they will be there for many years continuing to build the movement. This critical work must be acknowledged. (Barrett, Leddy, & Stom, 2014, para. 8)

Yet, film impact assessment remains film and media centric; although some analyses have moved toward including a few measures that “focus on the degree to which a film contributes to a healthy participatory civic life” (Clark & Abrash, 2011, p. 10), the unit of assessment of “impact” remains a particular film and associated issue campaign. What if one truly unseats the filmanthropic/film impact perspective, focusing not on an individual film but on social movements and their storytelling practices? To answer this question in the case of *Being Caribou*, I next examine storytelling about the Arctic Refuge as a long-term practice within the organizational cultures of the member groups of the Alaska Coalition.

Building a Storytelling Infrastructure: A Brief History of Alaskan Conservation Advocacy

Public storytelling has been a cornerstone of Alaskan conservation advocacy for more than a century, preceding even the founding of leading American conservation organizations. Major figures in American conservation had deep ties to Alaska, visiting and working in Alaskan landscapes for long periods.⁸ John Muir, the founder of the Sierra Club, began writing about Alaska in 1879, when his dispatches from a seven-month trip through the Inside Passage were serialized in the *San Francisco Daily Evening Bulletin* as “wilderness journalism” (Brinkley, 2011, p. 3). Muir made a total of seven trips to Alaska (Heacox, 2014), sharing his fervent enthusiasm for Alaska in serialized letters for the *Bulletin*, articles, and three books, including the bestselling *Stickeen* and *Travels in Alaska*, a “valentine to Glacier Bay” (Brinkley, 2011, p. 12) that lay on Muir’s bedside table as he passed away. Such stories, authors, and popular cultural tropes catalyzed the Alaskan conservation movement from the end of the 19th century to 1960 (Brinkley, 2011).

From their very beginnings, American conservation movements produced and circulated many of these narratives. As early as the 1890s, newsletters filled with stories and photographs were foundational to how conservation groups connected with their members. For example, prior to the turn of the century, Sierra Club bulletins consisted largely of member tales of wilderness expeditions, complemented by drawings and even photographic plates. Dunaway (2005) documents how, under David Brower’s leadership, the Sierra Club parlayed this strength in adventure storytelling into the large-scale production, distribution, and marketing of coffee table books to support its campaigns. The very first such book, *This Is Dinosaur*, was distributed to every member of Congress as part of a successful campaign to prevent the building of the Echo Park Dam. The Sierra Club’s Exhibit Format series, which teamed esteemed nature writers with prominent photographers, further developed the circuits of visual storytelling that the Sierra Club used to develop mass public support. Exhibit Format books were tied into touring photography exhibits; the books were widely reviewed in the popular press, often with reviewers making explicit links

⁸ Banerjee (2012) and Nelson (2004) discuss the instrumental role played by Margaret and Olaus Murie, who were key players in the Wilderness Society, the Wildlife Society, and the Izaak Walton League, in the establishment of ANWR, which was later expanded to the present day Arctic Refuge boundaries. Gillam (2010) documents the Alaskan work and connections of Edgar Wayburn.

to the bills and campaigns the books were supporting; and excerpts from the books in popular magazines, as well as brochures and catalogs promoting the books, reached hundreds of thousands of people. At the same time, the Sierra Club leveraged the high cultural capital of such projects in its relationship building with judges, business elites, and members of Congress; this strategy was so successful that during heated debates on the Wilderness Bill in 1960, several congressmen directly referenced or quoted passages from their complementary copies of *This Is the American Earth* or referred to it in their political speeches (Dunaway, 2005).

In the 1950s and early 1960s, conservation community and popular storytelling circuits evolved rapidly as part of campaigns to pass a Wilderness Act; in the late 1960s and 1970s efforts to influence the settlement of Alaskan native land claims and the creation of Alaskan protected areas pushed the conservation community to find new ways to energize and activate its grassroots base. Representative Morris K. Udall, chair of the House Interior Committee, described this effort as “head and shoulders above anything put together in the public interest field since the civil rights movement” (Hornblower, 1979, p. A3).

