

THESIS

MOSTLY ONE SHADE OF GREEN: SIERRA MAGAZINE AND THE DISCURSIVE
EXPLOITATION OF “AUTHENTIC NATURE”

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ABSTRACT

MOSTLY ONE SHADE OF GREEN: SIERRA MAGAZINE AND THE DISCURSIVE EXPLOITATION OF “AUTHENTIC NATURE”

Environmental discourse from the mainstream environmental movement often relies on nature-based schema and a human-nature dichotomy in describing the environment, which can prioritize natural spaces over human-occupied spaces. It can also run counter to the aims of the environmental justice movement to protect vulnerable humans from harm. The goal of this research was to better understand how the largest environmental organization in the U.S. conceptualizes nature and the environment, and how these conceptualizations may be informing the priorities of the Sierra Club and the environmental movement more broadly. The research question of this study was: How does the Sierra Club, in the discourse represented by its magazine, present a nature-based schema and a human-nature dichotomy which indicates a preference for the idea of nature protection at the expense of protection for the human sphere? This study aimed to answer this question by performing a critical discourse analysis of six issues of *Sierra* magazine from 2011-2016, a publication popular with, and influential to, environmentalists. Findings indicate that *Sierra* magazine reveres authentic nature more greatly than other spaces and that authentic nature is exploited for profit. Authentic nature experiences are also discursively reserved for the elite, rather being presented inclusively. *Sierra* heavily emphasizes nature protection and the enjoyment of nature, while alternative perspectives are rarely featured and make *Sierra's* focus on authentic nature stand out even more.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The environmental movement is one of the largest and most influential social movements in the U.S. An estimated 20-30 million people identify as a member of the environmental movement and a majority of people feel concerned about the environment and consider themselves “environmentalists” (Brulle, 2008; Davis, 1995). The environmental movement contains within it the mainstream environmental movement and alternative movements (Gottlieb, 2005). The mainstream movement consists of the largest and most powerful environmental groups, such as the Environmental Defense Fund and the Sierra Club. Often, its approach to environmentalism is to seek incremental changes in the system that are limited in scope and depth (Taylor, 2000). The mainstream movement tends to compromise with industry and government and rely on capitalistic principles to solve problems (Dowie, 1996). Some of its proposed solutions include financial incentives to reduce environmental harm, managing the demand side of the market, technological optimism, non-confrontational dialogue, and regulatory compromise (Dowie, 1996).

On the other hand, the alternative environmental movement developed outside of the mainstream movement and seeks transformative changes in the social system in order to address environmental problems (Taylor, 2000). The environmental justice movement is one of the primary alternative environmental movements. Rather than consisting of several large-scale organizations like the mainstream movement, the environmental justice movement consists of many small grassroots groups. These grassroots groups emphasize social, political, and legal justice for people negatively impacted by environmentally harmful activities. Environmental

justice discourse demands social justice for the disproportionate environmental impacts that exist for certain communities due to an unequal distribution of power according to social factors, such as race and class (Capek, 1993). As they have a greater share of money, staffing, governmental access, and other important resources, mainstream environmental organizations have the power to enact tangible social, legal, and political change towards environmental justice (Taylor, 2000). However, they have traditionally been far less concerned with environmental justice initiatives as compared to other nature-centric environmental issues, such as wilderness protection.

Environmental justice organizations have often called upon mainstream organizations to assist them in their aims to improve the environmental quality of their communities. However, environmental justice organizations have received limited assistance from mainstream organizations, as these organizations have traditionally defined environmental justice concerns as “not environmental enough” (Di Chiro, 1996, p. 299). The grassroots organizations that make up the environmental justice movement do not have the same lobbying power, fundraising capabilities, and access to government as do mainstream organizations (Bullard & Johnson, 2000). In contrast, mainstream environmental organizations have experienced much greater favor and success with federal departments and regulatory agencies, giving them the ability to achieve their goals and integrate their priorities into the legal and political system (Bullard & Johnson, 2000; Konisky, 2015).

The priorities of mainstream environmental organizations are reflected in the make-up of their budgets. 62 percent of the total budgets of the top ten environmental organizations are spent on wildlife and wilderness protection, land preservation, and water conservation, whereas 12% is spent on toxic waste management and land use planning that could protect vulnerable communities from harm (Taylor, 2002). Environmental justice groups struggle at a grassroots

level to protect the health and wellbeing of their communities, while powerful, socially legitimate mainstream environmental organizations deprioritize their concerns and expend little to no efforts towards their concerns.

The Nature of “Truth” in Environmentalism

The mainstream environmental movement tends to speak of environmental problems and solutions as if they should be accepted as non-negotiable facts. This tendency is largely the outcome of a realist perspective of the environment, which stands in contrast to a social constructionist perspective (Burningham & Cooper, 1999). A realist perspective of the environment presumes that it consists completely of objective qualities, rather than both objective and subjective qualities. However, the environment is not solely a natural reality to be understood solely through the natural sciences; it is also socially constructed and “mediated by social processes” (Anderson, 2003, p. 5). The environment as a concept is not discerned completely through objective means; rather, humans confer meaning onto nature and the environment (Greider & Garkovich, 1994). Those meanings develop into discourse on the environment. Environmental discourse determines how environmental issues are discussed, thought about, and what kinds of policies are developed towards the environment (Hajer & Versteeg, 2005). Environmental discourse establishes certain ways of thinking about the environment, which may emphasize certain possibilities (protecting wilderness) and dismiss other possibilities (protecting vulnerable communities from environmental harm).

As socially constructed conceptions of the environment become the basis of discourse of the environment, subsequent environmental policy is influenced because certain ways of understanding environmental problems and solutions become naturalized (Honneland, 2004). Rather than the environment being a reality “out there” with objective problems and solutions,

society engages with the environment symbolically and socially (Eder & Ritter, 1996; Evernden, 1992; Latour, 2004). The environmental movement tends to be highly dismissive of such criticisms, however (Carolan & Bell, 2003; Burningham & Cooper, 1999). Partly due to a fear of being discredited by anti-environmentalists, the movement presents itself as the bearer of indisputable truth and prophecy about the environment through reliance upon a myth of infallible science and reason. The environmental movement particularly relies upon the social construct of “nature” as a way of normalizing culturally constructed concepts as non-negotiable and based in an objective reality (Corrigan & Sayer, 1985). Any notion of subjectivity in the environment is seen as a threat to the movement’s goals and objectives and should be avoided. The social construction of the environment – and the propensity of the movement to deny such social construction – could be influencing the discourse of mainstream environmental organizations in a way that prioritizes certain environmental issues over others without the movement ever questioning such prioritization.

The social construction of environmental discourse is further influenced by nature-based schema about the environment and a tendency to assume a human-nature dichotomy in environmental discourse. In nature-based schema about the environment, individuals who cognitively process the environment and associated issues largely correlate the environment with natural organisms and spaces (Cantrill & Chimovitz, 1993; Fiske & Taylor, 1991). In addition to nature-based schema about the environment, an assumed human-nature dichotomy in further emphasizes the protection of the natural world over humans in environmental discourse, as it creates a false separation between humanity and nature and subsequently prioritizes natural spaces over human-occupied spaces (Anderson, 2003; Lakoff, 2010; Martell, 1994).

Taking into account the socially constructed nature of environmentalism, it is important to question what “environmental” actually means to mainstream environmental organizations. It is also important to examine how mainstream organizations may be reflecting and perpetuating their notions of an environment in their discourse and organizational activities. As the concept of the environment is socially constructed and potentially influenced by nature-based schema and a human-nature dichotomy, the research question of this study is: How does the Sierra Club, in the discourse represented by its magazine, present a nature-based schema and a human-nature dichotomy which indicates a preference for the idea of nature protection at the expense of protection for the human sphere? This question is an important consideration, as the subjective construction of the environment by mainstream organizations can reinforce environmental injustice by prioritizing concern for the natural world over human welfare.

This study aimed to answer the question through a critical discourse analysis of environmental discourse by the largest mainstream environmental organization in the U.S. – the Sierra Club. This study attempted to contribute to the literature on environmental discourse as it addressed several gaps in the literature, including a lack of critical research and a need for current literature on environmental discourse of mainstream environmental organizations. It also aimed to contribute to the field of mass communication in several ways. For one, it offered a needed critical voice on the central, yet often problematic, role of nature in environmental discourse. Secondly, it examined the communication of a social organization. Although social organizations (such as the Sierra Club) are influential in shaping public communication and public policy, they are not as heavily studied as other sources of communication, such as mass media and new media technology (Gottlieb, 2005; McQuail & Windahl, 2015). Lastly, it contributed to mass communication literature on schema theory by filling gaps in the literature

on the influence of schema in environmentalism and offering a critical perspective on the formation and perpetuation of schemas.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

Various elements of environmental discourse have been identified in past research. One of these elements is how the concept of nature has shaped and influenced environmental discourse. Schema theory is another key piece of the literature that works to explain how the environment is cognitively processed through the categorization of the environment as nature. Other literature has detailed the historical-cultural background of the environmental movement and how that history relates to the operations of the movement today. Another section of literature examines environmental discourse that characterizes the environment as the natural world, which is seen as separate from human beings. This characterization is termed a human-nature dichotomy. Lastly, some scholars have criticized the human-nature dichotomy in environmental discourse and pointed to some of its problematic implications. This body of literature is diverse and takes a variety of approaches to describe environmental discourse and the role of nature in said discourse. In the sections that follow, schema theory, nature-based schema, the historical-cultural background of the environmental movement, and the role of human-nature dichotomy in environmental discourse will be discussed.

Schema Theory

Schema theory was developed to explain the organization of knowledge in the mind. Schema theory contends that people use cognitive structures to interact with their surroundings and organize knowledge around various phenomena, including experiences, events, issues, and concepts (Baran & Davis, 2011). Cognitive schemas are “structures of expectation” formulated around objects, issues, events, etc. They are a means of sense-making formed by life

experiences, values, and other various social conditions (Tannen, 1993). Although they can vary from individual to individual, schemas are mostly socially shared (Scheufele & Scheufele, 2010). The social commonality of schemas makes them more firmly rooted in discourse, as they are shared across an entire society or culture, rather than being relevant only to a few individuals.

The socially shared nature of schemas also makes them highly accessible to those who communicate to the public, such as news media, governments, and large organizations. In constructing and conveying a message, communicators can access and activate schemas in order to advance their aims (Guthner, Froehlich, Milde, Heidecke, & Ruhrmann, 2015). For example, communication about welfare programs may draw upon preexisting cultural schemas of “individual responsibility” and “being a hard worker” to portray welfare users as undeserving of public assistance – without ever explicitly saying so. The repeated activation of schemas can increase the accessibility and applicability of such schemas, further reinforcing their explanatory power (Guthner et al., 2015). Thus, groups with the ability to communicate on topics with the most frequency and authority are highly likely to experience greater success in achieving their goals and objectives. As socially powerful groups maintain dominance over discourse on the topic, limited ways of discussing and understanding a topic can become reinforced and further lend dominant social groups the power to construct discourse, policy, and public opinion according to their ideals and motives.

Schema Theory and Environmental Discourse

Schema theory can offer insight into how the environment is understood and discussed by mainstream environmental organizations. In presenting information about a topic, communicators often appeal to preexisting schemas held by the audience on the topic (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996). Schemas can heavily influence environmental discourse in

particular, as people rely upon them when producing and interpreting environmental discourse (Cantrill, 1996). Encountering the wide-ranging, complex, and often confusing environmental debate can lead to an overreliance on schemas about the environment (Cantrill, 1996). As schemas are created through categories of experience, using them in place of thoughtful reason and consideration can lead to shortsighted and overly simplistic solutions to complicated environmental problems (Fiske & Taylor, 1991; Russell, Ward, & Pratt, 1981). Schemas have permeated mass media communication about the environment, as tropes (such as Mother Nature, carbon footprint, etc.) and simplifications of concepts are propagated in public environmental discourse (Cantrill, 1996). A particular schema often relied upon in processing environmental discourse is the association with the environment as nature (Cantrill & Chimovitz, 1993). This nature-based schema can overly associate environmentalism with protecting natural and wilderness spaces.

It has been demonstrated that nature-based schema is typically relied upon by individuals processing environmental discourse. In a study, participants' free associations with the word "environmental" were examined (Cantrill & Chimovitz, 1993). Six general categories for perceiving the environment and environmental issues were identified. However, mental representations of the word "environmental" most significantly correlated with ecological and biological characteristics. This pointed to the participants' nature-based schema about the environment while cognitively processing environmental issues, problems, and solutions.

Considering nature-based schema about the environment is central to a discussion on environmental discourse. Environmental problems and solutions can become limited to an emphasis on the natural world, as a nature-based schema influences how environmentalists shape environmental discourse and how the public cognitively processes environmental discourse.

