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Making Wilderness

An Inquiry into Stig Wesslén's Documentation and Representation of the Northern Swedish Landscape

ABSTRACT The present article explores images of the Northern Swedish landscape, produced and mediated by Stig Wesslén (1902–1987) in the 1930s and 1940s. Trained as a forester, Wesslén gradually turned into a documentarist, focusing on the wilderness, notably big birds, predators and the mountain range in Lapland. Along with making a number of ambitious movies and embarking on intensive lecture tours, he was an active debater and writer and published six, richly illustrated books. These careers were interwoven, partly for practical reasons; income from lecturing and journalism financed his filmmaking and gave him time to write his books. It is argued in the article that Wesslén was driven by a strong feeling for wilderness and that he was against the way modern civilization exploited nature. The goal of his documentary work was ultimately to raise public awareness regarding the state of nature and he may thus be seen as a link between the preservationists of the early twentieth century and the environmentalists of the 1960s. In order to reveal the true essence of nature, Wesslén developed a “scientific” documentary technique, which he called “camera hunting.” The idea was to use the best camera equipment possible that would allow him to observe nature at a distance, not disturb the natural order of things, and present authentic images. Yet, as the article shows, Wesslén sometimes anthropomorphized the animals and also dramatized nature in many of his works.

KEYWORDS Stig Wesslén, nature documentary, wilderness, Lapland, critique of civilisation, “camera hunting”

Introduction

Popular depictions of the natural world in texts, photographs and movies have had an enormous influence on people's image of nature, and the northern Swedish space with its landscape and mountain ranges, are no exception. Swedish documentarians, including Borg Mesch, Kai Curry-Lindahl, Jan Lindblad, Edvin Nilsson, Bo Landin and Yngve Ryd have all made significant contributions in this field. Another documentarian who deserves mention as a particularly interesting member of this company is Stig Wesslén (1902–1987). At its peak in the mid-twentieth century, the extent and variety of his productivity was indeed impressive. Along with making a large number of movies and embarking on intensive lecture tours both within and beyond the borders of the country, he was an active debater and writer producing six, richly illustrated books for a prestigious publishing house. Since his production concentrates for the most part on the forests, mountains and wildlife of northern Sweden, Wesslén's contribution to the image of the north is well worth in-depth analysis.

Although nature documentaries, and movies in particular, have enjoyed a large audience from their very inception, and nature photography and videotaping has today become something of a national pastime, making a significant impact on our perception of nature and the state of the environment, research into the genre is surprisingly limited. Internationally, and especially in the US, the history of the nature documentary has been studied in depth (Bousé 1998; Mitman 1999; Bousé 2000; Vivanco 2002; Dunaway 2005; Horak 2006; Brower 2010; Tobias 2011; Rust *et al.* (eds.) 2012). As Bousé has shown, the history of wildlife film coincides with the very origin of motion pictures (Bousé 2000). Animals were often feature attractions in the very early days of cinema, but in arranged takes of tamed beasts usually shot in zoos. New technology, such as the more powerful lenses that became available in the 1920s, made it possible to film animals in the wild from great distances, and the Safari and hunting film was established as a category within wildlife movies. Another category was scientific-educational films where the scientific ambition was to show the natural world, usually with a Darwinian motif. The mid-twentieth century saw a breakthrough for the adventure narratives with the launch of Walt Disney's series "True Life Adventures" playing a key role. These shorts were characterized by their accessible story lines, in which animals were portrayed with distinctly human attributes, in the stylistic tradition of Disney's animated menagerie (Bousé 1998; Bousé 2000; Horak 2006; Tobias 2011).

Original research into the history of the nature documentary in a Scandinavian context is still thin on the ground (see however Qvist 1986; Ganetz 2004; Andersson & Eliasson 2006; Ganetz 2012). Wesslén was one of the

most renowned mid-century nature documentarians, a Scandinavian counterpart to Ansel Adams (1902–1984) in the US or Jean Painlevé (1902–1989) in France, who were of the same age as him. But in contrast to Adams or Painlevé, with the passage of time, Wesslén's accomplishments have faded almost entirely into obscurity (Furhammar 1982), only very recently becoming the subject of a more comprehensive commentary (Mårald & Nordlund 2010), but even then only in Swedish.

Wesslén is also interesting inasmuch as he represents a period in modern environmental history that is often overlooked by scholars. Both in Sweden and internationally, there is a tendency to focus on turn of the twentieth century pioneer conservationists and advocates of the breakthrough of ecological politics and consciousness from the late sixties onwards. In Sweden, the first conservation laws, the first national parks and the Swedish Society for Nature Conservation were all established in 1909, inspired by a similar development in the US and in Germany. In the sixties, a similar leap forward occurred when natural resource and environmental protection legislation was passed and the Swedish Environmental Protection Agency was established. There is, however, historical continuity between these periods and studies of the transition between them contribute to creating a broader and better historical understanding of modern conservationism and environmentalism (Kylhammar 1990; Kylhammar 1992; Linnér 2003; Anselm 2004; Mårald 2008; Sörlin 2011; Lundgren 2011). Yet to date, the significance of visual and documentary techniques in mediating a deeper public understanding of nature in this period has generally, in a Swedish context, been most notable by its absence.

By combining approaches from environmental history, media history, and history of science and ideas the present article aims to explore the image of nature and examine the attitude to the relationship between nature and society mediated by Stig Wesslén, along with the painstaking manner in which he sought to portray it. We have asked the following questions: What aspects of nature did Wesslén choose to highlight? How did he manage to carry out his costly, complicated projects? How did he keep a balance between the popular entertainment and scientific documentation roles of the natural film genre? How were his results received in Sweden and abroad? Furthermore, we intend to locate Wesslén's accomplishments in their chronological context but also relate him to a particular school of thought in modern environmentalist thinking.

We have chosen to limit the parameters of this article to Wesslén's production during the 1930s and 1940s, during which time he developed his documentary method, formulated his basic tenets about nature and combined writing with photography and filmmaking in a dynamic manner.