During this period, the conservation community came together to form the Alaska Coalition. Through the Alaska Coalition, the major national conservation groups moved beyond developing joint strategies and sharing information to pooling their resources, creating an extremely organized, powerful, and effective lobby. Long before the arrival of Twitter, Facebook, or sophisticated voter-tracking databases and software, the Alaska Coalition pioneered the kind of direct, voter-engaged, district-by-district grassroots lobbying that, decades later, has become mainstream for both political parties and civil society organizations in the United States. Over the course of the 1970s, the Alaska Coalition successfully built a fluid, responsive, and highly organized voter activation structure that could be called on at a moment's notice to unleash a deluge of supportive phone calls, letters, visits to members of Congress, presentations at committees, and even demonstrations. This system tightly coupled developments in Washington to outreach with the grassroots base: At key legislative junctures, teams of lobbyists would report back every day, updating each potential congressional vote, so that Alaska Coalition staff and volunteers could target and intensify lobbying efforts, and work the phones long into the evening to ensure that vulnerable senators and representatives would receive a flood of feedback from their local constituents (Nelson, 2004).

A team of approximately 14 grassroots organizers worked closely with the Washington, DC, office, cultivating volunteer leadership throughout the Alaska Coalition's member groups and pioneering innovative organizational practices. For the first time, major environmental groups, including the Sierra Club, the Audubon Society, the National Resources Defense Council, and the National Parks Conservation Association, combined their mailing lists, sending mailings to upward of 750,000 people (Clusen, interview, March 29, 2012). The Alaska Coalition developed an urgent action “mailgram” system, spending up to \$50,000 per individual mailing to reach key grassroots organizers (Clusen, interview, March 29, 2012). By 1979, during the final push for the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act, the Alaska Coalition had assembled and was actively using a 3 million-name computerized database, organized by congressional district (Hornblower, 1979).

The persistent efforts of dedicated local volunteers played a significant role in efforts to pass the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act (Nelson, 2004). The Sierra Club, for example, aggressively organized Alaska campaigns in every state, ensuring each of 50 state chapters and 200 local groups had Alaska coordinators. Such volunteers had a high degree of person-to-person interaction with professional conservation organizers. The resultant training and mentoring produced sophisticated organizers able, for example, to put together coalitions of influential community members willing to visit individual elected officials and link their future electoral support to the representative's Alaskan conservation voting record (Hornblower, 1979).

But what role did storytelling play in developing and supporting this grassroots volunteer constituency? The next section describes how multimedia storytelling practices, especially touring events, built and maintained grassroots support during the campaign to protect the Arctic Refuge.

Using Storytelling to Build Grassroots Support

The passage of the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act put the Arctic Refuge under unique pressures: to not scuttle the entire Act, provisions on the fate of the refuge's coastal plain, labeled the "1002 lands," were removed at a late stage, replaced with language dictating that Congress be responsible for legislating a status for the lands at a later date. In the ensuing decades, access to these lands took on enormous symbolic importance for both the oil industry and the American conservation movement. Equally important, this new legislative state of affairs brought the Gwich'in nation, heritors of a powerful place-based storytelling culture,⁹ to the forefront of public national and international struggles over the Arctic Refuge.

From time immemorial, the coastal plain has been the calving grounds of the Porcupine caribou. For more than a dozen isolated Gwich'in villages scattered across Alaska and northern Canada, survival of the herd is synonymous with Gwich'in survival. In 1981, all of the Gwich'in villages came together, organizing transnationally to form the Gwich'in Steering Committee, whose sole purpose is to advocate to protect the Arctic Refuge. A central tenet of the steering committee's political strategy was and is to share the story of the Gwich'in relationship to caribou truthfully, respectfully, and to as wide an audience as possible.¹⁰

Beginning in the 1990s, Gwich'in speakers joined the touring multimedia shows about the Arctic Refuge initiated by grassroots activists. These traveling shows worked closely with the Alaska Coalition, contributing to the growth and revitalization of the group's membership. As one example, organizer Lenny Kohm estimated that over a 15-year period he presented more than 2,000 Last Great Wilderness Project slideshows to an average audience of between 50 and 200 people, or between 100,000 and 400,000 people in total. Kohm presented his slideshows—often accompanied by a Gwich'in speaker sharing his or

⁹Profeit-Leblanc (2002) discusses the Athapascan (Gwich'in) storytelling tradition specifically, and Archibald (2008) offers a good general introduction to indigenous "storywork." See Roburn (2015) for a more extensive discussion of indigenous storytelling in relation to the Arctic Refuge.