History of the Term *Environment*

A consideration of how the term *environment* evolved can further clarify how the environment is understood and discussed today. The term *environment* itself referred simply to “surroundings” for several centuries (Harper, 2001). The key element of the term, “environ”, is derived from the French “enviruner”, meaning to surround or encircle (Rowe, 1989). The first use of environ + ment, which refers to the “state of being environed”, was documented in 1827 (Harper, 2001). As this time, the term was used literally to refer to a person or thing’s surroundings (Rowe, 1989). This included natural and outdoor surroundings, but could also refer to a person’s home or town, for example. It also was often used to refer to social or cultural conditions that a person could be surrounded and subsequently affected by (Warde, 2010). These particular usages of the term are still often employed today in addition to the usage relevant to the environmental movement.

Ecological Descriptions of the Environment

For over a century, the use of the term solely reflected its origins, referring to the sum of surroundings for a person or thing. In 1956, however, the term was first recorded in relation to ecology and began to increasingly connote ecological ideas and notions throughout the 1960s (Harper, 2001; Warde, 2010). Ecology is the study of how organisms interact with their environment (Berleant, 1993). In studying how organisms interact with their environment, ecologists began to recognize that human activity could impact the environment in a variety of ways (Warde, 2010). The way that human activity can harm the environment and organisms living in it became a central element of how the term is used in environmentalism today (Warde, 2010). Ecological explanations of the environment are now an essential part of the environmental movement and environmental discourse. When the term began to take on an ecological meaning

and become associated with environmentalism, environmentalists purposefully avoided any emphasis on human beings, society, and human-occupied spaces, as an anthropocentric worldview was seen as the root of nearly all environmental problems (Rowe, 1989).

Anthropocentric views of the Earth are seen by environmentalism as the root cause of nearly all environmental problems. Environmentalism typically challenges anthropocentrism in any form, as environmentalists largely believe that human interests lead to greed and overconsumption, which exploits a victimized Earth and harms the living beings existing on it.

The original meaning of the term also may have led to philosophical assumptions that still linger today. The etymology of the word as one's surroundings conceptualizes it as an entity that is both outside of and revolving around humans (Berleant, 1993). However, the interconnected nature of living entities and the environment is one challenge to this conceptualization. The air that organisms breathe does surround them, but it also enters their lungs and subsequently flows through their bloodstream as a part of their biological system, for example. Today, environmental discourse can tend to assume a simple cause-and-effect relationship between organisms (such as humans) and the environment, rather than acknowledging a complex web of interrelationships (Berleant, 1993). The assumption of a cause-and-effect relationship between humans and the environment (where humans are seen as inflicting harm on a vulnerable environment) merged with a reluctance to acknowledge the needs of humans and society. This left little room for the human sphere within environmentalism.

History of the Environment throughout the Environmental Movement

The history of how the environmental movement developed is also an important consideration, as the way mainstream environmental organizations discuss the environment and related issues is embedded in a history of how the movement evolved (Brulle, 1996). A historical

and social context is necessary to understand how the environment became an idea and an issue in the first place.

Wilderness Preservation Movement

The Wilderness Preservation Movement (WPM) redefined attitudes towards nature in a way that cherished it as a sanctuary away from civilization. The WPM is considered a foundational element of the modern environmental movement (Cox, 2012; Taylor, 2002; Gottlieb, 2005). In the late 19th century to early 20th century, conservationists and preservationists such as John Muir and Aldo Leopold championed the protection of natural lands and being in harmony with the natural environment (Taylor, 2002). Wilderness preservationists were largely inspired by the Romantic Movement and transcendentalism of the late 1800's, as these philosophical movements valued nature spiritually and aesthetically (Cox, 2012). Individuals such as John Muir and David Thoreau, influential speakers and writers of the time, called Americans back to nature to find spirituality and serenity (Taylor, 2002; Brulle, 2008). This led to new conceptions of nature and its meaning, which in turn informed understandings of the environment and our relation to it.

Wilderness protection activists like Muir engaged in fierce debate with others who contrastingly viewed the environment as resourceful to human needs (Cox, 2012). Those who did not view the environment as a utopian wilderness argued that altering the environment to human needs was imperative to the development of society. This view is termed the wise-use narrative. It valued the environment as resourceful to humanity and was championed by foresters such as Gifford Pinchot (Brulle, 2008). Pinchot and others did not view the environment as a utopian wilderness and paradise. Rather, they contended that altering the environment to human needs (in a responsible manner) was imperative to the progression of civilization (Cox, 2012).

Despite these wise-use arguments, wilderness preservationists were able to convince many Americans that nature was inherently valuable in its own right beyond its utility to humans (Cox, 2012). Although the term “environmentalism” technically did not exist, early wilderness preservation activists laid the foundation for the environmental movement because they reconstructed values and feelings towards nature and humanity’s relationship to it. Men such as Muir, Leopold, and Thoreau are seen as some of the key founders of the WPM (Taylor, 2002). They are considered influential to the environmental movement today and often highly revered by environmentalists. Muir is upheld as the founding father of the modern environmental movement, as he laid the groundwork for the modern environmental movement and founded the Sierra Club in 1892 (Solnit, 2014). Today, it is the largest environmental organization in the United States with over 700,000 members, more than 60 chapters, and multiple outlets of public communication such as magazines and newsletters (Reber & Berget, 2005). The Sierra Club and other environmental organizations are highly influential in shaping environmental discourse and policy (Gottlieb, 2005).

Critics of the Wilderness Preservation Movement’s *environment*. The WPM’s vision of the environment was quite revolutionary for the time, as it changed long-held conceptions of the environment, nature, and wilderness. Prior to the WPM, most people saw the environment as a desolate wasteland associated with human strife and suffering (Cronon, 1996). The idea of the wilderness and nature being anything but desolate and undesirable is a relatively new notion for humankind (Cronon, 1996; Oelschlaeger, 1991). Early colonists, for example, faced a harsh and unforgiving land and typically did not think twice about altering it for their own good (Cox, 2012; Warren, 2003). Actually, the ability of the WPM to change the meaning, purpose, and

value of the environment after such a long history of disdain for nature lends credence to the idea that the environment is a socially constructed concept.

The WPM captured the notion of environment and redefined it according to romanticized, idealistic philosophies of nature and the earth. It fought for the protection of nature for its own sake, driving attention away from a utilitarian view of the environment. However, Muir and others really only fought relentlessly for the protection of places that they subjectively found valuable, such as Hetch Hetchy Valley and Yosemite. If a natural area was not majestic and visually astounding, then wilderness preservationists remained largely unconcerned about it (Cronon, 1996; Miller, 2014). Natural landscapes like the Rocky Mountains or Giant Redwoods Forests were singled out for protection largely due to their aesthetic value. Meanwhile, areas perceived as less aesthetically stimulating were ignored, even if they were technically just as “wild” as a more stunning landscape (such as a grassland or swamp). Human occupied spaces such as cities and towns were viewed as even less deserving of protection, as these places were seen as “fallen” from the “natural Eden.” Compared to his eloquent, grandiose descriptions of natural spaces, Muir describes civilization with disdain and reproach: “The gross heathenism of civilization has generally destroyed nature, and poetry, and all that is spiritual” (Muir, 1871). His answer to the “gross heathenism of civilization” was for citizens to return to a utopian wilderness:

Thousands of tired, nerve-shaken, over-civilized people are beginning to find out that going to the mountains is going home; that wildness is a necessity; and that mountain parks and reservations are useful not only as fountains of timber and irrigating rivers, but as fountains of life (Muir, 1901, p. 1).

This view of wilderness areas versus urban areas is more easily adopted when one is of the privileged class. Muir and most wilderness preservationists were wealthy white men who spent their weekends in the wilderness. These types of wilderness ventures require ample leisure

time and at least a median income, two privileges not enjoyed by marginalized communities (Dowie, 1996). It is easier to criticize civilization for “gross heathenism” when one can leave it at will. In comparison, millions of impoverished citizens, a disproportionate number of them African Americans and other minorities, worked long hours for minimal pay and did not have the time or finances to even consider taking respite in a wilderness area (Taylor, 2002). Wilderness preservationists demonstrated that caring about the environment is more of a privilege than a choice for many individuals.

Anti-Toxics Movement and the Current Environmental Movement

Epitomized by Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring*, the environmental movement of the 1960s and 1970s consisted of environmental discourse that focused on combating air pollution, water pollution, and pesticide use, rather than legislative protection of natural lands (Brulle, 2008; Cox, 2012; Gottlieb, 2005). This phase of the environmental movement saw considerable success with the passage of environmental legislation such as the Clean Air and Water Act and National Environmental Policy Act (Gottlieb, 2005). Discourse of the environment was shifting during this time. It now gave more emphasis to human health, rather than just a promoting preservation of nature.

Despite a new communicative emphasis on human health, marginalized communities facing disproportionate impacts of industry and pollution found it difficult to garner the support of the mainstream environmental movement (Di Chiro, 1996). Reports and investigations were confirming long-held suspicions in these communities – that poor and predominately minority areas were targeted for polluting factories, toxic waste dumps, etc. (Brulle, 1996). Although they hoped to find support for the protection of their environment from the mainstream environmental movement, these communities instead uncovered a disconnect between the issues they faced and

the rhetoric of the mainstream environmental movement. Part of the problem, they noticed, was that their concerns were seen as “not environmental enough” (Bullard & Alston, 1990; Di Chiro, 1996, p.1). This led to a new movement that both challenged the definition of the environment by the mainstream movement and worked towards a more human-oriented understanding of it.

The Environmental Justice Challenge to the Environmental Movement

The environmental justice movement of the 1980s developed partially out of frustration with apathy on the part of mainstream environmental organizations. It worked to redefine environmentalism to emphasize health and quality of life (Gottlieb, 2005). Critics from the environmental justice movement contend that middle and upper-class mainstream environmentalists focus on protecting wild areas because they did not have to be concerned if the water they drank was poisoning them, for example. Mainstream environmentalists have the resources to seek solace in nature, thus, they greatly revere it and spend time and effort protecting it (Taylor, 2002). Meanwhile, even after social gains in the civil rights movement and the development of the current environmental movement, those living in poor urban environments can only be concerned about dangerous and unhealthy living conditions. Their “environment” is what immediately surrounds them, and surviving in it is the primary interest. Natural areas are simply not a priority, especially since these marginalized groups do not have the finances or means to retreat to it on a whim (Gottlieb, 2005; Taylor, 2002).

While the human and built environment gained more attention through the public health and pollution movement, dominant environmental groups that evolved out of the ideology of the wilderness protection movement still held on to picturesque ideas of nature as their top priority and concern (Gottlieb, 2005; Taylor, 2002). In noticing the harmful emphasis on nature that existed in discourse on the environment, the environmental justice movement formed to call

attention to the disproportionate pollution and poisoning faced by lower income and minority communities due to industry in the areas. The movement is seen as beginning in 1982 when a predominately African American North Carolina community protested the dumping of PCB (a harmful toxin) by a corporation there, as they had become aware that their community was targeted by the corporation for its racial and socioeconomic makeup (Brulle, 1996). When these grassroots activists found that mainstream environmentalism organizations were unwilling to hear their claims and deem them environmental issues, they set out to reclaim the concept of the environment and define it in a way that denied a duality between an environment “out there” and the environment of their communities.

An alternative definition of the environment. The definition of the term *environment* proposed by environmental justice advocates was “where we work, live, and play” (Gottlieb, 2009, p. 7). At the core of environmental justice was the idea that the environment is primarily defined by and for humans. These groups could not imagine directing money, efforts, and legislation towards the protection of an endangered species while their community was suffering and dying each day (Floyd & Johnson, 2002). This idea did not sit well with modern environmentalists and preservationist ideals, who continued to view the environment as a natural sanctuary (Di Chiro, 1996). Thus, a divide was intensifying within the sphere of environmentalism, with each side emotionally and ideologically attached to their discourse and understanding of the environment. Despite the challenge of the environmental justice movement, the mainstream environmental movement maintained the dominant discourse on the environment (Taylor, 2002). Within the mainstream movement’s dominant discourse on the environment, a dichotomy persistently appeared that ideologically splits humans and civilization from the natural world, termed a human-nature dichotomy.

Human-Nature Dichotomy in Environmental Discourse

A human-nature dichotomy exists in most environmental discourse. It assumes that humans are separate from nature, rather than part of it and existing within it (Anderson, 2003; Bruner, 1991; Lakoff, 2010; Martell, 1994). Because of this false dichotomy, the environment is often framed as both surrounding and separate from humans in environmental discourse (Lakoff, 2010). This view of the environment fails to acknowledge that humans are not distinct from nature; humans are a part of it themselves. This conceptualization of the environment is deeply rooted in environmental discourse, but should be addressed and reformulated as it is “a terribly false frame” that can hinder comprehensive environmental progress (Lakoff, 2010, p. 76).