This impressively creative period culminated in the film *I Lapplandsbjörrens rike* ['In the kingdom of the Lapland bear'] (1940), which is considered his *chef-d'oeuvre*. Another reason to focus on Wesslén and on this period, is that it precedes the breakthrough of the better-known Swedish wildlife filmmaker, Arne Sucksdorff (1917–2001) (Barnouw 1993). Since Wesslén and Sucksdorff represent different approaches towards the making of wildlife films, a study of Wesslén provides a broader perspective on the establishment of such films in Sweden.

Aside from Wesslén's documentary production—articles, films and books—the present article is based on a wealth of source material in the form of diaries, correspondence and press cuttings from the period under investigation, kept at Ájtte, the Swedish Mountain and Sami Museum in Jokkmokk.

A Life in the Service of the Nature Documentary

Before delving deeper into his rich production, we would first like to introduce Wesslén himself and give a brief overview of his work and its context. Stig Wesslén was born in Stockholm in 1902. After graduating from high school in Västerås, he served lengthy forestry internships in the 1920s. This practice made a formative impression on the young man; it was during this time he began taking photographs of the wildlife he encountered, primarily avian, awakening a passion for conservation and concern for the precarious situation of the great birds of prey (Lundström & Wesslén 2010; Olsson 2010). Field training was a prerequisite for acceptance to the two-year forester program offered by the School of Forestry in Stockholm, which Wesslén began attending in 1928 and which provided him with both a theoretical and practical education in forestry, hunting and biology.

Wesslén started to write for a wider public as early as 1925, when he published an article in *Svenska Jägareförbundets tidskrift* ['Magazine of the Swedish hunting association'] that accounted for the habits of the osprey, based on studies and photographs taken from a camouflaged blind on top of an observation tower. By the end of the decade, he was regularly contributing articles to the forest journal *Skogen* ['The forest'] and to the national daily *Svenska Dagbladet*, on black grouse, capercaillie, the draining of the wetlands, the devastating consequences of poaching and the deforestation that so deeply worried him (Lång & Nordlund 2010).

At the beginning of the twentieth century, contemporary animal protection and hunting legislation made few concessions to nature conservation in a general sense. Animal protection in Sweden focused on domesticated animals with the primary aim of preventing unnecessary suffering in individuals, rather than the preservation of entire species. Seed- and in-

sect-eating birds were the exception to this rule, their long association with positive values warranting protection in the minds of legislators. Larger wild birds were however not considered to be in any danger and the hunting of some species was, in fact, encouraged by the law (Lundgren 2009). During the 1920s approximately one hundred owls, a dozen eagles and as many as 15,000 hawks were shot and killed in Sweden each year (Bernes & Lundgren 2009).

This situation was, according to Wesslén, deeply problematic. He insisted that poaching and the mass felling policy of the forestry industry were having a serious impact on already decimated or endangered species. The most outrageous thing, readers were informed, was the fact that demands for nature and wildlife protection fell on deaf ears as far as hunters and foresters were concerned. The extinction of countless species of birds of prey was at risk of being accelerated (Lång & Nordlund 2010).

Wesslén bought his first camera during the course of his forestry studies, and slowly but surely turned into a fully-fledged documentarian. As a writer, photographer and finally film director, Wesslén was entirely self-taught, trained as it were by the network of contacts he created, comprising foresters, hunters and Sami, spread throughout Sweden, who provided him with hands-on knowledge about how to approach wild animals, sent him data on sightings and in turn were hired as assistants on his expeditions. He also made contact with a number of scientists, but these relationships were significantly more distant and formal (Danell 2010).

Immediately after gaining his degree in 1930, Wesslén headed for Laisdalen in the northern mountains to make his first movie, *Ardnas – Nordfjällens konung* ['Ardnas—the king of the northern mountains'] (1932). The expedition also resulted in newspaper reports and the book *Kungsörnarnas dal* ['The valley of the golden eagles'] (1932). He toured this movie throughout Sweden during the winter, two showings per day each preceded by a lecture. Such public speaking was to become the financial pillar of his career and he continued well into the mid-1960s. In the thirties, he also lectured frequently in Austria and Germany and could attract audiences of up to 3,500 people. He even broadcast radio lectures in German. According to his own reckoning, he lectured to some 120,000 people on the continent (Lundström & Wesslén 2010: 21).

Apparently, Wesslén's images of Northern nature, together with the macho public persona he developed, fitted the contemporary Nazi context well. His books were translated and published by the Deutsches Verlagsgesellschaft, some in several editions, and he and his pictures appeared in newspapers and magazines, such as the Nazi *N.S. Bildbeobachter* in 1934 and the propaganda magazine *Der Norden*, published by Nordische Gesellschaft

(managed by Alfred Rosenberg and Heinrich Himmler among others) in 1941. Wesslén was also keen to attend the Internationale Jagdsausstellung in Berlin in 1937, organized by Reichsforstmeister and Reichsjägermeister Hermann Göring, where the Swedish nature artist Bruno Liljefors received “der Grosse Preis Adolf Hitlers” (Wonders 2006; Sörlin 2010). Wesslén did not, however, return to Germany after this visit until after the war.

As far as we know, Wesslén was not a supporter of the Nazi ideology. Rather, it was his ideas about the importance of protecting nature from modern civilization that resonated with the German conservation and animal welfare movement of the Third Reich period (cf. Uekotter 2006). What Wesslén really thought about political matters—apart from a somewhat reactionary critique of modernization and a romantic view of nature—is in fact very difficult to say. The historian of ideas Sverker Sörlin, who has made an analysis of ideological tendencies in Stig Wessléns documentary artwork, talks about “politics in camouflage” (Sörlin 2010). He has, nevertheless, detected explicit traces of an anti-communistic attitude.

In 1934, Wesslén embarked on his next major production, a documentary on the endangered brown bear and Arctic fox. The film *I Lapplandsbjörrens rike* took six years to complete, during which time he continued to write newspaper columns, publish books and produce short films. Success for the project was long in coming, but when in the autumn of 1938 he became the first man in the world to capture the brown bear in its native habitat, it made headlines across the world (Mårald 2010).