¹⁰ Roburn (2015) discusses the formation and work of the Gwich'in Steering Committee.

her stories—to Kiwanis and Rotary Clubs, church groups, university clubs, gardening clubs, Sierra Club chapters, hunting and fishing groups, union locals, and any other constituency that expressed interest. Kohm described his public presentations as “all storytelling,” and at their most compelling when Gwich’in told “stories about hunting caribou or why caribou was so important, and just about their lives in general because that’s what people seemed to really be interested in” (Kohm, interview, September 26, 2013b).

Kohm aimed to quickly transform the empathy and interest of audiences into concrete community building: His goal was to leave a given presentation with a list of individuals who already had or were empowered to take a next step (e.g., calling their elected representative, organizing another awareness-raising event), and a means to connect them into a structure that would support the self-perpetuation of this new community of concern. Through forging on-the-ground connections with local organizers, over time Kohm built a list of approximately 300 “AAA” or “Ardent Arctic Activist” volunteers whom he would call personally to instigate participation in Arctic Refuge campaigning activities and to congratulate them and report back on the outcomes of their work. A core “drop everything” list of approximately 60 people could be counted on at a moment’s notice for big tasks such as getting 500 calls to a congressional office within a day.

Kohm’s Last Great Wilderness Project was but one of a number of traveling awareness-raising efforts for the Arctic Refuge, affiliated with the AWL and Alaska Coalition, that crisscrossed the continental United States beginning in the 1990s. These included other multimedia shows, such as those put on by Caribou Commons and Subhankar Banerjee, but also cross-country rallying tours, such as the 2002 “Walk to Washington” in which participants from three different self-propelled legs (traveled on foot, by bicycle, and by biodiesel van) met for a rally in Washington, conducting more than 135 public events on the way. In addition to these events, prominent environmental groups sponsored touring photography exhibits and book projects on the Arctic Refuge, turning the launches into major occasions with activities and press releases. As early as 1991, the conservation community was not only promoting Arctic Refuge films but also supporting their production and circulation in conservation networks.¹¹

Why and how did traveling multimedia efforts become so important to the Alaska Coalition’s grassroots mobilization efforts? In the early 2000s, based on his multiyear collaborative research and volunteer leadership building work with the Sierra Club—a core member of the Alaska Coalition—Marshall Ganz proposed that social movement storytelling, which he referred to as “public narrative,” acted as “a discursive form that we’ve developed . . . to answer that question of when confronted with challenge, how do I find the emotional or moral resources to deal with it?” (Wherry, 2015, para. 13). In other words, stories played a specific role in building social movements by creating solidarity, hope, and a sense of urgency; these helped overcome isolation, self-doubt, inertia, fear, and apathy, priming people to purposeful political action. Ganz identified learning to share stirring public narratives as the first of five “leadership-in-practice” skills in which he and his colleagues schooled the Sierra Club’s volunteer leadership. As the next sections show with reference to the *Being Caribou* screenings in 2005, multimedia

¹¹ For example, Audubon produced and helped circulate 1990’s *Arctic Refuge: Vanishing Wilderness?* narrated by Meryl Streep.

storytelling anchored events in which more engaged volunteers developed their activist skills and leadership, while new members took a first action, joining the initial rung of a “ladder of engagement” (Han, 2014; Karpf, 2010) with the Alaska Coalition and its work.

Why *Being Caribou*? Social Movement Stories as Calls to Action

The results of the 2004 election, which increased Republican majorities in Congress, forced AWL and the Alaska Coalition to mobilize on a scale not seen before. AWL and Alaska Coalition organizers made the strategic decision to build a “living room” screening drive, using *Being Caribou* screenings as a core activity in a tightly focused, intensive year-long campaign to pressure elected members of Congress in advance of key Arctic Refuge votes. AWL organizers chose *Being Caribou* based on the electric reception the film had received in September 2004 at AWL’s Alaska Wilderness Week, a biannual volunteer training session in Washington, DC, that brought together local organizers from across North America, AWL staff, and elected congressional officials. Timed to overlap with the 40th anniversary celebrations of the Wilderness Act and a major political mobilization by wilderness advocacy groups in Washington, the packed screening at the auditorium of the American Association for the Advancement of Science included activists, conservation leaders, Gwich’in and other Native Americans, Hill staffers, elected officials, and members of the public. According to Lexi Keogh (interview, March 28, 2008), the communications coordinator for AWL at the time, “Everyone loved the film. People were engrossed by it.” The home-made quality of the film, and the way it told the story of the migration of the caribou through the story of newlyweds whose marriage was tested by their journey, made a geographically far-away issue intimate and relatable (Degnan, interview, March 26, 2008).