Human-Nature Dichotomy in Media

Some studies have supported the notion of a human-nature dichotomy in environmental discourse as portrayed through forms of media. One study conducted a critical discourse analysis of an Appalachian newspaper to investigate how the environment was represented and how those representations could be impacting local environmental politics and policy (Burke, Welch-Devine, & Gustafson, 2015). A dominant discourse of “outdoor life” was used to most often to portray environmental issues. This type of discourse problematically reduced the complexity of environmental issues in the region down to protecting natural spaces used for recreation. In the Appalachian region, environmental issues extend far beyond a simplistic need to protect recreational outdoor spaces. The region faces a multitude of unique environmental challenges, including coal mining, mountaintop removal, a disproportionate number of landfills in poor rural areas, and groundwater degradation – all of which are linked to serious harm to human health and well-being in the area (Burke, Welch-Devine, & Gustafson, 2015). Despite such pressing environmental issues, the discussion remained limited to protecting the natural environment,

which was portrayed as worthy of protection because it was a source of recreation and enjoyment for human beings.

Another study turned to a bestselling book about children's relationship with nature to examine an environmental discourse of nature separation (Dickinson, 2010). The book, *Last Child in the Woods: Saving our Children from Nature-Deficit Disorder* by Richard Louv, makes parallels between ADD/ADHD (attention deficit disorder and attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder) and a disconnect between nature and children, diagnosing these nature-deprived children with "NDD", or nature deficit disorder. The book is credited with influencing countless educational and environmental groups all across the U.S. (Dickinson, 2010).

Critical methods were employed to examine the book's environmental discourse and environmental programs inspired by the book. Although Louv is credited for highlighting concerning implications of childhood alienation from nature, the solutions offered by the book (returning to nature through play and scientific exploration) are criticized for not adequately addressing the issue of alienation from nature (Dickinson, 2010). Louv's solutions focus on increased exposure to nature through activities such as naming species, learning about natural processes, etc. However, these activities could actually perpetuate environmental problems, as they do not address the primary social, economic, and political impetuses that create a disjunction between humans and nature and lead to environmental harm. There is also a heavy emphasis on protection of wild spaces and little emphasis on how environmental degradation can harm humans and communities. Finally, rather than teaching children about the environment in a holistic manner that demonstrates the interconnectedness between the environment and living things, children are taught to become distant observers of the natural world through the activities

they perform (Dickinson, 2010). This reinforces a split between humans and a natural world that is supposedly “out there.”

Human-Nature Dichotomy in Public Debate on Environmental Issues

Another study also exemplified the role of a human-nature dichotomy in a public debate over development in the Adirondack Park. Those on the anti-development side of the debate characterized individuals in favor of development as “environmental rapists” wanting to spoil their “wild jewel” (Senecah, 1996). On the opposing side, environmentalists were called “nature Nazis” who did not care about the human community (Senecah, 1996). On each side of the debate, human and nature are seen as two distinct and separate forces. A false choice between humans or nature proliferated as a result (Senecah, 1996). One side believed humans and nature can exist in the same space and that humans should be prioritized over nature, whereas the other believed human presence would harm an otherwise wild and pristine nature that must be protected at all costs over human interest. In this case, the debate was an example of the human-nature dichotomy that can occur in environmental discourse, a dichotomy that can limit the debate to either/or understandings and offer overly reductionist solutions.

Human-Nature Dichotomy and Environmental Tourism

Some scholars have also looked at nature tourism as reproducing environmental discourse through the human-nature dichotomy. One such study examined tourist brochures for safari experiences in East Africa, finding that they relied upon romanticized ideals of nature to promote the safari (Norton, 1996). In doing so, the brochures created an environmental discourse of nature experiences as a return to a lost time in pre-civilization, thus ignoring the inherently human construction of this “nature experience.” Important to note, however, is that tourists were also interviewed about the experience. It was found that their perceptions were far more nuanced

than marketing materials for the safari (Norton, 1996). Although they did not recognize the underlying assumptions about nature and its relationship to civilization as portrayed by the brochures, they did interpret them thoughtfully and through the lens of their own perceptions and experiences.

Another study also analyzed tourism marketing for an African safari. The safari was portrayed as a separate space outside of human society and influence (Bruner, 1991). Human society was characterized as advanced and civilized, yet also environmentally degraded and fallen from nature. Once again, the natural space offered by the safari was conveyed as fully natural and both undefined and unmediated by humans in any way. Textual productions of nature as a sanctuary away from civilization further solidify the human-nature dichotomy that informs environmental discourse.

Human-Nature Dichotomy in the Field of Sociology

The scholastic world is not immune to perpetuating a human-nature dichotomy. The field of sociology has also tended to assume a separation between the natural world and societal structures (Anderson, 2003). Early on in the development of the field, sociologists overreached in their attempt to break away from the biological and natural sciences, as they largely discounted interactions between the social order and the environment. Rather, they created a tradition of leaving explanations of the environment up to the naturalists and biologists, whose understandings of the environment typically fail to acknowledge any social constructions of the environment and rely ontologically on biological determinism (Martell, 1994).

Although the study of the environment is still on the margins of sociological scholarship, when sociologists do take up the environment as a topic, they frequently reproduce the similar assumptions about nature and society (Newby, 1991). Although some sociological study

regarding environmental justice has challenged the human-nature dichotomy in environmental discourse, the social sciences typically study environmental topics through the critical/cultural tradition by focusing on the role of capitalist production in environmental degradation (e.g., Gould, Pellow, & Schnaiberg, 2008; Schnaiberg, Pellow, & Weinberg, 2002; Shove & Warde, 2002). While this may be an important and useful way to analyze environmental issues, it further treats socio-economic structures as divided from the natural world. It also fails to recognize the environment as a socially constructed and negotiated concept. Within this line of thought, it is assumed that the social world is constructed and governed by human-created socio-economic forces, while the natural world operates deterministically and mechanically outside of us (Anderson, 2003). Socio-economic forces essentially victimize the environment, which is presumed to get along just fine if it were not for capitalism and human greed. These presumptions do not recognize both the objective and subjective qualities of the environment and its role in society.

An abstraction of nature from society in the social sciences has further impacted discourse about the environment in society at large. As the natural sciences are the leading scholastic voices about the environment, and social scholars largely fail to contribute to the discussion on the relationship between social forces and the environment, environmental discourse is further cemented in a false dichotomy (Martell, 1994). Discourse and debate about the environment are compartmentalized, relegated to the natural sciences, and lacks a diverse set of voices on how environmentalism should proceed in understanding and addressing environmental issues. This limits the realm of possibilities for environmental organizations, policymakers, and the public. Some scholars have noticed and taken issue with the human-nature dichotomy, however, and have questioned and challenged it in their work.

Challenging the Human-Nature Dichotomy

The human-nature dichotomy in environmental discourse has received some notice and criticism. This criticism mostly came about during the 1990s. Within this criticism, ontologically realist notions of nature are challenged by pointing to its inseparability from human creation and definition. Some of this criticism has come from the environmental justice movement, as they contend that an emphasis on nature by mainstream organizations hampers their efforts to protect the health of their communities (Di Chiro, 1996). Rather than focusing on natural lands and wilderness, a redefinition of environmentalism away from a human-nature dichotomy could help reorient efforts towards humanity and bring about justice for both society and the natural world. The notion of nature as a utopian paradise inherently becomes a means of oppression for communities facing environmental injustice, which is why they cannot be concerned about whales and trees, for example, until they themselves are healthy and valued by society (Di Chiro, 1996). Ultimately, environmental justice groups often contend that notions of nature must be rooted in community, and to try to separate the two is problematic.

However, it bears noting that the environmental justice movement can often tend to reproduce the human-nature dichotomy in their own discourse. For example, the proposed redefinition of the environment by the environmental justice movement, “where we work, live, and play,” overcompensates for the focus on nature by the mainstream movement and excessively orients it towards humans. Environmental justice advocates often experience more apparent, tangible, and immediate environmental dangers to their health and well-being, which may be a reason they can become overly oriented towards a human-centric environment. But even if their emphasis on humans in the human-nature dichotomy is understandable, it still reinforces a false duality that limits and oversimplifies environmental discourse and subsequent

environmental actions. If a false choice is assumed within environmental discourse, the environment as a whole will inevitably suffer.

Challenging the idea of wilderness. Another criticism challenges the role of wilderness as an essential tenet of environmentalism. Making wilderness the core of environmentalism has led the concept of wilderness to become a prescriptive solution to modern environmental problems (Cronon, 1996). This is problematic, as it creates a narrative that says nature is where we are not, thus designating certain natural spaces and human-occupied spaces as unworthy of environmental concern, such as urban and suburban areas (Cronon, 1996). Centralizing the environmental movement around wilderness frames nature as something of a faultless moral measuring stick against which to judge human activity (Cronon, 1996). In this view, the natural world is assumed to exist in a perfectly harmonious balance outside of human activity, so to save ourselves and nature we must simultaneously preserve nature and return to it as the true “Eden” or paradise. This further cements the human-nature dichotomy in environmental thought. Viewing nature as a model of Eden early on in the WPM is a large part of the reason wilderness is a central tenet of environmentalism. Muir’s romantic, passionate writings on places such as Yosemite can be paralleled to biblical ideas of Eden and humanity’s fall from it (Cronon, 1996). Muir’s “medicine” for depraved and fallen civilization is a return to paradise (wilderness).

However, there are two fallacies in this notion of wilderness that is typical of the WPM and fundamental to the present environmental movement. First, Muir and others only valued *certain* places as restorative to the human condition. The towering Half Dome of Yosemite was much more transcendental to Muir than the grasslands, for instance. This preferential treatment continues to be reflected in the geographical characteristics of most national parks in the United States (Taylor, 2000). Although environmentalists portray wilderness as an objective moral

measuring stick for humanity, it is actually a human construction. Meanwhile, urban areas, where over 80 percent of Americans live, are not taken as seriously as grandly beautiful natural areas are (Miller, 2014). This has been linked to less frequent and zealous calls for protection and improvement of these spaces by the environmental movement (Alkon, 2008; Cronon, 1996; Taylor, 2000). Although these spaces could be viewed and portrayed as equally worthy of protection, concern, and improvement, they are often ignored or disregarded altogether.

The second fallacy in the WPM notion of wilderness is that it creates a paradox that is central to environmental discourse, yet also unacknowledged by it. As Cronon (1996) explains:

If we allow ourselves to believe that nature, to be true, must also be wild, then our very presence in nature represents its fall. The place where we are is the place where nature is not. If this is so—if by definition wilderness leaves no place for human beings...then also by definition it can offer no solution to the environmental and other problems that confront us. To the extent that we celebrate wilderness as the measure with which we judge civilization, we reproduce the dualism that sets humanity and nature at opposite poles. We thereby leave ourselves little hope of discovering what an ethical, sustainable, honorable human place in nature might actually look like (p. 11).

The false paradox this argument describes should be addressed if environmentalism hopes to advance the human relationship with the environment. In taking on a steadfastly ontological realism about nature, environmental discourse often fails to recognize that there may not be some objective nature “out there” that we can simply understand and seek to protect, as the natural world is always encountered through human ideals, perceptions, and values (Cronon, 1996). Continuing to deny the social construction of nature further stalls environmental progress that would benefit both human and non-human living beings and human and non-human occupied spaces.

It is crucial to note that these criticisms are not intended to devalue nature or strip it completely of its objective existence. Instead, they challenge taken for granted assumptions about the natural world and our relations with it. There are some alternatives to the human-nature

dichotomy. First, a more comprehensive notion of nature can be fostered by understanding it as both the grand landscape and the weed growing in the crack of the pavement in an urban area, for example (Cronon, 1996). Secondly, environmentalists can be intellectually honest about the assumptions that create the ideological foundation of the movement (Cronon, 1996). This could progress movement forward, even if it helps the movement become more aware of the ideas and philosophies underlying their motives and actions.