While filming in the mountains, Wesslén got close to the local Sami population, which piqued the interest of the documentarian in him. He concluded that traditional Sami life, like the wilderness itself, was under threat from encroaching modernization. After contacting Ernst Manker (1893–1972), ethnographer and curator of the Nordic Museum in Stockholm, an ambitious film project was undertaken in order to preserve Sami culture on film. This resulted in the documentary *Från vinterviste till sommarfjäll* [‘From winter camp to summer grazing’] and the scripted drama *Sampo Lappelill*, both of which premiered in 1949. For a long time, Wesslén’s perception of the Sami reflected contemporary essentialist cultural ideas which believed that a “Laplander should act like a Laplander.” On the one hand, the Sami were considered members of a culture inferior to “the Swedish,” while on the other, they were, after all, best suited to a nomadic, reindeer-herding life in the high north. Were they to abandon this traditional way of life, their culture would inevitably wither and die. Eventually, Wesslén re-evaluated his opinion and accepted the idea that the Sami too should benefit from the advantages of modernization (Lantto 2010; Aronsson 2010; Kouljok 2010).

His ambition and meticulousness seem only to have increased with the years. The last major project on which he embarked was intended to catalogue all the regional biotopes in Sweden and a vast number of their animal inhabitants. Filming began in 1950 and resulted sixteen years later in the movie *Den levande skogen* ['The living forest']. One reason it took so long was that ten years into shooting, a new, higher quality film stock became available. Wesslén was keen to use it and discarded everything he had recorded up to that point. He was also doing everything himself and spared neither time nor effort on quality and detail. The film failed to become the success Wesslén had hoped. The critics were kind but audiences stayed home. Since it had taken so long to make, time had left him behind. With the introduction of television, audiences were no longer thronging to the local cinema to see documentaries, which also impacted on Wesslén's lecture tours (Lisberg-Jensen 2010). Wesslén made his last movie in 1970. But in 1984, he was once again in the spotlight when director Tage Danielsson used footage from *Den levande skogen* in his film version of *Ronja rövardotter* ['Ronja, the robber's daughter'], based on the Astrid Lindgren children's book of the same name. Three years later, Wesslén was dead.

In the following sections, we will first focus on Wesslén's writings and documentary books and then explore his filmmaking, notably his "scientific" documentary method. This division is made for analytical reasons; in reality, Wesslén's writing, photography and filmmaking often developed simultaneously.

Critique of Modern Civilization, Worship of Nature

The chief characteristics of Stig Wesslén's style were established at an early stage: a romantic, narrative viewpoint with concrete examples, legal paragraphs and elegant description regularly interwoven. An essay on the great snipe, for example, evolved into an encomium over nature's beauty and mystery. His vocabulary speaks volumes: the landscape of the north is "wild and grotesque" and the wilderness is portrayed as pristine, an unfamiliar source of power difficult for the human mind to access, clouded as it was by rationality and locked behind the iron doors of the machine age.

This critical stance toward modern civilization became something of a hallmark for his authorship. The attitude was far from unique among contemporary natural filmmakers internationally, especially in the US (Mitman 1999). Such opinions also existed in Sweden but were far from mainstream. In the decades that followed, the public debate on natural resources and pollution was most notable for its absence. Sverker Sörlin accurately summarizes the general, interwar consensus in the words, "The veneration of Electricity and Technology and Engineering still easily trumped the respect

shown the environment” (Sörlin (ed.) 1992: 408). Attitudes toward the forest itself, where management of the resource developed increasingly mechanical and large-scale methods after the Second World War, were similar, with clear-cutting, contour ploughing and monoculture as logical results (Kardell 2004; Enander 2007).

The polarity between nature and culture, man and pristine wilderness, recurs consistently in Wesslén’s works. In his very first book, *Träskets aristokrater* [‘The aristocrats of the marshlands’] (1930), the ruthlessness of mankind is contrasted with the serenity of nature. In a fiery tirade, stoked by poaching and mass felling, Wesslén give full reign to his outrage.

Man is a barbarian, a plunderer and murderer in a world created in balance and relative harmony, he abuses the power an optimistic Creator gave him, and when we compare the animal population now roaming our lands, with what it was a mere century ago, one cannot but wonder over the speed with which the herds have been decimated. (Wesslén 1930: 5–6.)

Harsh words, probably influenced by Wesslén’s own observations and experiences in the field. That he had learned much about the forest and the land from people who possessed so-called “traditional” ecological wisdom also seems likely (Danell 2010). However, Wesslén’s reference to a state of balance is also reminiscent of a longer tradition of nature romanticism, albeit one with dystopian undertones. While he does not offer his reader clear references to sources of inspiration or specific books, it is not difficult to find points of contact with the critical naturalist literature that emerged in the latter half of the nineteenth century, particularly with *Man and Nature*, the 1864 work by American diplomat George Perkins Marsh, one of the main hypotheses of which is that the activities of mankind affect nature in a very concrete and negative manner. “Man is everywhere a disturbing agent,” he insisted. “Wherever he plants his foot the harmonies of nature are turned to discords.” Marsh’s opinion of man was pessimistic and bereft of that faith in cultural progress that otherwise so typified the era: of all organic beings, man alone was to be regarded as essentially a destructive power. Linnaeus’ *Homo sapiens* had turned into a *Homo destruens* (Uddenberg 1994: 31–32).