Equally important, the film has an unusual ending: After cutting short their journey to meet with elected officials at the 2003 Alaska Wilderness Week, a heartbroken Allison and Heuer conclude that, alone, they cannot sway lawmakers. The narration switches from Allison, near tears, to Heuer suggesting, “Maybe the answer is to work from the bottom up and not just the top down as we’ve been trying.” Heuer intones, “This story hopefully will resonate with people. We have to make them feel it in their hearts. I guess that the only pathway is true democracy” as the imagery shifts to pictures of protest signs, banners, and a ceremonial drum as Gwich’in and other Arctic Refuge supporters hold a demonstration on Capitol Hill, and finally to an image of the sun setting on the Washington Monument. Through this sequence, the film models the public narrative appeal that Ganz (2011) describes as “link[ing] our own calling to that of our community to a call to action” (p. 2).¹² In Ganz’s terms, the filmmakers’ “story of self”—their deeply felt concern for the caribou they lived with—becomes a “story of us” of democratic citizens, and a “story of now” because the actions Americans take will determine the future of the Arctic Refuge calving grounds.

Sam Gregory (2012), longtime program director of the human rights video advocacy organization WITNESS, has highlighted the importance of such open narrative structures in effective

¹² Ganz continues, “Leaders can use public narrative to interpret their values to others, enable one’s community to experience values it shares, and inspire others to act on challenges this community must face. It is learning how to tell a story of self, a story of us, and a story of now.”

videography/storytelling for action, stressing that these stories must be coupled with opportunities to act. *Being Caribou* was an apt choice for video party settings because the narrative power of the film's ending carried easily into a concrete "ask" immediately made by volunteer organizers. For organizers, the double dose of public narrative—a call to action in their own words, echoing the affecting call at *Being Caribou*'s end—increased their efficacy, and thus confidence in their practice of a vital skill. According to Ganz (2010), although the craft of getting commitments is

key to social movement action . . . it is a leadership skill that people find most difficult to master . . . it takes courage, training, and dedication to develop a movement culture of asking for and getting real commitments. (p. 536)

The choice of *Being Caribou*, and indeed of undertaking a living room screening campaign for the first Arctic Action Day on March 12, 2005, was made both to boost short-term action to protect the Arctic Refuge and to grow membership and leadership skills within the Alaska Coalition to sustain a difficult, year-long campaign.

Arctic Action Days: *Being Caribou* and the 2005 Arctic Refuge Campaign

Volunteers organized hundreds of *Being Caribou* living room and community screenings planned for March 12, 2005. The house party format that screenings followed had been widely adopted by the North American conservation community following the 2001 financial crisis.¹³ As major foundations substantively cut back their grantmaking, they funded various initiatives that trained conservationists in grassroots fundraising, including house parties. Most of these efforts, as with *Being Caribou* parties, heavily stressed the ask. Civic engagement research suggests that a house party setting is particularly apposite for making asks: Peer-to-peer dialog and creating a sense of community through shared social interaction are incredibly important predictors both of initial involvement and longer-term participation in social movements (Corrigall-Brown, 2012; Han, 2014). Invitees habitually attend house parties because of shared social ties and common interests. In the case of *Being Caribou* screenings, audience members were usually connected to organizers through shared membership in a faith, labor, conservation, or recreation group or community.