Resistance to criticism. The criticism previously discussed did not go unnoticed by wilderness preservationists and deep ecologists, who became defensive about challenging the ideological foundation of the environmental movement (Nash, 1998; Sessions, 1996). Preservationists defended mainstream organizations' extensive efforts towards wilderness preservation as an essential antidote to anthropocentrism (Nash, 1998). They contend that preservation calls for humanity to intrinsically value the environment, rather than only instrumentally value it for its resources and utility. Deep ecologists also expressed displeasure with the criticism. Deep ecology is a philosophy that views non-human life and ecosystems as inherently worthy of respect and protection and equally valuable to human life. They call for humans to return to the so-called "natural order" that is displayed by the natural environment (Devall & Sessions, 1985). Deep ecologists point to the important achievements made by preservationists in protecting ecological diversity and integrity of the Earth (Sessions, 1996). They also challenge the assertion that nature is all around us and that we are not – and cannot – be separated from it. Deep ecologists believe that the idea that we are both immersed in and a part of nature implies that humans could spread civilization across each possible inch of the planet without concern because nature will somehow still be there. Deep ecologists say that this would actually decimate nature by leading to the destruction of 80 to 90 percent of the planet's

biodiversity (Sessions, 1996). In this argument, the assumption is made that nature is fundamentally defined by ecological biodiversity. This argument also presupposes a false cause-and-effect relationship, assuming that breaking down the human-nature dichotomy will inevitably lead to unrestrained urban sprawl and population growth. A false choice between humans or nature is also assumed, giving further evidence to how persistent the human-nature dichotomy is in environmental thought.

Challenging environmental discourse does not mean discrediting it entirely or calling for environmental harm. Rather, a focused critique of environmental discourse can push the movement forward by acknowledging how the environment is inherently socially constructed (Buell, 1998). The environmental movement must seriously consider how the environment is socially constructed in order to survive and flourish as a movement.

Rationale for Research

Strengthening the Literature on Schema Theory and Environmental Discourse

Schema theory has traditionally been used to examine how people can be influenced to perform environmental behaviors. This includes a body of research on how environmental attitudes can influence environmental action, the gap between environmental attitudes and behaviors, and how appealing to values can influence environmental action (see: Buttel & Johnson, 1977; Kollmuss & Agyeman, 2002; Seligman et al., 1979; Van Liere & Dunlap, 1980; Stern, Dietz, Abel, Guagnano, & Kalof, 1999). While this body of research provided insight into how environmental behaviors can be influenced, it does not investigate underlying schema about what the environment actually *is* to individuals. Research from Cantrill and Chimovitz (1993) aimed to fill this gap in the research by identifying schemas about the environment, but a gap still exists on how nature-based schemas are formed and perpetuated through environmental

discourse. More generally, there is also a lack of knowledge about how any kind of schema is formed and perpetuated, as noted by Baran and Davis (2011).

While research from scholars such as Cantrill and Chimovitz (1993) offers quantitative insight into the cognitive processing of the term environment, it does not give critical insight into how nature-based schema and a human-nature dichotomy may be influencing environmental discourse in a way that reinforces existing power structures. Accordingly, critical research on the formation and perpetuation of schemas through social power dynamics could strengthen literature and knowledge on nature-based schema in environmental discourse.

Mainstream Environmental Organizations and the Human-Nature Dichotomy

Research on a human-nature dichotomy in environmental discourse examines the mass media, public debate, environmental tourism, and literature in the field of sociology. However, research on a human-nature dichotomy in environmental discourse specifically created by mainstream environmental organizations is missing. This research also infrequently makes the link between a human-nature dichotomy in environmental discourse and schema on the environment. Further establishing the role of nature-based schema on the environment and a human-nature dichotomy in the discourse of mainstream organizations can fill this gap.

Understanding the Current Movement

The mainstream environmental movement experienced a great deal of criticism during the 1990s and early 2000s (Cronon, 1996; Di Chiro, 1996). Because the criticism of this time already pointed out problems with the mainstream movement's discourse, it is not useful to look at the environmental discourse of organizations from decades ago and compare it to today. Problems within environmental discourse of mainstream organizations from previous decades are already quite well-known, so a comparative analysis looking at older copies of *Sierra* would

likely be redundant. It is important, however, to look at the current environmental discourse of a mainstream organization. Environmental organizations were very aware of the criticism they fielded during the 1990s and early 2000s. However, it is not known if the Sierra Club and other mainstream environmental organizations took that criticism into account and improved their philosophy and messaging strategies. Looking at current copies of *Sierra* is one way to answer this question. It is also important to note that while recent research has criticized current environmental communication and discourse generally (e.g., Burke, Welch-Devine, & Gustafson, 2015), it does not analyze the environmental discourse of mainstream environmental organizations. Studying the Sierra Club and *Sierra* magazine as a representative of the environmental movement and environmental organizations will help fill this gap.

The Need for a Critical Perspective

While Taylor (2002) examines the link between the social and cultural history of the environmental movement and its focus on nature today, a historical approach is taken and environmental discourse that is propagated by mainstream organizations today is not critically examined. Gottlieb (2005) and Brulle (1996; 2008) have also contributed to the literature on the social and historical context of the mainstream movement, but do not offer a current and critical look at the movement in today's power structure of society. A critical look at the movement today would enhance and contribute to this work.

Critical research on current mainstream environmental discourse should be conducted to fill this gap and further explain the implications of a human-nature dichotomy in environmental discourse. Therefore, it is proposed that research should be conducted that critically examines the role of nature-based schema and a human-nature divide in the formation and dissemination of

mainstream environmental discourse. This research will also approach the subject of study openly and inductively to observe any other themes and findings that may appear.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

Purpose of the Study and Research Question

In order to address limitations and gaps in the literature and answer the research questions of this study, a qualitative approach was taken to collect and analyze data. This consisted of a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) of texts produced by the Sierra Club, the largest and most influential mainstream environmental organization.

This study aimed to answer following research question: How does the Sierra Club, in the discourse represented by its magazine, present a nature-based schema and a human-nature dichotomy which indicates a preference for the idea of nature protection at the expense of protection for the human sphere?

Theoretical Perspective: Critical Discourse Analysis

This study was guided by the theoretical and analytical paradigm of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). CDA is an inductive and qualitative approach (Wodak & Meyer, 2015). The focus of CDA is the relationship between power and the use of language (discourse) (Weiss & Wodak, 2003). Briefly defined, discourse is a type of social practice where discourse both shapes and is shaped by societal conditions. Because discourse is a social practice informed by power, CDA purposefully aims to uncover power relationships and their implications, thus producing results of practical relevance (Wodak & Meyer, 2015). Power is understood as control, which can be control of money, politics, action, thought, or any other resource that creates certain possibilities for one group and limits possibilities for another (van Dijk, 1993). CDA is a method interested in power relations, domination, and inequality as expressed and perpetuated through

discourse. To illuminate the role of discourse in power relations, it focuses on the discourse of institutions, groups, and organizations (van Dijk, 2001).

Given the purposes of this study, CDA is an appropriate method that allowed an in-depth exploration of how the environment is conceptualized in discourse produced by the Sierra Club. The Sierra Club is the top mainstream environmental organization in the U.S. and a major contributor to dominant discourse on the environment (Taylor, 2002). It is also considered the most politically influential environmental organization (The Aspen Institute, 1999). Dominant discourse is understood by CDA as discourse with political and ideological legitimacy that seeks to express and reinforce societal power relations (van Dijk, 2001). The Sierra Club has political and ideological legitimacy and may be using discourse in a way that reinforces the legitimacy of their values and position on the environment. Studying the Sierra Club as a representative of the mainstream environmental movement made it possible to obtain insight into the possible influence of nature-based schema and a human-nature dichotomy in environmental discourse and a subsequent prioritization of natural spaces over human-occupied spaces.

Social-Discoursal Approach

There are several varying approaches within CDA; however, these approaches share five characteristics (Fairclough & Wodak, 1997):

1. Discursive practices are seen as shaping society;
2. Discursive practices are also shaped by society;
3. Language should be analyzed in a social context;
4. Discourse is inherently ideological and invested in producing and reproducing unequal power;
5. CDA is an ethically critical practice.

CDA shares these five features; however, CDA diverges into three main approaches: historical-discoursal, cognitive-discoursal, and social-discoursal (Chouliaraki & Fairclough, 1999). The specific approach taken by this study will be the social-discoursal approach developed by Norman Fairclough. This approach is popular within communication research and is considered a well-developed theory and method (Phillips & Jorgensen, 2006). In a social-discoursal approach, the emphasis is placed on the social elements of discourse. The approach concentrates on the fluid relationship between society and discourse, in which discourse influences, and is influenced by, societal practices and power relations (Fairclough, 1995).

An essential goal of Fairclough's CDA is to expose social inequities through a critical analysis of discourse (Weiss & Wodak, 2003). Fittingly, Fairclough's methodological approach evolved out of Critical Theory associated with the Frankfurt school (Chouliaraki & Fairclough, 1999). Critical Theory contends that socially powerful groups and individuals aim to uphold the status quo, as it supports their powerful position in society. Critical Theory also aims to expose typically unnoticed and unquestioned hegemonic processes in an attempt to give greater power to disadvantaged populations (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2000). Hegemony is a central concept in Critical Theory that refers to power obtained through hierarchical social, political, and economic structures and maintained via ideological and moral control (Richardson, 1989). Fairclough's CDA is an extension of Critical Theory that specifically focuses on the role of discourse and language in upholding power relations and hegemony in a society (Fairclough, 1992a). CDA researchers employing Fairclough's approach are tasked to explore the relationship between discourse and social structures. This allows them to explain how discursive practices play a role in shaping power relations, and how the unquestioned nature of discursive practices contributes to hegemony and unequal power (Fairclough, 2003). The central view of this

approach is that language and discourse are inextricably interwoven into social practices and are social constructions themselves.

Locus of the Study

The locus of this study was issues of the Sierra Club's *Sierra* magazine from 2011-2016. This six-year period was chosen because it provides up-to-date insight into the environmental discourse by the Sierra Club and fits well with *Sierra's* publishing schedule. As previously mentioned, the mainstream environmental movement's environmental discourse of past decades already received a good deal of attention in the literature. Accordingly, a comparative analysis of issues in the 1980's or 1990's and issues today would not have been as useful and elucidating to understanding the environmental discourse of a mainstream environmental organization today. As the mainstream movement's discourse of past decades is already covered in the research, the most recent issues available were chosen for this study.

Sierra is published on a bimonthly schedule (January/February, March/April, etc.). One issue per year was examined from 2011-2016. To ensure that each season of the year and bimonthly period is represented, the six issues chosen began with November/December in 2011 and moved backwards through the months until January/February in 2016 (January/February in 2016, March/April in 2015, May/June in 2014, July/August in 2013, September/October in 2012, and November/December in 2011). Thus, six issues total were examined. These issues were purchased directly from the Sierra Club and mailed to the researcher.

Six issues were chosen as the sample size because it allowed the researcher more time to read and analyze each issue in its entirety from front cover to back cover. The researcher strived to select a comprehensive, recent, and diverse set of issues, without creating a sample size that would be unmanageable due to time and resource constraints.

Although one may assume that articles and features would be the primary sources of discourse in a publication such as *Sierra*, other elements of the magazine are equally as important to examine. For this reason, the research examined the full contents of each page of each magazine. Other elements besides stories, such as advertisements, images, and letters to the editor, are purposefully chosen components that serve to construct the magazine as a whole. It was also important to analyze images in addition to text, as there is not enough scholarly work on visual representations of the environment in environmental discourse (Hansen & Machin, 2013). To adequately assess the Sierra Club's environmental discourse through *Sierra*, all components were taken into consideration, as those elements were editorially chosen to be placed in the magazine and are subsequently consumed by readers of *Sierra* magazine.

This magazine was chosen as the focus of this study for several key reasons. For one, it is one of the most popular publications produced by any environmental organization with 1.1 million subscribers (Sierra Media Group, 2016). *Sierra* is a highly influential publication, as it is more likely than other environmental publications to reach powerful individuals. Compared to other environmental-focused publications, *Sierra* was found to reach the highest concentration of "influentials," a term for individuals who are involved in politics, public policy, and civic affairs (GfK MRI Survey of the American Consumer, 2014). It also reaches the highest number of "green advocates" of any environmental publication, which is a term for individuals who support environmentalism both in ideology and behavior (Sierra Media Group, 2016).

Sierra was chosen over other sources of discourse because it reflects the discourse of a large, mainstream environmental organization. In order to address gaps in the literature on the discourse of mainstream environmental organizations without replicating research that has already been performed, *Sierra* was chosen over other sources of discourse such as news reports,

as this type of media has already been examined by previous scholars (e.g., Burke, Welch-Devine, & Gustafson, 2015). One option for this research would have been to compare *Sierra* to information presented by an environmental justice group in order to understand differences in their discourse. However, the environmental justice movement does not produce any substantial discourse with the reach and influence of a magazine like *Sierra*. As the environmental justice movement primarily consists of grassroots groups and has considerably fewer resources than an organization like the Sierra Club, it creates very little discourse on the environment. Due to time and resource constraints, this study chose to focus on influential, widely disseminated environmental discourse (*Sierra*). In future studies, however, looking at environmental justice discourse in comparison to mainstream discourse could be a fruitful investigation.