Despite being dense with facts, the ideas *Man and Nature* mediated spread quickly and soon took on political significance, especially in North America. By linking culture to nature and science and history, the book, according to Marsh’s biographer David Lowenthal (2003), became one of the most influential texts of its age. Like Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* (1962), it has been called a “wake-up call.” It is, however, difficult to estimate its impact on the Swedish debate; it was never at least translated. Nonetheless,

similar ideas problematizing mankind's relationship with nature were soon being expressed in Sweden, although the Swedish debate was primarily influenced by its German counterpart and especially by Hugo Conwentz (Linnér & Lohm 1995; Lundgren 2009). Among early Swedish nature conservationists the author and lecturer Karl-Erik Forsslund (1872–1941) expressed a more radical opinion. In 1914 he characterized modern man as a “mass-murderer of the rest of the earth's inhabitants, a greedy and wasteful plunderer of its treasures” (Forsslund 1914: 7). Forsslund was reacting to the ravages of industrialization, but had also been inspired to do so by German zoologist Ernst Haeckel, the man who coined the term “ecology” (Sundin 1984).

For Marsh mankind was a “destructive force,” for Forsslund a “mass murderer,” and “plunderer,” and for Wesslén, a “barbarian, a plunderer and murderer.” Obviously this was a recurring motif, but Wesslén's critique of modern civilization can also be placed in a synchronous context. In the 1930s, the project of modernizing Swedish society was well and truly underway; social reform and the push for industrialization were instilled with a glowing faith in progress. Yet it was also a turbulent time internationally, fraught with financial and political crises, in the wake of which followed a burgeoning, diverse counterculture critical of these very blessings (Conford 2001; Leppänen 2005). Some of those belonging to this movement problematized culture and values and the relationships between individuals, while others, including Wesslén, concentrated on man's relationship with nature.

Wesslén was drawn to the preservationist phalanx of nature conservationists. In Sweden, this stance was primarily taken by natural scientists. These were no critics of modernization as such, but rather calls for the hitherto “untouched” parts of nature to be conserved. The argument has both scientific and nationalistic roots (Sundin 2001). Wesslén's message is very straightforward on this point: the wilderness must be preserved, for its own sake as well as for the sake of mankind. This is the creed he wished to spread among the general public (Wesslén 1930: 7).

Literary Devices and Anthropomorphized Birds of Prey

A sense of adventure and a taste for debate fuelled Wesslén's first book, but first and foremost, it is a vivid, literary tale about a family of harriers, captured in words and pictures. It is a summer idyll in which the fledglings are always satiated, being fed “the very moment they opened wide” (Wesslén 1930: 71), interlaced with drama whenever the “aristocrats” of the marshlands, the harriers, take flight, causing the other denizens to seek shelter as they “glide over the reedy mass with assured, even strokes of their mighty wings” (Wesslén 1930: 20).

Wesslén's writing is marred by another common characteristic of na-

ture documentaries—the tendency to impose human qualities on his birds. When the long-eared owl is described as “loathed” and “despised” by the northern lapwing, he inches perilously close to the vocabulary of the child’s fable. This may partly be explained by its belonging to a literary subgenre in which all fauna and fowl are perceived as individuals, giving the story greater impact and capturing the interest and empathy of the reader (cf. Dirke 2000). In *Träskets artistokrater*, as in the books that followed it in the 1930s, this stylistic device recurs frequently enough to lead one to suspect that a deeper conviction lies behind it.

Though his first book was given a favourable reception by arts pages’ critics, several of whom praised the attractive illustrations and empathetic descriptions of nature, there were complaints about his tendency to anthropomorphize. Wesslén heeded his critics and in an article entitled “Acting like an Animal” in the daily *Dagens Nyheter* (23 October 1932), he took a more realistic approach. He rejected the theory that animals might be cruel or, for that matter, that it was even possible to endow them with human attributes. Nature quite simply deviates from the game plan drawn up by modern industrial society, and “human idiosyncrasies like nervousness, anxiety and angst” do not exist in it. Once again, Wesslén expresses his high estimation of the balanced character of the natural world.

The contrast between wilderness—often described as pristine and primal—and contemporary civilization is striking. As Darwin had made clear, there is struggle and exclusion in the animal world, but it is based on an ancient drive which modern society has lost. Any portrait of Wesslén as a critic of modern society is inevitably double-edged: the proud exponent of the latest in photographic and film technology shared the same body with the romantic contemplator of the dynamics of the wild terrain. Such ambivalence toward modernity was hardly unique; while many modernists expressed grave doubts about the new and unknown, they did not want to miss the opportunities offered (Källström & Sellberg (eds.) 1991).

Wesslén saw himself as a skilled coordinator of these somewhat contradictory perspectives. His self-apprehension as a professional seems more often than not to have been based on his conviction that he was simply the right man for the job. His various roles—photographer, author, moviemaker, lecturer—all played into the same ambition: to make a living and to disseminate knowledge and awareness of the wilderness and its inhabitants.

The Clash of Romanticism and Modern Civilization in the Mountains

In Sweden, conservationists, outdoorsmen and wilderness enthusiasts have long headed for the hills in the North, thereby charging them with a particular aesthetic and emotional value. As ethnologists Jonas Frykman and Orvar Löfgren indicate, the mountains have come to symbolize the wild and exotic but also the lone and lofty, health-giving and purifying (Frykman & Löfgren 1979). Forsslund made his way there, and so did Wesslén, as photographer, writer and filmmaker.



Fig. 1. Stig Wesslén's media persona: a writer, lecturer and filmmaker as well as careful researcher and adventurous explorer in the northern space. Photo: Curt Götlín.

The ambitious documentary book *Kungsörnarnas dal* offers essential insight into Wesslén's romanticizing of the mountains, as does his meticulous planning and relentless search for memorable images. His pedagogy is spiced with some fairly macho jargon, making it clear, for example, that the mountains are no place "for weaklings." The phrase calls to mind Nietzsche, whose superman ideal had inspired Forsslund in the latter's image of the heroic mountain-climber (Sundin 1984). His book further interposes simplistic and, even in their own day, outdated ideas about the nomadic Sami

and the mystical mountain landscape, where the struggle for survival is a daily routine. The windswept landscape is described as stately, a field of power since time immemorial.

This is the country of the Laplander and the grand herds of reindeer, of the bear and the wolf, the home of wolverine and the golden eagle, where death teeters on every precipice and where the lot of the weak is to perish for the benefit of the strong. (Wesslén 1932: 7.)