Being Caribou screening asks were simple, offering immediate pathways to translate the shared value of calving grounds protection into actions: signing a petition, writing a letter, joining a meeting or protest. Drawing on the fairly extensive orientation package and supported by regional leaders who were often paid organizers, party hosts offered peer support and on-site training for these actions. This helped

¹³ House parties have a much longer history within social movements. For example, they were prominent in the early stage organizing of the United Farm Workers movement (Klein, 1999). See Clarke (1999) for a discussion of the gendered and racialized origins of North American house parties as loci of business in the domestic sphere.

attendees overcome the lack of civic skills which is often a key barrier to political participation.¹⁴ For example, hosts provided sample letters and addresses of elected officials, and attendees wrote letters together in the party setting. Party organizers were developing the skills to support others as they themselves were supported, growing the reach and strengthening the bonds of the collaborative, distributed leadership structure that formed the backbone of the movement to protect the Arctic Refuge.¹⁵ Ganz and Lin (2012) recognize these crucial functions by identifying house parties as the second of their five leadership-in-practice skills.

Rather than articulating video parties to a long tradition of house parties as a social movement organizing tool, media scholarship has tended to situate the rise of video parties in Robert Greenwald's partnerships with MoveOn.org and the Center for American Progress, although chronologically the early use of video parties by the Alaska Coalition preceded these events.¹⁶ Such narratives focus on the role of "new" networked digital media and viral marketing in creating alternative distribution networks. However, in both the Arctic Refuge campaign and some of the work of MoveOn.org, the main work of video parties was to grow existing grassroots organizing structures and capacity/skills, but grafting in digital tools. For example, MoveOn.org used house parties in 2004 not to screen Michael Moore's *Fahrenheit 9/11*, but to convene a "town hall" in which people who had already seen the film video-conferenced with Michael Moore before planning local actions with their neighbors to "win back the White House."¹⁷ As with Arctic Action Day video parties in 2005, multimedia served to amplify reach and connection, acting as a precursor for building relationships, shared commitment, and purposeful action by increasing audience participants' sense of political efficacy.

Corrigall-Brown (2012) points out that participation in social movements is highly correlated with an individual's sense of "political efficacy," or belief that his or her actions make a difference. The calving grounds campaign was strategically designed such that thousands of small actions (e.g., hosting hundreds of house parties in one day or having a number of local groups deluge a "swing" senator with letters and phone calls before a key vote) added up to "specific measurable outcomes with real deadlines" (Ganz, 2010, p. 536), exactly the formula Ganz describes as key to effective action.

¹⁴ See Baggetta, Han, and Andrews (2013) on Verba's "civic voluntarism model," which argues "that political participation demands proficiency with civic skills like leading meetings, writing letters, and making speeches" (p. 547).

¹⁵ In his Sierra Club work, Ganz named this the "snowflake model." It is now widely used in grassroots organizing (Wherry, 2015).

¹⁶ See, for example, Aufderheide (2005). In fact, Arctic Refuge campaign video parties preceded Greenwald's wide use of this tactic; the *Bring Home Alaska* film was part of Protect the Arctic campaign kits distributed to local Audubon chapters in 2001. See <http://www.protectthearctic.com/helpnow.asp> from April 6, 2001.

¹⁷ More detail on these events is archived at <http://pol.moveon.org/f911/mappics.html> and <http://www.moveon.org/pac/news/f911parties.html>. Approximately 55,000 people attended 4,600 house parties.

The first consolidating “peak” of activity in the 2005 Arctic Refuge campaign saw approximately 300,000 people watch *Being Caribou* at roughly 2,700 screenings as part of the March 12 Arctic Action Day that preceded a key Senate vote (Roburn, 2015). Internet connectivity helped facilitate immediate sharing of photographs and data from Action Day activities, articulating individual acts to a visible, quantifiable mass action, building relationships and a shared sense of commitment between activists in all 50 states and Canada.

Just four days after the Arctic Action Day, despite tens of thousands of letters, phone calls, and other acts of protest, an amendment to keep drilling out of the Arctic Refuge was defeated in the Senate by one vote. This defeat became not a failure, but a challenge built into the narrative of the next two Arctic Action days representing even more crucial electoral choice points/votes for the movement to organize toward. This interpretation was an outcome of the campaign’s distributed leadership model, which encouraged debriefing and shared reflection within a supportive environment of both peers and mentors. In such settings, the learning opportunities provided by early campaign setbacks act as important recalibration points that can increase the strategic capacity of a campaign and even the motivation of campaigners (Ganz, 2010).