The full *Sierra* magazine is only available in print. There is a *Sierra* website that features some of the stories and pieces in the print version, but full access to the magazine is not provided online. Some stories are culled from the print version and placed online, but one must read the print version in order to access the entire magazine. The print version was analyzed for two reasons. For one, analyzing the print version ensures consistency and full access to all content, as online publications may change or be removed. Secondly, *Sierra* subscribers receive the print version in the mail as a part of their subscription. It was important to analyze the print version, as it can be assumed that subscribers receive and likely consume the print version, but it cannot be assumed that all subscribers also consume *Sierra* online. Naturally, there is no way to precisely know how *Sierra* subscribers consume the magazine without asking them, but it can be assumed that *Sierra* subscribers are receiving a copy in the mail. Because part of the justification for analyzing *Sierra* is the high number of subscribers and the influential status of those subscribers, it is important to analyze the print version, as it is known that subscribers are receiving the print

version, but it is not known if they also go online to read *Sierra*. Thus, it is more fitting to analyze the print version.

Time and Location of Study

The study took place during the fall of 2016 over the course of 2-3 months. The data collection phase took around 2 weeks. The data analysis phase took around 3 weeks. It was conducted at Colorado State University.

Data Collection and Analysis

In respect to text selection, it is important to note that CDA diverges from many other avenues of research in the way that objects of study are chosen and described. The critical foundations of CDA mean that a researcher begins with the understanding that discourse is influenced by power and plays a role in reinforcing power (Haig, 2008). Rather than selecting random samples of discourse to attempt to prove or disprove that critical notions of power and hegemony exist in the first place, critical discourse analysts are expected to select texts that help answer *how* those forces may be operating within the selected locus of study. The texts selected are representative of the Sierra Club as a powerful institution and are thus appropriate for the goals of this study.

Although there is “no typical CDA way of collecting data,” there are recommended practices that can orient the process (Fairclough, 2001, p. 23). Following the dominant tradition of using the constant comparative method in qualitative analysis, this CDA study was guided by the constant comparative method (Boeije, 2002; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Constant comparison is a methodological approach that is used throughout data collection and the analytic process, including creating categories, forming boundaries of each category, assigning pieces of data to

their appropriate categories, summarizing categories, etc. (Glaser & Strauss, 1965). The aim is to uncover conceptual patterns in the data (Boeije, 2002).

Entire pieces of text, images, ads, and any other discursive materials from Sierra magazine were analyzed at the macro-level. This means that text was examined for the ways that power relations in society are reflected in the text and reinforced by it (Fairclough, 1992).

Throughout the data collection and analysis phase, the concepts of human/nature dichotomy and nature-based schemas were present and guiding. Coding and category creation were guided by these two concepts, as they are influential to shared understandings of the environment and at the core of this study's research questions. However, the researcher was also open to any themes and concepts that appeared and did not exclude them from the analysis, as this ability is one of the main advantages of using a qualitative, inductive methodology such as constant comparison guided by CDA.

A framing approach may have been appropriate for this study in lieu of a schema approach. Framing theory describes how political actors promote certain frames and how the news media articulates and utilizes frames (Gamson, 1992). Frames are socially created categories of information that cull certain elements of reality to assemble them into a narrative that promotes a certain interpretation (Carragee & Roefs, 2004). While this approach could have been relevant and useful in describing how mainstream organizations such as the Sierra Club cull certain elements of the environment in order to promote their interpretation of environmentalism, Framing theory has traditionally been applied in studies on the news media rather than the discourse of an organization (Entman, 1993). Additionally, little to no previous research exists on how the environment is framed in relation to nature, whereas Schema theory offered a starting point for examining this phenomenon through the concept of nature-based schema. Finally,

frames are typically broader and more generalized than schemas (Baran & Davis, 2011). The mainstream environmental movement may frame environmentalism as a whole in a different way than the environmental justice movement does. But to look specifically at how the environment is conceptualized in relation to nature, a schema approach is more useful and focuses on a singular element of environmental discourse.

The main goal of emergent coding and the constant comparative method is to reach conceptual saturation (Glaser & Strauss, 1965). To achieve conceptual saturation, similarities and differences in the codes are conceptualized until no new categories can be generated from the open codes and gaps in the emerging coding scheme are filled. Once this set of codes is generated and mostly finalized, the relationships between the categories of codes are explained. The researcher performed close readings of the text and wrote organized notes in the margins of each page. More extensive notes were also taken separately and used during the data analysis phase. These notes and observations were used to create codes and categories through the constant comparative method. Rather than fitting the data to a coding scheme created prior to data analysis, constant comparison as guided by CDA requires an emergent coding scheme where raw data are transformed into theoretical descriptions. Magazine content was analyzed using an emergent coding scheme where a close reading of the text identified overarching themes. Once a broad set of themes was identified, themes were compared and often combined, until a few broad overarching themes were identified.

Context is also an important consideration in CDA. Context refers to factors such as cultural norms, societal structures, and ideologies. It is seen as a mediator between language and society and is considered in CDA methodology (Wodak & Meyer, 2015). The historical, social,

and political context of environmental discourse produced by the Sierra Club was a consideration in this research throughout the data collection and analyzation processes.

Levels of analysis in Fairclough's approach. Fairclough (1992b) provides a methodological framework that describes three levels of discourse that should be analyzed in order to conduct CDA systematically:

1. Discourse as written or spoken text;
2. Discourse as a discursive practice (the production and consumption of text);
3. Discourse as a social practice.

In this model, the three levels are distinct, yet interact with one another and are not completely separate (Fairclough, 1995). Of the various forms of CDA, some pay high attention to either the social elements or the linguistic elements of a text, thus neglecting one or the other. Fairclough (2003) finds this approach unbalanced. Rather than choosing either social or linguistic features to analyze, both are given attention in this model. The three levels will be described in greater detail in the following sections.

Discourse as text. In this level of analysis, the analyst concentrates on the text and linguistic qualities of the discourse (Pasha, 2011). This includes word choice, metaphors, semantics, descriptors, word pairing, etc. Linguistic features of the text should be considered part of the social features of text. The two are intertwined and should be analyzed as such. There are some important considerations at this level (Fairclough, 2003):

1. The genre of the text;
2. How events and objects are described and represented (issues, people, debates, places, etc.);

3. A presence or absence of certain ways of representing, describing, and explaining events and objects.

Discourse as a discursive practice. The production and consumption of messages is referred to as “discursive practice” (Fairclough, 1995). Within the different stages of text production and consumption, the influence of institutionalized ideals is highly present and formative. At this level of analysis, an analyst should pay attention to the processes behind the production and consumption of text. When analyzing discursive practices, the following questions can be considered (Pasha, 2011):

1. Why are writers and editors choosing certain issues to include over others?
2. How and why are events and issues being discussed the way they are?
3. What factors may be influencing writers and editors?
4. How do images and advertisements contribute to the overall discourse presented here? Why were these images and advertisements chosen for publication?
5. Are there other competing/alternative discourses and ways of representing these topics?
6. Who is being quoted and sourced? How are they being quoted and sourced?

This level of analysis links discourse to the larger context that informed its creation and subsequent consumption. Analyzing the linguistic features and discursive practices of a text will naturally overlap, but Fairclough (2003) contends that both should be analyzed separately.

Discourse as a social practice. The final level of analysis focuses on ideological and hegemonic practices underpinning discourse. A consideration of social, cultural, ideological, historical, and political structures around a text is important here (Fairclough, 1999). At this level, the analyst considers how these structures inform, and are informed by, discursive

practices (Fairclough, 1995). The analyst goes beyond discourse as language and discourse as a practice in order to better understand the wider social structure and its role in generating and reinforcing power relations in a way that is advantageous to certain social actors and groups. This level may include the immediate context or may point to the larger social context of institutionalized practices and ideologies. To comprehensively analyze discourse at this level, a researcher should interpret how the text is involved in the hegemonic process of shaping ideas, concepts, and beliefs (Harvey & Braun, 1996).

Constant Comparison during Data Analysis

Following Boeije's (2002) efforts to make constant comparison a more concrete, step-by-step approach, this study was guided by a specific 3-step analysis procedure that fit the study and data at hand:

1. Comparison within singular, topically grouped items in an issue (article, advertisement, etc.).
2. Comparison across an entire issue.
3. Comparison across all six issues.

Put simply, constant comparison involves comparing each piece of data with every other piece of data (Morse & Field, 1998). Comparing codes and categories across each of the three levels described above will help achieve the base goal of comparing each piece of data with every other piece of data. Going further, Strauss and Corbin (1998) state that the act of comparison also involves the creative process and creates an interplay between the data and the researcher. In addition to close comparisons that create categories and help ensure internal validity, a researcher is also expected to connect the data with parables and metaphors that position data in a larger context.

Addressing Disadvantages of CDA

A criticism frequently faced by CDA is that it involves an arbitrary selection of texts or pieces of a text, thereby lessening data representativeness and the ability to reveal larger patterns (Baker et al., 2008). These critics also say that CDA risks producing only ideological or philosophical observations, as it typically does not include an analysis of the behavior of individuals (Schegloff, 1998). This limitation in particular can be addressed by including conversation and interview analysis with CDA. Results can consider the research question both in the larger social structure and at the level of meaning held by individuals (Schegloff, 1998). This step could be taken in future research to answer the limitations of the present study and create a more well-rounded understanding of the topic.

Others also warn that CDA can lead an ideological researcher to select texts that will confirm their predicted interpretation (Widdowson, 1995). To CDA's credit, however, the approach is required to be upfront about its stances and ideology, unlike other approaches that front a detached objectivity (Fairclough, 1996). For the present study, it could be said that it is disadvantageous that the Sierra Club is being chosen, as the researcher understands it to be representative of dominant discourse on the environment. However, the Sierra Club is quantifiably the largest environmental movement and produces one of the most influential publications on the environment. In the interest of being upfront about personal stances and ideologies, I, as the researcher of this study, do identify as an environmentalist and have a particular interest in environmental justice. I do not belong to any environmental organizations, but I am concerned with environmental issues that impact humans and have roots in unequal power. The goal of CDA is to be purposefully critical and political – this is what sets it apart from other approaches (van Dijk, 1993). This puts the researcher in the position to critique

discourse for its role in perpetuating dominance and inequality and make practical suggestions to remedy it. Although I am coming from a critical perspective, there were continuous, conscious efforts to analyze *Sierra* openly and objectively in order to ensure receptivity to whatever may appear from the data.

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

Characteristics of the Magazine

Sierra is published on a bimonthly schedule beginning in January and February of each year. The issues examined ranged from 68 pages in length to 100 pages. The average length is closer to 70-75 pages, however, as the issue with 100 pages was a special issue that featured a larger section of Sierra Club sponsored outings than was typical. There are few items that consistently appear in each issue. On the cover of every issue, *Sierra* is called “The Magazine of the Sierra Club” in small text towards the bottom. Also in each issue, the table of contents page contains a description of the magazine in very small text at the bottom. It says *Sierra* is “the official magazine of the Sierra Club” and that members of the Sierra Club are subscribed to *Sierra* through their annual dues to be part of the Sierra Club (\$7.50 of the \$39 annual fee to be a member of the Sierra Club, which was consistent from 2011-2016). Nonmember subscriptions are available as well for \$15 a year. Towards the front of each issue, two columns of text provide information about key Sierra Club members and *Sierra* employees, including Sierra Club directors and *Sierra* editors. The Sierra Club column features the Sierra Club motto in each magazine, which reads:

To explore, enjoy, and protect the wild places of the earth; to practice and promote the responsible use of the earth’s ecosystems and resources; to educate and enlist humanity to protect and restore the quality of the natural and human environment...

Sierra changed slightly over the six years of the sample in terms of how the magazine is organized. From 2011-2014, there was only a “features” section and a “departments” section. The features section highlights featured stories. The departments section contained all of the

other content of the magazine, which was titled with singular words or short phrases that spoke to the general theme of the related content and seemed to be purposefully chosen to grab attention, such as “Survive,” “Escape,” “Comfort Zone,” “Innovate,” “Repurpose,” and “Ponder.” Some were recurring sections, such as the “Survive” and “Repurpose” sections that were one-page sections in each issue. In 2015, the magazine changed its organizational scheme to divide the publication into four sections: “Features,” “Explore,” “Enjoy,” and “Protect.” These sections are inspired by the motto underneath the title of the magazine on the cover of each issue: “Explore, Enjoy, and Protect the Planet.” Each of these sections contains stories related to the title of the section. “Enjoy” specifically related to what could be termed the “environmentalism lifestyle,” with tips and pieces about living green. “Explore” was almost exclusively about outdoor recreation. “Protect” seemed to be a blend of nature and wildlife preservation and climate change related topics. The content itself did not differ significantly afterwards; it was just organized in a way that drew greater attention to the main themes of the magazine.