This fixation on grand struggle, which involves all living things, signifies an extremely romanticized image of the wilderness. Wesslén's view of nature is reflected in his description of the Sami, who are declared to be mere components in a mystical wholeness. They become the primitives incorporated into a fairy tale world where reindeer bells and ceremonial drums echo far and wide over the mountain range, as the Sami sing and dance with abandon. This mythologized perception of the actual state of things feels hopelessly rococo to a contemporary reader, as it did to a number of contemporary critics. The writer and literary scholar Gösta Attorps, who had been very pleased with Wesslén's previous book, thought this one was even better and praised both the photography and wordsmithing. He did however point out one big failing, which lay in the free reign Wesslén gave to his "lamentable mysticism." The writer Harald Schiller arrived at a similar conclusion in his review in the daily *Sydsvenskan* (23 March 1932).

Their objections are understandable. Wesslén certainly over-eggs the narrative pudding. The pure, pristine and primeval—insofar as both nature and man are concerned—determines what must be protected and preserved. In a way, this attitude can be seen as the crux of Wesslén's critique of modern civilization in the thirties: it requires that a line of demarcation be drawn between nature and culture. That Sami, animals and the mountain landscape itself for that matter will allow themselves to be preserved seems a foregone conclusion, and those who, like Wesslén, have the opportunity to leave civilization behind, undergo an act of purification:

Eventually, the infernal racket of spinning wheels, which has caused millions of people to lose their natural instincts and turned them into soulless drones in a huge, dead machine also fades away. (Wesslén 1932: 31.)

Here and in subsequent works, Wesslén is both the impassioned polemicist and starry-eyed romantic. Contrast and contradiction are well-worn stylistic elements; the city languishes in the shadow of the mountains, its citizens live less authentic lives than the aboriginal population—and on the horizon, a glimmer of hope, that the drive to struggle for daily existence under the open sky can be reclaimed.

Untouched or Staged

Wesslén clearly enjoys using full-blooded imagery to bring nature to life for his readers. He also presents himself as a painstaking observer; biding his time in his camouflaged hide, he sees and photographs the wondrous details of nature. Insects, wild ducks, curlews, and ospreys pass his way. The message is simple: behold nature and be amazed. The sensation of proximity and precision is often dazzling, even if his descriptive conceits far too often tip over into melodrama.

His estimation of himself and the role of the nature documentarian was, however, not shared by all. Both his first film *Ardnas* and the book *Kungsörnarnas dal* triggered a bitter debate in the daily *Dagens Nyheter* in January of 1933. The well-known Sami pastor Gustav Park (1886–1968) initiated the dispute when he sharply criticized Wesslén's description of the Sami and local society. There was also criticism of how Wesslén filmed nature, including accusations that a merlin had been shot for encroaching on the nesting place of an osprey, and that the nest of an eagle owl had been moved to a more photogenic location, and destroyed in the process.

However, the greatest outcry was raised by the report that Wesslén had “tethered” a grass snake to a marsh harrier nest with a piece of rope in order to capture pictures of the life and death struggle. Ornithologists called his methods “animal cruelty” and insisted that his work in no way conformed to reality (13 January 1933). Wesslén responded repeatedly to this criticism, categorically denying some accusations and insisting on his honourable intention to disseminate an interest in nature in order to promote animal welfare. Eventually it was proven that some of the accusations were based in fact. Wesslén admitted that he ordered a licensed hunter to shoot “a common merlin” so that the rarer osprey might retain its nest. He had invested much time and money in filming the osprey, so shooting the intruder was an unfortunate necessity. This, he let it be known, “is the only animal I have killed or had killed since 1925.” His explanation for the incident with the grass snake was far less convincing. The fight with the marsh harrier was accurately reconstructed and “the snake was trapped and temporarily tied to a thin piece of thread” (21 January 1933). Wesslén was hardly alone in trying to rearrange nature to make it more photogenic. Throughout the history of the wildlife documentary there has been a tension between the striving for authenticity and efforts to stage the natural setting to make it more dramatic and fit established genres (Mitman 1999; Bousé 2000).

Wesslén was, however, upset by the aspersions cast on his integrity and was convinced that the criticism emanated from “a tiny clique of bookish, armchair ornithologists, too cosy to dedicate themselves to real, penetrating and substantial study of nature. My humble person has attracted their holy

wrath" (21 January 1933). This dubious reputation still remained with him when, several years later, he attempted to finance his next expedition: to film bear and Arctic fox in the mountains. His application for SEK 10,000 of state funding was denied. The Royal Swedish Academy of Sciences, which vetted his application, gave the following answer on 22 April 1936:

In principle, it would be improper to encourage enterprises of the present, more or less businesslike character, as they not only may fatefully disturb wildlife in general in its most fragile phases, but also because it is the rarest, nearly extinct and thus particularly vulnerable animal species that have attracted the interest of the film photographer.

Wesslén was not the kind of man to let something like that pass without comment. In a letter dated less than a month later, he refuted all criticism. The work would be performed professionally with all the required caution, he explained. A state-of-the-art camera with a quality of lens that would allow shooting at a great distance would be used in order not to disturb the animals. His sheer presence would also serve to keep poachers at bay. Despite this appeal, Wesslén received no state funding and in future, he would act with greater temperance in his role as photographer and filmmaker. Temperance was however the last adjective that could be used to describe the character of his contributions to the debate on the unchecked poaching and threat of extinction hovering over his beloved birds of prey.

An Unfair Fight against Poaching

If *Kungsörnarnas dal* was the first volley in a fierce confrontation with contemporary conservation and hunting legislation, it was but a pale foreboding of things to come. Of the two topics that captured Wesslén's interest in the first half of 1930s—studying and photographing birds of prey and the fight against poaching and the destruction of the wilderness—it was the latter that dominated his next authorial effort. The book was called *Den ojämnna striden* ['The unequal struggle'] (1933) and was presented as a dialogue between a lumberjack of the old school and a conservationist who, according to our interpretation, acts as Wesslén's alter ego. Here he lets loose his admonishing, polemical side, arguing that lumberjacks and hunters are bringing both birds and mammals to the brink of extinction at a blistering pace.