The Alaska Coalition continued to screen *Being Caribou* to hundreds of thousands of viewers throughout 2005, ordering 5,000 more copies of the DVD in June (Keogh, interview, March 28, 2008). As a shared story of commitment to the caribou, the film was motivational: In the public narrative of the Arctic Refuge campaign, the difficult, challenging, and long journey of the caribou and of Allison and Heuer acted as a reminder that survival and success—for social change campaigns, as well as for caribou—depend on resilience in the face of adversity. Such a reframing of activist experience, in which defeat and difficulty are reinterpreted as trials through which the movement gains strength, prompts positive affect and maintains hope. Han (2014) describes such “transformational” storytelling as key in nurturing a culture of high-engagement organizing within social movements. The final section of this article examines how such campaign storytelling worked on the ground in Whitehorse, Yukon.

Community Screenings in Action: Building Movement Momentum in Whitehorse, Yukon

Being Caribou premiered at Whitehorse’s Available Light Film Festival on Tuesday, March 1, 2005, where it was given pride of place as the festival opener, following an evening reception. Local calving grounds organizers introduced the film, capitalizing on the gala event, which was covered by local radio and newspapers, to publically call the Yukon Premier to account for “at this 11th hour for the issue, (being) negligent in his duty as representative of the people, the cultures, and the wilderness of the Yukon Territory” (E. Heuer quoted in “Fentie Is Blasted,” 2005, p. 42). Although the film screened twice in the large Beringia Interpretive Centre auditorium as part of the festival, demand to see it remained strong. Erica Heuer, Karsten Heuer’s sister, began organizing additional by-donation screenings of *Being Caribou* at Hellaby Hall, the basement of a local Anglican church. In March, 1,200 people saw the film at 10 at-capacity screenings (Heuer, 2005). Heuer answered questions after each screening, and also invited local politicians, Gwich’in representatives, and calving grounds advocates to address audiences and begin a “think tank” about next steps. According to Erica Heuer, after the screenings,

People wanted to know what was happening, they wanted to know what they could do. . . . So it was a super easy springboard to go into “We’re not sure what to do next. What do you think we should do next? Do you guys have any ideas? That’s partly what we’re here for.” You know, because the message, Karsten’s message at the end of the film is “Do what you can,” right? So that’s the note you finish watching on, that’s the last thing in your mind and then there you are and it’s like “Yeah, what can I do?” (Heuer, interview, December 3, 2012)

Often the postscreening discussions lasted more than an hour. With ideas forwarded from one discussion session to the next, a consensus quickly emerged to organize a demonstration to coincide with a March 30 visit to the Yukon Legislature by a delegation of Alaskan politicians (Heuer, interview, December 3, 2012; McElheran, 2005b).

The resulting rally, attended by hundreds including a sizeable First Nations contingent, was covered on national news. The two major Whitehorse newspapers put the rally as their front cover photos and published full-page spreads of multiple articles and photographs showing crowds carrying hundreds of signs outside the legislature and how, inside the gallery, “Dyson and the other Alaskan delegates, who sat together near the front of the gallery, were surrounded by a sea of white, slogan-inscribed T-shirts (emblazoned with ‘SAVE ANWR’)” (McElheran, 2005a, p. 3).

Although the rally was intended to send a message to the visiting Alaskan elected officials, as a display of “people power,” it had a crucial catalytic effect in shifting momentum after the demoralizing defeat in the Senate just two weeks before. Erica Heuer attributed this success to the fact that *Being Caribou* audiences had themselves decided on the demonstration as a tactic:

They [*Being Caribou* community screening audiences] are the ones who decided that we should have a demonstration, which I am sure is why it was so successful, because out of 24 screenings¹⁸ where you get people from the audience deciding, submitting this idea, putting it forward and building it and getting excited about it, and that happens from meeting to meeting to meeting to meeting, with different people all the time—that by the time you get to have the demonstration, all those people, or a good percentage of them anyways, will show up. So, it was great . . . it left a mark. And I always think that these things, individually maybe they don’t get that net change that you want, but they contributed to the positive energy from which other ideas can spring, other activists can spring, and other actions can spring that ultimately will result in the change that you want. (Heuer, interview, December 3, 2012)

In other words, *Being Caribou* screenings were activist training grounds. The March 30 demonstration, which reinvigorated the calving grounds debate locally, was but the first in a series of events and activities to protect the Arctic Refuge that took place in the Whitehorse area throughout 2005 and 2006, as Erica

¹⁸ In fact, the demonstration occurred after about 10 such screenings, not the full 24.