In addition to the sections described above, each magazine features ample amounts of photography to accompany stories, but sometimes photos stand alone and take up a page or two. Each issue has a letters-to-the-editor section where readers write in about articles and features from the previous issue. Finally, every issue of *Sierra* contains many advertisements through the magazine, as is typical for an average magazine. Most of these advertisements are from outside sponsors who purchased ad space. The great majority of these ads were outdoor recreation-related. Other advertisements were from the Sierra Club. These include two main types: donation requests and Sierra Club Outings. Donation requests encourage readers to donate to the Sierra Club. Sierra Club Outings are advertised in a section towards the back of the magazine and contain details and pricing for Sierra Club organized outdoor recreation trips.

Codes

A list of codes was developed using the CDA approach. These codes were written throughout each magazine next to places they appeared and listed out on a separate sheet of paper for reference. More extensive notes on observations were also taken, both throughout the magazine and on a separate sheet of paper. The codes that were developed throughout the data collection process were refined, combined, and further conceptualized through the constant comparative method until consistently apparent, comprehensive themes appeared from the categories of codes. The raw list of the main codes developed is provided in Table 1.

Table 1. List of codes.

Code Acronym	Description of Code
HND	Evidence or example of human-nature dichotomy in the presentation of the environment or an environmental issue.
OR	Outdoor recreation-related content.
ORA	Outdoor recreation ad, either by outside sponsor or Sierra Club.
OP	Overtly political piece of content, typically anti-Republican rather than pro-Democrat.
NBS	Evidence or example of nature-based schema about the environment or an environmental issue.
AHND	Evidence or example of content that is contrary to human-nature dichotomy. Does not appear to split humans and nature.
ANBS	Evidence or example of content that is contrary to nature-based schema. Does not appear to associate the environment with nature.
ELS	Environmentalism lifestyle content. Content that alludes to being “green” and often includes associated products, such as non-toxic cleaning supplies or hybrid vehicles.
GW/CE	Greenwashing/commercializing environmentalism by monetizing environmental actions, items, issues, or related topics.
FF/CC	Fossil fuel/climate change-related content.
UC/UMC	Upper class/upper middle class. This kind of content would primarily be relevant to and/or appeal to upper class and/or upper-middle-class individuals.
N4D	Nature for donations. Using nature and/or nature-related text and photographs in an attempt to inspire readers to donate to the Sierra Club.
EJ	Environmental justice related content
AN	Content that relies upon and/or perpetuates the idea of an authentic nature

The researcher also took a simple frequency count of how many times these codes appeared in the samples of *Sierra*. The frequencies of these codes can be seen in Table 2 and are ranked by frequency of appearance from greatest to least. Notable in these frequencies, outdoor recreation-related ads were the most dominant form of content with 108 appearances across the six magazines. Other forms of content also appeared regularly, although not nearly as much as outdoor recreation advertisements. This included content related to authentic nature, content relevant to upper-to-upper-middle class readers, fossil fuels/climate change-related content, and outdoor recreation-related content.

Table 2. Code frequencies.

Code Acronym	Frequency of Appearance
ORA	108
AN	35
UC/UMC	34
FF/CC	32
OR	31
ELS	27
N4D	25
NBS	22
HND	15
EJ	15
GW/CE	12
OP	10
AHND	10
ANBS	4

Guided by critical discourse analysis techniques, a close reading of the content, the creation of codes and categories, and the constant comparative method, the researcher identified several key themes from the data. The findings for these themes will be presented in this section and further discussed in the subsequent section.

First, in *Sierra*, nature is automatically viewed as a space worthy of protection and important to the environmental movement, whereas other spaces require an explanation of why they may be important to the environmental movement. One would be hard-pressed to find a story about a type of space outside of a natural setting that did not link itself to an actual environmental issue. A story about a day spent biking around a neighborhood, for example, would link the story to alternative transportation. A story about mountain biking in the Rockies, however, would typically not include any mention of an actual environmental issue. This theme demonstrates nature-based schema about the environment, as nature is revered as the “ultimate environment,” whereas other spaces must be explicitly linked to some environmental issue in order to be included in the magazine.

Second, content in *Sierra* indicates a striving for connection with authentic nature, which has a discursive distinction from what is seen as a more inauthentic form of nature and human spaces. Third, authentic nature is highly commodified by packaging the “the outdoor recreation experience” in outdoor recreation advertisements and Sierra Club trips. Authentic nature is also commodified in donation requests by exalting the protection of authentic nature and using authentic nature to specifically appeal to wealthy individuals.

Findings also indicated that authentic nature is not presented as a place for all; rather, it is presented as a place to be enjoyed by the elite. This is partly demonstrated by *Sierra’s* characterizations and descriptions of those who do not participate in authentic nature experiences, and of those who do not participate in them according to certain standards. Finally, although *Sierra* contains consistent themes and patterns in their discourse and presentation of the environment and associated issues, there are some exceptions to the rule. However, these exceptions mostly seem to further highlight the overarching patterns in *Sierra*.

The Environment and Nature are Interchangeable in *Sierra*

Sierra bills itself as the magazine of the Sierra Club, but often reads more like an outdoor recreation magazine with some environmental stories mixed in. In each issue, several stories and features cover an individual's experiences in nature in a narrative format. These stories are solely about time spent in nature, whether it be a hike to the top of Corkscrew Peak in Death Valley National Park or mountain biking in a remote area of Montana. Outdoor recreation stories go into detail about the experience itself, including sensory details, itineraries, locations, and the personal meaning of the trip for the recreationist. However, they do not make a link to a specific environmental issue or even a nature preservation issue, such as water pollution, resource conservation, etc. It seems as though a story about nature can speak for itself on why it is important to environmentalism because nature is seen *as the environment*. Less "natural" spaces, however, would never be afforded this privilege.

There are other stories in the magazine that revolve around specific environmental issues. These stories are clear and explicit about how they are environmentally themed, however. In one story, a college professor attempting to create a fully sustainable and green community is profiled. The article covers the wide variety of actions that would need to be taken to make a town fully self-sustaining and green, including changing food systems, sources of energy, and waste disposal systems. In another story, the author interviewed individuals who are trying to get people to eat insects as a source of protein and nutrients because insects have less of an impact on the environment as compared to traditional sources of meat and protein. In these stories and others, the environmental issue at hand is explicitly described and is the focus of the story. Occasionally, an outdoor recreation story will have some environmental issue interwoven into it, as was the case for a story about how coal mining could impact outdoor adventure tourism in

West Virginia. However, the majority of stories about outdoor recreation experiences in nature have no mention of an actual environmental issue. In contrast, other stories clearly describe environmental issues and could easily be seen as an example of environmental discourse. These findings indicate that in *Sierra*, nature is allowed to speak for itself as an environment worthy of protection, but other spaces are not afforded the same status and are discursively linked to some specific environmental issue.

Authentic Nature in *Sierra*

Authentic nature was identified by Alton Chase (1986) to describe the way environmentalists and preservationists have typically conceptualized nature since the preservationist movement. In brief, authentic nature is seen as a purer form of nature, away from human disruption and corruption. For environmentalists who espouse this view of authentic nature, the goal is to return to a lost time of pristine wilderness that is set aside from human-occupied spaces.

This study found that the idea of an authentic nature is a central element of *Sierra's* discourse. It is used in representations of the environment and serves to reinforce nature-based schema and human-nature dichotomies. As will be further demonstrated in the following sections, the authentic nature outdoor recreation experience is present in each issue in several formats (stories, features, advertisements, etc.). It is presented as a highly desirable – and even essential – experience that humans should have and appreciate. Yet, authentic nature experiences are highly commodified in *Sierra*. Packaged trips to exotic locales and high-tech outdoor recreation gear are promoted throughout the magazine. Contrarily, protecting authentic nature from human influence is also important. The idea of protecting authentic nature from human harm is used to shore up donations to the Sierra Club. Donation requests rely on representations

of nature that are highly subjective and reflective of an authentic nature mindset, including the use of beautiful landscapes and attractive animal species. Finally, while authentic nature is revered and seen as valuable in *Sierra*, the magazine's discourse communicates authentic nature is not a place for all to experience. Conversely, elitist attitudes about who should experience authentic nature send the message that only some are meant to experience these places.

Experiencing Authentic Nature through Outdoor Recreation

As demonstrated by the high frequency counts of codes related to outdoor recreation, authentic nature, and outdoor recreation advertisements, experiencing authentic nature through recreation is central to the identity of *Sierra*. Each issue features several stories on outdoor recreation, which, as previously mentioned, often do not relate to any specific environmental issue. They are the same kinds of stories that could be read in an outdoor recreation or travel magazine. Not all outdoor recreation is the same, however. Findings show that *Sierra* particularly values outdoor recreation experiences that take place in authentic nature far from human civilization. Content that features extreme recreation also seems to be particularly valued. Elements of danger and remoteness exist in many of the outdoor recreation stories in *Sierra*.

Sierra has a recurring story section in each issue titled "Ponder: Your Place in Nature." In the May/June 2014 issue, this section contains a story titled "The Human Run." The story describes the large numbers of recreationalists who travel to a certain part of Alaska each year for the salmon run when salmon migrate through the area. They come to fish, to see the grizzly bears that flock to the area, and to experience what they consider a very "wild" place. The story, written by *Sierra's* assistant editor, describes the motivation of the travelers to visit such a dangerous and inhospitable place. He states: "They thought that enduring the inhospitable

mountains...the fog of mosquitos, or the insane light would bring them closer to some truth about themselves.”

Far from providing a critical take on this mindset, the author takes part in it himself. He says this “Alaskan impulse” drove him to stand close to a bank of dead salmon in an area where grizzly bears are known to frequent and become aggressive over their share of salmon. He says he enjoyed the fear and adrenaline from putting himself in such danger. He also describes a couple who hunts caribou in the area and takes the meat home for the winter. He concludes that:

The ritual of turning the caribou into food seemed to confirm that winter was something to be survived, even though they live in a fully connected house in the suburbs of Anchorage. These people all thought that Alaska was a cordoned-off proving ground, a place to separate themselves from the rest of the human species and manufacture a hardscrabble lifestyle.

In this story, the author and other travelers see this place as separate from the places they normally occupy, which are dull in comparison to the excitement they can find during this time of year in this remote part of Alaska. Not only does this place provide an adrenaline rush and excitement because of its dangerous elements, it also seems to fulfill a deeper need for these travelers. Their “regular” lives seem unable to “bring them closer to some truth about themselves” whereas the wildness of this place is able to do so. A key element of the experience in authentic nature is the separation from human civilization and other humans, which this story demonstrates. The author says that Alaska is seen as a place to “separate themselves from the rest of the human species and manufacture a hardscrabble lifestyle.” The author notes the irony of this view, as these people return to their amenities in the suburbs upon leaving this “cordoned-off proving ground.” For the subjects of this story, however, their brief time in this wild place offers an opportunity to prove themselves in a way that is not offered in the human-occupied, developed spaces that they normally inhabit.

Recreating in authentic nature often includes an element of danger and even risk of death. It also often involves spending time in remote areas far from human civilization. This was demonstrated by the story “We’re Skiing That?” in the November/December 2011 issue. This story revolved around the author overcoming his fears while participating in a four-day ski-mountaineering camp. He says that skiing in dangerous backcountry areas “is one of the most thrilling outdoor adventures a person can have.” But, as he notes, “unfortunately it can also kill you.” The author is willing to risk his life for these experiences, however. Over the course of the trip, he gradually becomes more comfortable with dangerous ski runs. In the end, the author is able to overcome his fear. He ultimately feels that he is a braver person who has slayed his dragon of “fear.” The extreme and remote nature of this landscape allowed the author to conquer his fears. *Sierra* featured this piece as its cover story. On the cover, the story is described with the title “How to Not Die Doing This.” The cover photo depicts a man on the peak of a mountain looking out at a landscape of mountain peaks and clouds. The photo evokes isolation, remoteness, and a sense that the man has conquered the mountain he stands on.

The Commodification of Authentic Nature in *Sierra*

Not only does *Sierra* exalt authentic nature experiences, it also uses authentic nature in a profitable manner to sell those experiences to readers. Advertisements in *Sierra* take the authentic nature experience and commodify it for profit for the magazine, the organization, and outside advertisers.

Commodification of authentic nature in outdoor recreation advertisements. In many respects, the Sierra Club and *Sierra* subsist financially on the socially constructed concept of authentic nature. The “authentic nature experience” is used to sell ad space throughout the magazine. Ads related to outdoor recreation appeared 108 times in the six magazines. A vast

majority of the ads in *Sierra* are either packaged outdoor recreation experiences or mid-to-high-priced outdoor recreation gear. Packaged outdoor recreation experiences are advertised with beautiful, eye-catching photos of grand landscapes or wildlife species, and sometimes include smiling individuals or families enjoying a scenic area.