Wesslén goes as far as to claim that there is a direct connection between modern forestry and widespread poaching; lumberjacks bring rifles into the forest and shoot for sport. The fact that hunting and preservation laws were not enforced is one more unfortunate circumstance. Ethics and aesthetics ought to complement one another; an attractive fen and forest fill mankind with respect for its denizens. Perceptions of the "pristine" are interwoven

with an idea of cultivation based on achieving gradual proximity to the shy animals. Total segregation is of course impossible since study—and photography—of endangered species is another way of taking increased responsibility for their survival (Wesslén 1933).

This impassioned appeal, delivered in the form of a novel, for the preservation of Sweden's wilderness, greater restrictions on the forestry industry, and protection of forest inhabitants, along with strict enforcement of adequate hunting laws, is the most ambitious of Wesslén's conservationist texts. The narrative is carried along by visionary ecological thinking and conservationist pathos, even if it occasionally slides back into an older, preservationist tradition. As far as style and structure are concerned the book is a mix of fact, boy's own adventures and intense polemic. The conclusion is that only thoughtful behaviour in the wild can put an end to mankind's negative impact on his surroundings.

Den ojämna striden was well received by Swedish as well as Norwegian critics. But it is ironic that Wesslén's next book, *Pappa Kroknäbbs resa från Skåne till Lappland* ['Father Hookbill's journey from Scania to Lapland'] (1934), met with exclusively good reviews, for it is with this book for a younger readership, more an abridged Reader's Digest version of all his previous books, that his level of ambition appears to have been contained within a manageable format. It is just as clear, however, that novelty—and ecological tradition—has been sacrificed to a more modest and straightforward description of birds of prey. It also reminds us that Wesslén's reputation was actually built on his photographic gifts. That they were for a time also accompanied by commentary on contemporary predator and hunting issues made for an interesting combination of fiction, conservationist debate and art.

By this time, Wesslén was ready for new adventures in the wilderness. Preparations for his long, arduous expedition among the bears and film projects in Lapland were in full swing. By the mid-1930s, his polemic momentum had temporarily run out steam, but his documentarian zeal had zeroed in on a new target.

Wesslén Captures Bears on Film

An essential piece of the technical puzzle of making it possible to shoot wild bears fell into place when Wesslén bought exclusive new equipment in Germany in early 1936: camera, motor, battery box and lenses ranging up to 120 centimetres, which facilitated long-distance shots. The camera cost him a small fortune, so funding the project was his next major priority. Aside from all the necessary equipment, funds to pay for the extended stay in the field had to be found. Wesslén spent the majority of each April to Sep-

tember between 1936 and 1939 in the mountains, also undertaking shorter expeditions in wintertime. Nor was he alone. Two of his assistants appear on camera, but in fact there were often four or five of them accompanying him most of the time.

Wesslén was constantly pitching himself to possible investors. He wrote regularly about the expedition in the daily *Stockholms-Tidningen*, where the project was referred to as “the Stockholms-Tidningen Expedition to the Mountains of Lapland.” Lecture tours up and down Sweden and on the continent brought in a substantial sum during the winter months, with Wesslén taking to the podium almost every evening. During the time it took to prepare his feature, Wesslén also produced six profitable short films. Relentless production was necessary to attract the necessary capital.

Although his equipment was the best that money could buy, it still needed modification to function in the field. Wesslén had a twenty-kilo, custom-made gyroscopic tripod produced and made further camera alterations himself. During the first years in particular, his diaries describe how he spent his evenings in cabins, tents and under the stars experimenting with details and adjustments. Aside from experimenting with different qualities of film stock, apertures, distances and development techniques, Wesslén manufactured a camera hide, special transport boxes, a support tripod, remote shutter releases, sound insulated ski poles, a pump for defogging the lenses and a telescopic focus.

The equipment weighed some 150 kilos altogether and on embarking for the mountains from Stockholm by train he had a total of 250 kilos of baggage in seventeen trunks. Added to this was all the equipment and provisions sourced locally. To speak of hardship and logistical difficulties along the mountain range is no exaggeration, especially considering that the network of roads was not particularly extensive in that part of Sweden. This may be the reason filming was eventually restricted to the area between Ammarnäs and Laisdalen, although the changes made by Wesslén to his method for attempting to capture the bears on film also played a role.

From the time of his debut with *Ardnas*, Stig Wesslén was well versed in how to document courting and brooding in avian life, a period when the birds were easy to locate and relatively stationary. The method he used was simply to build hides near their nests or mating grounds and wait. In comparison, bears posed a much greater challenge. Building hides where bears were known to pass did not work. At this time, an estimated 200–250 bears were located in an area that stretched from Treriksroset to Dalecarlia in Sweden, a stretch as long as the road between Stockholm and Vienna. Were he to simply mount a camera in an ideal location and wait for a passing bear, he could find himself “sitting and waiting for years, for doomsday itself,” as

he put it in a lecture. Nor was there any kind of manual to consult on how to film a wild bear, since no one had ever done it before. This was long before useful devices for tracking and monitoring wild animals had come into use (Benson 2010).

Wesslén had no alternative to trial and error, suffering one setback after another between 1936 and 1938, including trying to wake a hibernating bear with water and creating a network of “bear stations” using animal carcasses as bait, as was reported in *Stockholms Dagblad* (21 April 1937). Even his method of moving quickly on a broad front over the terrain was abandoned when members of the expedition unexpectedly ran into bears, which were scared off before they could get their camera out (Mårald 2010).

When bear hunting resumed in September 1938, Wesslén introduced a new method, described in a lecture entitled “In the Mountains of Lapland.” The plan was now to try and adapt to the habits of the bears. While their prey slept away the day, the expedition also rested. Its member rose an hour before sunrise and hiked to a predetermined observation point as a group. Here they divided up the terrain between them and systematically tracked their respective areas with binoculars. If they failed to spot a bear, they gathered at a new position some three kilometres ahead and repeated the procedure, camera always in tow.