Heuer continued to host weekly or biweekly *Being Caribou* screenings. Although legislative attempts to open ANWR to drilling ended on December 21, 2005, when ANWR drilling provisions in a defense appropriations bill were defeated by a filibuster, local momentum in support of the calving grounds continued to build, with a sold-out Arctic Refuge fundraiser for the *Being Caribou* book tour drawing more than 400 people to the Yukon Arts Centre at the end of April 2006.

Conclusion

During the 2004–2006 period, living room and community screenings of *Being Caribou* played an important role in the AWL and Alaska Coalition’s civil society campaign to protect the coastal plain of the Arctic Refuge.¹⁹ Between 500,000 and 750,000 North Americans saw the film in contexts where they were immediately asked by their peers to step up and take an action—make a phone call, write a letter, attend a demonstration, join a group—to protect the Arctic Refuge (Roburn, 2015). The resultant tens of thousands of actions played an immediate role in the struggle, but they represent only part of the impact that *Being Caribou* had on civil society efforts to protect the “1002 lands.”

This article has situated the AWL and Alaska Coalition’s use of *Being Caribou* more broadly within a tradition of social movement storytelling. Over decades, the AWL and Alaska Coalition developed practices and infrastructures for sharing stories about Alaskan conservation. These were largely supported by local volunteers operating within a distributed leadership model; movement storytelling was not only a way to grow entry-level grassroots participation in Alaskan conservation but also operated as a staging ground for volunteers to practice and develop their skills as organizers and advocates. Public storytelling activities created circuits of connection among volunteers that deepened their implication and bolstered their sense of belonging to the movement.

This analysis suggests that the study of social purpose film impacts, at least in the context of social movements, must extend to a consideration of how a film functions as a part of processes that develop movement leadership in the long term. But how can this be done? Creating movement leadership development metrics for an individual film is insufficient and even misleading; a “movement storytelling” perspective by its nature unseats any individual film as the core unit of analysis, shifting instead to understanding how stories, through their circulation, help to grow social movements over time. This process is more complex than simply building movement leadership in the ways this article has emphasized; for example, in the case of the Arctic Refuge, the *Being Caribou* story accreted onto a culture of caribou stories through which Gwich’in people, over a course of generations, had profoundly shaped the character of the movement to protect the Arctic Refuge (Roburn, 2015).

Cox (2015) argues that “media-centrism” in academic analyses of the public dimensions of social and environmental issues limits scholars’ abilities to perceive and theorize scale and complexity within communicative systems. He calls for broader meaning-making ecologies that pay close attention to the

¹⁹ The public campaign was only one part of efforts to protect the refuge. At a diplomatic level, Canadian Gwich’in effectively leveraged international agreements and powers negotiated through self-government processes to force calving grounds protection as a diplomatic issue.

ways that “flows, processes and “uptakes” of information, narratives, and discourses” circulate and “characterize a particular sociocultural landscape” (p. 374).

In this article, I have argued that *Being Caribou's* meaning-making effects are inseparable from a larger ecology, one that encompasses not only other caribou stories but also the institutions, organizations, processes, and people involved in their circulation. Using a sociology of practice (Couldry, 2004), I have situated *Being Caribou* viewing activities with respect to the broader social movement practices that they helped to anchor. Although *Being Caribou* lacked substantive philanthropic funding, applying such an approach more broadly to social purpose films that have had such funding requires that film impact research consider its own role within the philanthropic giving process. How do filmanthropic funding projects, and the evaluation culture they impose, shape what kinds of films get made and how these stories are circulated? Whose needs are served and whose are excluded as philanthropic funders increasingly partner with universities and academic researchers to study “social innovation” and “media impacts”? What might such knowledge production look like if it included or even centered on the questions of social movement campaigners?

The lacuna of research in this area papers over frictions between filmmakers, social movements, and funders. Tsing (2005) argues that such frictions within social movements are rich sources of learning, and that understanding them is key to social movement efficacy. Stories are profoundly shaped by the media they pass through: This is as true for the “media” of social movement cultures, networks, and organizations as it is for the medium of a coffee table book or film. As the study of social change storytelling moves forward, it is important that researchers expand their “ecology” of story, and of impact, to better attend to the communities and interactions in which social change stories live.

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