The text of one of these ads reads “Alaska beyond Your Dreams, Within Your Reach: It’s like nothing else on Earth. Get your FREE Official Alaska State Vacation Planner today!” Another reads “Breathtaking vistas, incredible bird-and-wildlife-watching. Thrilling treks through the forest, scenic hiking trails and bikeways, and more await.” These ads imply that companies seek out *Sierra* as a target market for packaged outdoor recreation experiences. They rely upon the concept of reconnecting with authentic nature as a key selling point, as evidenced by language choice such as “It’s like nothing else on Earth” and the use of descriptive, and somewhat flowery, adjectives that serve to imply that their experience will get you something different and more authentic than anywhere else.

Some packaged experiences are more “rugged” than others and would appeal to a clientele with advanced outdoor recreation experience, while others seem to be a laidback vacation with exotic nature sprinkled in. A more advanced adventure is advertised in a full-page ad on the back cover of the March/April 2015 issue. It shows a crew of people on a raft in Antarctica. They are a small part of the picture, made minuscule by a barren, uninhabited landscape of blue ice and water. The language describes a truly authentic experience in an extremely remote place that most human beings would likely avoid at all costs. The ad reads:

Embark on a Lindblad-National Geographic expedition to Antarctica and experience the thrill of 21st-century exploration. Travel with the world’s most experienced ice team as our veteran expedition naturalists guide you on hikes to penguin rookeries, kayak outings in quiet coves, and Zodiac excursions amid soaring icebergs.

The ad is titled “The Difference between an Ocean View and A View from the Ocean,” implying that *this* trip is a real authentic nature experience and thus more gratifying, unlike a leisurely vacation to the beach.

Occasionally, advertisers also took out several-page ads that masqueraded as the type of outdoor recreation story typical to the magazine, such as the one in Figure 1. This ad describes a day spent kayaking alone while advertising the Hobie kayaking brand. This “story” co-opted several of the techniques used by actual *Sierra* writers to describe outdoor recreation experiences, including an emphasis on the solitude and fulfillment one can find in authentic nature. Interwoven throughout the story is information on the kayak brand and pictures that feature the gear and equipment used by the author in the story.

SPECIAL ADVERTISING SECTION



Gentle Solitude

It is in deep solitude that I find the quietness with which I can truly love my brothers. The more solitary I am the more affection I have for them... Solitude and silence teach me to love my brothers for what they are, not for what they say. —Thomas Merton

Thomas Merton's *Thoughts in Solitude* is one of my favorite books. I don't have a hard copy with me, but I always had a firm copy between my ears. Much of it has percolated into my brain, so little remnants of Merton bubble to the surface periodically. The idea of being alone, but not lonely was a common theme in his writing, and Merton knew a lot about being alone. He spent a great deal of his life in such solitude, in a small shack he built in the woods outside his monastery in the Kentucky hills. It was his writing that first taught me the concept of really never being alone—you are always with yourself, and your Creator is never too far off when you're in Creation.

So solitude is not often described as "gentle," but I found it to be so on this trip.

As I finished my gingersnaps, it was hard to get off. The island I was on couldn't have taken more than two or three minutes to turn me, but I continued to find little jewels of nature that interested me and prompted me to shoot a few rolls of film. The old tree with the barker clawed bark, the outcropping of the sandstone where wind and waves carved miniature canyons, and shelves and endless smooth platforms. I had never noticed the minute variations in sand color and texture, and ended up spending half an hour looking at one place where sand was being deposited as the current slowed.

My internal clock finally told me I would have precious little daylight left if I didn't shove off, so I packed up, but gambled, leaving the camera out on top of the case. This could easily prove fatal if I misplaced a paddle stroke and ended up turning turtle, but it was worth the infinitely small risk to take a good shot if the light became just right.

I floated along in more of that delicious autumn light, where the lower angle of the sun stays away the longer and of the spectrum and warms up the sea-

No assembly needed. Simply unfold, inflate and hit the water!



THE EVOLUTION OF INFLATABLE KAYAKS

To a dealer near you, visit www.hobie.com or call 1-800-736-3433

Figure 1: Outdoor recreation ad.

Outdoor recreation gear is sold extensively throughout the magazine. Ads for gear include high-end hiking boots, durable outdoor clothing, sporting gear such as kayaks and backpacks, pricey portable yurts, and GPS technology for backcountry trips. Some are traditional

advertises that cover anywhere from a fourth of a page to a full page, while others feature products within a section written by *Sierra*, like one in the July/August 2013 issue titled “Playing with Fire” that features several products related to campfires. These ads typically use photos of their gear that feature the product up-close or “in action” while being used in an outdoor setting. One advertisement featured folding outdoor chairs and showed a picture of a man sitting in one positioned on the peak of a tall mountain with nothing but clouds and sky around him. While a disclaimer mentions that the man is a professional athlete and individuals should not attempt this stunt, the gear is still visually associated with isolation in nature and extreme outdoor activity – even though the ad was just for a chair.

Commodification of authentic nature in Sierra Club trips. In addition to outdoor recreation advertisements from outside organizations and businesses, *Sierra* also devotes a considerable amount of space to their own outdoor recreation trips called “Sierra Club Outings” (there were two to three pages dedicated to these trips in all issues except for one: the January/February 2016 issue which featured 45 pages and over 300 trips). These trips range in price from around \$300 on the lower end for trips that include service projects, around \$1,000 or more for domestic trips, and up to nearly \$8,000 for international trips. Not only do these trips appear to be a key source of funding for the organization, they also seem to be central to the mission and identity of the Sierra Club. Written by two Sierra Club Outings co-chairs and trip leaders, an introduction to the 2016 Sierra Club Outings section describes the importance of these trips with a quote from Muir: “If people in general could be got into the woods...to hear the trees speak for themselves, all difficulties in the way of forest preservation would vanish.” *Sierra*, and Muir, give the impression that authentic nature is the prescription for a society

unconcerned about preservationist ideals. If they could only get more people into these wild and beautiful places, then their goals of preserving these wild and beautiful places would be realized.

Commodification of authentic nature in donation requests. The idea of a perfect and unadulterated nature is also employed to solicit donations to the Sierra Club. Throughout each issue, there are inserts that call for readers to send donations, make the Sierra Club a part of their will, become a “Wilderness Guardian monthly donor,” or take part in a charitable gift annuity. These inserts always use a photograph of aesthetically pleasing nature, like a stream running through a forest, a mountain peak, or a photo of wildlife. Wildlife species are those traditionally considered appealing. A fox pup is featured in one, while a pack of wolves runs through the snow in another (see Figure 2).



Figure 2: A call for donations.

The language choice in these donation requests allude to the fear of losing something precious and irreplaceable. The request that features the pack of wolves reads “join the pack to

protect America's wilderness." Another used Muir and his legacy to encourage donors to continue the tradition of saving wildlife species, safeguarding wilderness, and creating parks.

Only a few of these ads featured people in the photos. These requests still used a natural setting and usually featured individuals who appeared to be family, such as a husband and wife, or a grandmother and her grandchild. Although humans were featured in some donation requests, authentic nature still provided the context and setting for the photo and language in the request.

Authentic Nature is Reserved for the Elite

Sierra content not only contains extensive discourse on the importance of experiencing authentic nature through outdoor recreation, it also communicates that authentic nature experiences are reserved for certain elite individuals. These individuals have a certain level of income and skill. They are also highly enthusiastic about extreme outdoor recreation experiences. On the other hand, people who do not have these attributes are discursively separated from those who do.

In the May/June 2014 issue, there is a six-page story about two men biking and kayaking down the Yakutat coast in Alaska. The story is titled "Lost in Time" and is written by one of the two men who participated in the trip. The author says the intention of the trip was to "ride to the ocean and down its uninhabited coast to see what there is to see" and to "directly experience this raw, primordial wilderness on its grandest scale." The men encountered a few skeptical people in the town of Yakutat right before the adventure. The author described one of the skeptics, a woman standing in front of a "shack" outside the single-gate airport the men exit from. He says she is wearing a "Bud Light sweatshirt" and that "she takes out a cigarette" before speaking to them. After asking if they know what they are getting themselves into, she says she will pray for them. Next, two men "stumble out of the bar" nearby and mention that "there's a load of bears

down there” and that it is dangerous not carry guns and that the difficulty of this venture will lead them to be “up a creek without a paddle.”

The men brushed off the advice of the townsfolk and carried on. In this story, it is as if the men seek to distinguish themselves from the everyday person. They make the distinction between themselves and these naïve townspeople – *they* are adventurers going to find their true selves in the wilderness, and these people just do not get it. The author emphasized their difference from the townsfolk and the town by describing their departure as pushing “further and further away from the human world.” The men endure several dangerous and uncomfortable situations during their trip, but ultimately find meaning and fulfillment from the trip because they were able to recreate in highly remote and uninhabited areas. Upon return to the town from the trip, the author describes the experience of seeing humans again as “jarring.”

For one, this story further exemplifies *Sierra’s* fixation with authentic nature and desire to experience it in an extreme and isolated manner. However, the way the author describes the townsfolk is also notable. The author uses language and descriptors in a way that conveys the social class and status of these people. In describing the woman, he quite purposefully mentions the Bud Light sweatshirt, cigarette, and her intention to pray for them. He also makes note of the drunkenness of the two men. His descriptions accompany his rebuke of their skeptical attitudes about their extreme trip. By pairing these descriptions of the townsfolk with the complete disregard for their advice and comments, the author conveys the message that authentic nature is for the appreciation and enjoyment of an elite class. It appears that this author, and more broadly *Sierra* magazine, believe that some people can enjoy wilderness more than others and that a good indicator of one’s ability to enjoy authentic nature is one’s class and status.

The author of this story seemed to be a recurring freelance writer for *Sierra*, as he also wrote a story for the July/August 2013 issue. This story, titled “A View with a Room,” follows the author, his father, and his father’s friend on a biking trip in Montana. The trip takes them to different lookout stations throughout the Montana backcountry, which are abandoned U.S. forest service fire lookouts now used by bikers and hikers. Throughout the story, the author uses a similar technique to describe his characters as he did in the previous one. His father’s friend, Ron, is described as a New Yorker with a “complicated relationship with wilderness” who is “not much for roughing it.” Ron serves as a foil to the author’s more authentic relationship with nature and the wilderness. Throughout the story, the author juxtaposes his own transcendental experiences in the wilderness with Ron’s complaints and snarky comments. After quoting someone who said being a fire lookout mostly just takes “soul,” the author of the story notes that Ron seems to be short on soul himself after Ron says it would be extremely boring to be a fire lookout. Later, as the author takes photos near the edge of a cliff, Ron comments “You’ve got the whole damn mountain and you’ve got to stand right on the edge?”

While Ron may not necessarily be of a lower social and class status like the townsfolk in the previous story, he still does not fit the mold to be a recreationalist and true enthusiast of authentic nature. The author goes as far as equating his inability to appreciate the lookouts to a lack of a soul. The author also notes that Ron is from New York and quotes Ron using colorful language. The way Ron is described serves to invalidate his personal way of experiencing nature. It does not appear that Ron does not enjoy the outdoors in general, as the author says he had joined him and his father on mountain trips for decades. Despite this, to the author, Ron cannot enjoy authentic nature as deeply and truly as he can.

These findings raise questions about the kind of person who reads *Sierra* and if they hold these elitist attitudes themselves. While this question cannot be resolved by this study, as this research did not interview or survey *Sierra* readers, *Sierra* may have provided its own answer to this question. In the May/June 2014 issue, an introduction in the front of the magazine asks “What Sort of Person Reads *Sierra*?” *Sierra* addresses the reader in a two-fold answer to why they care about who reads the magazine: so that the editorial team can “publish articles that will inform, engage, and entertain you, honored *Sierra* reader, with jaw-dropping brilliance” and so that the advertising team can “sell you to companies that in turn want to sell something to you.” The piece then lays out a bulleted list of the type of ads that would depict a typical *Sierra* reader:

- Grinning like a loon while riding your folding bike to work and then giggling on the back of your girlfriend’s tandem as you cycle past wetlands that you helped save from bulldozers;
- Hoisting your sweaty self up a 5.10 granite face and then kicking back under a camp lantern reading *The Botany of Desire*;
- Giving a thumbs-up to the crew who put solar panels on your house in the morning and then battering your way through Class V rapids at sunset;
- Admiring a scarlet macaw in your binoculars and then admiring the way your flip-flops look on the sustainable flooring you installed to protect that rainforest.