Success finally came. By 15 September 1938 they had spotted a bear on the other side of the Vindel River, just above the tree line on Mt. Nuolpa. Three days later, after resting a while in Ammarnäs, they headed back to the mountains. According to Wesslén’s diary, they spotted four bears after only an hour of tracking, a female and her litter, one of whom was white, which was a sensation in itself. The film team persevered all the rest of the day until Wesslén accidentally tripped and scared away the mother and her cubs when he hit the ground with a thud. The expedition continued for several weeks after this roaring success and returned for one more season, in 1939, when they captured a lone bear feasting on a reindeer cadaver in a late-winter snowstorm. The time was also used to record the expedition itself and the technology and methods employed in making the film.

At the premiere of *I Lapplandsbjörnens rike*, on Boxing Day, 1940 at the famous Grand Cinema in Stockholm, the Prime Minister and the Queen were both in the audience, indicating the national importance of his achievement. And this time, there were no dissenting voices raising the issue of the negative effect of the documentarian on wildlife.

Camera Hunt as Research

The quest for authenticity had, after the accusations of staging in 1933, become of the utmost importance to Stig Wesslén in his documentation of



Fig. 2. One of the posters that were produced by the artist Eric Rohman for the movie *I Lapplandsbjörnens rike* (1940). The text says: "The first major depiction of wilderness from our country." It captures several significant images associated with Stig Wesslén and his career: the brown bear, a bird of prey, the Sami culture, the giant camera and Wesslén's own mountain expedition together with his assistants Haldor Johansson and Edor Burman.

animals and their environment. Therefore it is only logical that the opening credits to *I Laplandsbjörnens rike* consist of a typewritten sheet of paper, which unfolds to reveal the following:

This is the authentic record of the work and experience of a zoological expedition in the wild kingdom of the mountains and valleys of Lapland. It has taken six years to complete and for the first time ever, the Swedish brown bear and Sweden's most elusive mammal, the Arctic fox, have been captured on film. The animals are unafraid and so we may follow them as they roam free and wild through our land, unaware of the presence of man.

After this, the narrator (that is, Wesslén himself) states that this is “no scripted drama with well-trained creatures displaying human characteristics, but an unadulterated portrayal of the Swedish countryside up in the north.” The purpose of the film is to show seldom-seen wildlife in its natural environment in close up, moving pictures, with the brown bear in the lead role—an experience few Swedes would otherwise ever be offered. However, the movie not only depicts nature and animal life but also the pains the expedition took to capture that unadulterated portrait. The main characters are Wesslén himself and two of his assistants, hunter Edor Burman and Sami guide Haldor Johansson. A large portion of the narrative consists of skiing over white, virgin snow, friendly moments around the campfire, and demonstrations of the mechanics behind the filming of the animals. At times, it feels like an instructional guide to the art of making nature and wildlife documentaries.

Wesslén used the contemporary term “camera hunt” to describe his methodological idea. Camera hunting was a practice that developed in the US at the end of the nineteenth century and beginning of the twentieth (Mitman 1999). Outdoor photographers began to use the term to emphasize that capturing pictures of birds and animals in the wild required the same skills as hunting them with a rifle. For the camera hunters, photographs had more or less the same meaning as hunting trophies (Brower 2010). This did not imply, however, that they were against the hunting and killing birds and animals; shooting with guns and shooting with cameras were just different sides of the same coin, a sign of white male dominance and control later explored by many scholars and cultural critics, including Susan Sontag and Donna Haraway, and conceptualized as the “camera/gun trope” (Lindahl Elliot 2006).

Wesslén, who was clearly against hunting for leisure and pleasure, used the term in a slightly different way. Instead of bloodshed, rifle reports and teamwork, the camera hunt according to Wesslén was benign, silent and pursued “alone” over several consecutive days. In order to succeed, one needed

to come as close to the animals in their natural habitat as possible without being noticed. This mode of hunting offered plenty of excitement but excitement was not the goal. Nor was the aim to control or dominate nature. Rather, the intention of the camera in studying and documenting nature in the wild was, as he writes in a lecture manuscript, to “unveil its essence,” which could never be achieved in a laboratory or by studying animals in captivity. Film-making unnoticed in the wild was thus, according to Wesslén, a valid branch of *research*, and each picture was a “study of animal psychology in black and white.” As Gregg Mitman has shown, the camera was used in contemporary natural history as a tool to put more distance between subject and object and in that guarantee scientific reliability and control (Mitman 1996).

Swedish professional scientists were not much impressed by this method, but neither was it embraced as an ideal by the entire nature documentary industry. Back in Sweden, the filmmaker Arne Sucksdorff grew to be a name of international repute being the first Academy Award-winning Swedish filmmaker (Furhammar 1982; Qvist 1986; Barnouw 1993). In many ways Wesslén and Sucksdorff are each other’s polar opposite: Wesslén strove to document nature in the wild, while Sucksdorff took artistic license in dramatizing and visualizing it. In order to achieve the desired results, Sucksdorff did not hesitate to use domesticated animals or even artfully arrange stuffed animals in a studio (Furhammar 1982). Chronologically, Wesslén came a few years before Sucksdorff, who debuted in 1941, by which time Wesslén already had two features and six short films under his belt, earning him bragging rights as the nature film pioneer in the country. Neither genre style nor working method had any precedents when Wesslén set out to make his first productions.

In *Det stora äventyret* [‘The great adventure’] (1954), written a few years after completing the movie of the same name, Arne Sucksdorff criticizes the camera hunt with acid in his pen, clearly addressing Wesslén. According to Sucksdorff no one can “camera hunt” himself to an artistic or scientifically accurate film. To achieve “optimal results” nature needs to be posed, where wild, half-domesticated and tame animals are blended into the film in order to approach the truth stylistically. “With the so-called ‘camera hunt,’” Sucksdorff continues,

you can only cover a small part of forest life; the overriding whole is not only artistically but also documentarily awkward and one-dimensional. For indeed, no one would maintain that a movie that truly does the animals justice can be made out of a compilation of moving, “at the nest photographs,” some scenes of the courting grounds and one or two pictures of grazing, harkening or fleeing animals. (Sucksdorff 1954: 106.)

Sucksdorff's attitude was utterly foreign to Wesslén, who viewed arranged scenes as nothing but a great hoax. Wesslén saw himself as a *scientific* documentarian. As a filmmaker and author, he slots into a tradition of nature romanticism, where the empathetic experience of nature is seen as the only way of achieving real, advanced understanding. As he said in his lecture "Kamerajakten" ["The camera hunt"]:

The photographic study of animal psychology, if I may call it that, should be conducted in such a manner that the animal cannot be aware of the presence of the cameraman. The desirability of this is due to the fact that all game animals are affected by the presence of man in one way or another.

The camera hunter should disappear into the landscape and become part of it, but remain a distant observer.

Conclusion

The academic literature on the history of documentaries referred to above conceptualizes the kind of work Wesslén conducted in many different ways. There is for example "outdoor photography" or "nature photography," where the photographer seeks to capture unique features of natural landscapes and animals for pleasure, aesthetic enjoyment or in a nostalgic and romantic mood. There is "wildlife photography" that focuses more on nature in action, conducted in order to expand public awareness of the values associated with a pristine Nature, untouched by man or culture. There is "conservation photography," driven by the goal of empowering nature conservation. And there is "environmental photography," which aims to explore ruined landscapes and highlight environmental problems, such as pollution or loss of biodiversity. Where does Stig Wesslén fit into this spectrum of photographic and film-making genres? Our conclusion is that Wesslén's artwork overlaps several of them and that he moved along with their evolution over time. By introducing new technologies and methods, such as his version of the "camera hunt," he also participated in this evolution.

Whether presenting a brief article, an essay in the daily press, an illustrated book with literary flourishes or a motion picture, Wesslén remained a documentarian who, with camera, paper and pen, recorded the infinite variety of nature in the North. He recorded and brought to life its complexity, but also expressed ideas about the intricacy of its character. The romantic view of nature was a sustained, recurring theme in his work, nature as a huge, beautiful and irrepressible oneness, whose power and balance should be revered. In describing creatures, great and small, Wesslén conveys a wide-eyed fascination, if not downright admiration, for the ingenious, coherent

way nature is arranged—forest, field and mountain, the competitive realm of its inhabitants.

Another element running through Wesslén's entire portfolio is that this very balance is being threatened by industrial society and its creeping exploitation of the wilderness. The notion itself is not unique. Decline is central to modern ecological thought—the story of how pristine, harmonic and balanced nature is slowly but surely being exploited, disturbed and destroyed, eventually leading to our current global environmental crisis (Frängsmyr 1980; Merchant 1980). What distinguishes Wesslén from others of his time is the dramatic language he employed and the intractability with which he hammered his point home. Interest in protecting and preserving endangered species and their surroundings can be noted innumerable times, from the very outset of his career to his last great work, *Den levande skogen* (1966), which opens with the following manifesto:

In the very near future, there may not be a single unsullied spot left on our planet for wild animals to roam. They are threatened with total obliteration as the world's steadily increasing population growth lays claim to its natural resources. Perhaps this film will then serve as a memorial to that which once was, just as it now wishes to serve as a reminder of all the pristine, unaffected beauty we are on the brink of losing.

The “pristine wildness” Wesslén dwelt on comprised the woods and mountain ranges of northern Sweden, described as a sanctuary besieged on every side by encroaching civilization. For him, authenticity, aesthetics and ethics are interconnected. Untouched nature was beauty itself and needed to be protected from civilization's corrupting infiltration. With his recurring newspaper reportage, illustrated books, movies and tireless lecture tours across Sweden and abroad, he resonated with an audience that was responsive to his ideas and image of the northern wilds.

Yet, as far as we know, Wesslén never took any interest in “environmental photography.” He never mediated images of ruined ecosystems or even landscapes that were obviously shaped by humans (just like many academic ecologists of his time, one could add). The distinction between mankind and nature and between civilization and wildness is reflected in Wesslén's documentary methods. Since mankind did not belong to nature it was essential that it was observed at a remove in order not to disturb the natural order of things. At the same time, he takes a parallel path taken in his documentary work, which stands in bold contrast to this attitude. In many works, Wesslén stands as the adventurer who, for the sake of his layman audience, dramatizes nature and anthropomorphizes animals.

From our historical perspective, it can be concluded that many of these ploys say more about the culture and society of his own day than they do about the natural world he sought to document. However, it is essential to understand the tension between the scientific, documentary ambition of the “camera hunt” and the entertainment value of the news articles and movies. Wesslén financed his activities and paid his bills by earning money selling his personality and his work. Without the showmanship, Wesslén would probably never have had the means to document nature and get his message across.

Ultimately, Wesslén’s image of untamed but endangered wilderness was both well before and lagging after its time. Much of his intellectual inspiration reaches back to ideas broached at the turn of the twentieth century by the pioneers of conservation, but there are also ecological ideas, criticism of industrialization, and demands for preservation that point toward the environmental awakening of the sixties and seventies. One difference is that later environmental ideas do not distinguish so categorically between mankind and nature. By definition, the environmentalist worldview includes both mankind and nature and is not only concerned with protecting wild, untamed nature but also tending less-breathtaking environments in close proximity to mankind (Mårald 2007: 47). The thirties and forties are an interesting period to study from the perspective of environmental history, because that was when a discussion about the social dimension of nature and the opportunity to open up the landscape for tourist recreation began (Sörilin & Sandell (eds.) 2000). Another innovation central to this article is that the genre of the nature film was established and reached a mass audience during this era, an important prerequisite for increasing knowledge and stimulating the activism needed to preserve and improve the environment.

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