The piece ended with some complimentary remarks about *Sierra* readers and a promise to reflect their “values and desires” in the magazine. The choices of activities, attributes, and interests of *Sierra* readers in this bulleted list speak to the elite individual by which *Sierra* feels its readers can be exemplified. According to this list, *Sierra* readers are advanced recreationalists who climb difficult rock features and raft in dangerous rapids, are able to afford eco-conscious upgrades to the home they own, and have enough wealth to take international trips to the rainforest. These descriptions fit many of the advertisements included in *Sierra*, such as the one in Figure 3 from the January/February 2016 issue. On this advertisement page, multi-day international trips and outdoor recreation gear are featured. These kinds of ads fit the description

of *Sierra* readers in “What Kind of Person Reads *Sierra*?” Not only does *Sierra* admit that its readers fit a specific elitist mold, it is glad that they do, as it is profitable to the magazine and its advertisers.



Figure 3: Advertisements.

Summary

The findings in this chapter indicate that authentic nature is viewed as a special space and is highly central to the discourse of *Sierra*. The magazine’s content values a deep connection with authentic nature, which is made distinct from what is seen as a more inauthentic form of nature and human spaces. Although authentic nature is seen as transcending the human-occupied world, it is highly commodified in outdoor recreation advertisements and Sierra Club trips. Authentic nature is also commodified in donation requests that call for the protection of authentic

nature. Authentic nature is used to specifically appeal to wealthy individuals in advertisements and donation requests. Stories and other content in the magazine do not present authentic nature as a place for all; rather, authentic nature is presented as a place to be enjoyed by the elite. This is demonstrated through *Sierra's* characterizations of those who do not participate in authentic nature experiences and/or do not participate in them according to certain elitist standards.

CHAPTER 5
DISCUSSION

The Environment and Nature are Interchangeable in *Sierra*

The way *Sierra* presents nature raises questions about whether a human-occupied space would ever be considered as inherently environmental as a natural space is in the magazine. Would a story about a day spent in walking around an urban space ever be featured in *Sierra*, and if so, would it explicitly link the story to an environmental issue, perhaps about public transportation or the use of pesticides in urban green spaces? The findings presented in the previous section imply that in *Sierra*, nature is allowed to speak for itself as an environment worthy of protection, but other spaces are not afforded the same status and are discursively linked to some specific environmental issue. Reflecting the Sierra Club's roots in nature preservation, nature is glorified while other spaces receive comparably much less attention. This relates to nature-based schema about the environment because the environment is heavily associated with nature in *Sierra*. Nature is the ultimate environment and can go unquestioned about its importance to the environmental movement.

One may argue that although the Sierra Club bills itself as an environmental organization and is considered the largest and most powerful environmental organization, *Sierra* as a magazine is both an environmental publication and an outdoor recreation publication. But the magazine calls itself "The Magazine of the Sierra Club" on each cover, so the publication cannot be separated from the organization itself, its conceptualization of the environment, or the way the organization communicates their conceptualization of the environment. Looking at this publication gives insight into the ways the Sierra Club constructs an equivalence between nature

and the environment, and how they portray that equivalence through their popular and influential publication.

These findings echo previously discussed findings about nature-based schema by Cantrill and Chimovitz (1993). Nature is so strongly associated with the environment that it does not have to be clearly linked to environmentalism. It also adds to their findings, as it sheds light on how schemas may be perpetuated and reinforced through discourse such as *Sierra*. While *Sierra* may never explicitly make a statement along the lines of “the environment is nature and nature is the environment,” this message is still being communicated and the association between the environment and nature is being made.

Authentic Nature in *Sierra*

Authentic nature is identified by Alston Chase (1986) in *Playing God in Yellowstone: The Destruction of America's First National Park* to explain that if the destruction of Yellowstone were to occur, it would not be due to the presence of humans (as many preservationists and environmentalists assume); rather, it would be the result of false beliefs about the nature of nature in the first place. Starting with the preservationist movement of the early 1900's, Americans have sanctified the wilderness and a supposedly purer nature and longed for a return to an authentic nature free from contemporary human disruption (Chase, 1986). They imagined a pristine time and place where earlier Native Americans lived in harmony with the natural setting around them and even drew spiritual sustenance from it. However, the preservationists failed to realize that this virginal nature has never really existed. Humans, including the Native Americans that environmentalists have extolled, have been interacting with, and altering, the landscape for thousands of years (Chase, 1986). There is no return to a wild nature because it has never really existed in the way that environmentalists imagine it.

Authentic nature is imagined as whole, harmonious, and functioning in perfect balance – until it is tainted by the presence of modern humans. In fact, a lack of modern humans is a prerequisite for authentic nature. Authentic nature is seen as spiritual and whole, and served as a pseudo-deity and philosophy for preservationists and environmentalists (Chase, 1986). The culturally-created concept of authentic nature was born into existence through the preservationist movement and the philosophies of individuals like Muir, Thoreau, and Emerson, who wrote of their time in nature as transcendental and akin to a religious experience.

The concept of authentic nature has appeared in environmental thought well before the environmental movement existed, as Chase (1986) demonstrates. This concept underpins nature-based schema about the environment and a human-nature dichotomy in environmentalism, as authentic nature is seen as “more real” than other spaces and separate from humans. In this line of thought, authentic nature is the true and ultimate environment that we must strive to restore and protect, whereas civilization is already fallen away from the authenticity of wilderness. Humans are seen as something of a scourge to nature, rather than a part of nature themselves, which further reflects the human-nature dichotomy in modern environmental thought.

Similar to these concepts, Wall (1999) studied environmental discourse in a Canadian TV series on nature that ran from 1960-1994. She found that the concept of authentic nature became more and more apparent as the years progressed, with later episodes deifying and reifying nature and urging viewers to reconnect with nature. Nature was also presented as a moral authority that humans should follow to save themselves and the earth from destruction.

Authentic nature appears in several forms throughout *Sierra* and is central to the identity of the magazine. As discussed in the findings, authentic nature should be experienced in a certain way – through excursions, sometimes extreme and remote, into highly “wild” places. The

magazine prioritizes outdoor recreation content and reserves much of its ad space for outdoor recreation advertisements. Outdoor recreation content also frames the outdoor recreation experience in a way that communicates that it is reserved for the elite, rather than being accessible to all.

Experiencing Authentic Nature through Outdoor Recreation

The story titled “The Human Run” discussed in the previous section exemplifies a recurring theme in *Sierra* – experiencing authentic nature through outdoor recreation is desirable and offers a sense of fulfillment. One of the key elements to an outdoor recreation experience seems to be the level of remoteness in the place one recreates in. A trip is more “real” and gratifying if it takes place in an extreme landscape. These extreme landscapes are also expected to be largely free of humans. Authors of stories about outdoor recreation experiences purposefully seek out unknown or difficult to reach natural areas. It is as if the more remote, human-less, and unforgiving a landscape is, the more authentic it is. This concept is exemplified visually in the image shown in Figure 4, where four humans are dwarfed by a remote and immense landscape in Antarctica.



Figure 4: Image for an outdoor recreation story.

Sierra's stories demonstrate a consistent theme in the magazine that contains presumptions and ideas about what authentic nature is to humans, and what utility it may serve as a place away from civilization. The magazine glorifies the experience of recreating in authentic nature as a path to a truer self. These findings reflect Dowie (1996) and Taylor's (2002) descriptions of the origins of the environmental movement as being based in Muir and others' affinity for time spent in the outdoors. The preservationist movement created a wilderness that gratifies humans precisely because it is away from humans. This tradition seems to continue on today within *Sierra*.

Additionally, the way authentic nature is conceptualized as a place away from human civilization in *Sierra's* outdoor recreation content reinforces the human-nature dichotomy. In "The Human Run," the subjects of the story see Alaska as a place that allows them to prove their worth and draw closer to a deeper part of themselves. Part of the reason this place fulfills their

desires to separate themselves from others and prove their ability to survive in a wild place is because of the clear distinction between this place and the human-occupied spaces in which they spend their daily lives. Although this place certainly does objectively differ from a neighborhood in the suburbs, it is the social construction of this place as a place to prove oneself that makes it valuable to these recreationalists. It is not the space itself that creates this reality, but the perception of this place as different from human-occupied spaces.

The Commodification of Authentic Nature

As explained by Marx (1990), for something to be commodified, it simply needs to be turned into an object with a greater exchange value than production value, thus making it profitable. *Sierra* uses the idea of authentic nature to sell goods and services throughout the magazine, including outdoor recreation gear and Sierra Club trips. The commodification of authentic nature in *Sierra* reflects political economy literature and previous scholarship on recreational tourism. It also raises an important paradox apparent in the magazine – that true nature is where humans are not, but one can spend money to be in that nature themselves and experience it. Finally, the use of authentic nature in *Sierra* for profit further enforces a divide between the concerns of the wealthy and non-wealthy, as authentic nature is used as a motivational tool to encourage donations from wealthy individuals.

The advertisements in *Sierra* not only reinforce the concept of authentic nature as pristine wilderness to be consumed, they also form the notion that one needs to spend money in order to have the best authentic nature experience. As shown, stories about outdoor recreation in authentic nature often feature activities that would require ample amounts of quality recreation gear, such as kayaking, canoeing, backcountry skiing, mountain biking, and backpacking. A majority of advertisements are either high-end, brand name outdoor gear or packaged trips that

range greatly in price, but would all require a certain level of disposable income. Reading the magazine may leave one feeling that to have a truly transcendent experience in nature, they will need a \$160 Vapor Straight Shaft Canoe Paddle, a \$60 Ultimate Survival Technologies Stormproof Lighter, a \$74 Tilley's Cotton Duck Hat, a \$1,000 Old Town Charles River canoe, and a seven-day \$995 canoe trip in the Adirondacks to take all that gear on. A walk in the park would never be seen as fulfilling, whereas a 13-day, \$3,775 trip hiking in the "natural beauty of southern Costa Rica and Panama" is billed as impressive, transcendent, and life-changing. It is much harder to make such casual outdoor activities into sellable commodities as compared to multi-day excursions into locales that require ample amounts of gear and experienced tour guides. Resultantly, low cost, affordable outdoor activities receive scant attention in comparison to the expensive and gear-intensive activities that fill the magazine.

The commodification of nature is present in some literature. Some have discussed the commodification of nature from a utilitarian perspective by looking at how industries aim to turn natural resources into a profit (Castree, 2003; Marx, 1990). Political economy approaches towards the environment also include the commodification of nature. These approaches consider the struggle between corporations, organizations, and governmental bodies for control and regulation of natural materials, and include theories such as the treadmill of production and resource extraction/ecologically unequal exchange theories (Rudel, Roberts, & Carmin, 2011). The political economy approach is actually employed quite often in *Sierra*, particularly for stories about climate change and fossil fuel extraction. These are expected findings, as this perspective on the environment has generally been a part of environmentalism for several decades (Rudel, Roberts, & Carmin, 2011). There is also an alternative political economy of the environment from the environmental justice perspective. It claims that policies and regulations

have long been influenced by powerful environmental organizations that exclude marginalized populations, and calls for a justice-based sustainability theory that would address the concerns of all populations (Rudel, Roberts, & Carmin, 2011).

To be careful not to conflate the environment with nature, however, it is important to note that the environmental justice approach to a political economy of the environment does not focus on nature or natural resources; rather, it uses the concept of the environment as it is understood by the environmental justice movement, which is quite human-centric. To a certain degree, however, the findings of this study resemble an environmental justice approach to a political economy of the environment, as they point out how environmental organizations *themselves* play a role in the commodification of the environment, rather than focusing solely on commodification attempts by industry. The difference in these findings from the environmental justice approach is that they demonstrate how an environmental organization commodifies the concept of nature through the outdoor recreation experience. While previous scholarship along this line of thought has focused on natural resources or the environment more generally, the present study finds that the concept of authentic nature is also being used for profit. Rather than selling a plot of timber for pulp production or a million barrels of oil extracted from the ocean, *Sierra* sells an idea, a value system, and a means of connecting with something supposedly greater than oneself through time spent in the outdoors. Part of the paradox, however, is that for this commodity to remain profitable, consumers must still *perceive* authentic nature experiences as priceless and transcending beyond the human world, even if these outdoor recreation experiences are highly shaped by human constructs and processes.

Some scholarship has also been conducted on the commodification of nature through outdoor recreation. Reis (2012) examined recreational tourism in New Zealand and explains that

New Zealand's scenic attractions are used to bill the country as a land full of natural wonder in order to entice tourists to the area. Reis (2012) interviewed hikers in New Zealand about their experiences and found that nature was being sold as a setting for personal and transformative experiences. Hikers tended to use nature as the stage upon which they act out their purchased tourism performance.

Reis's (2012) study gives insight into how outdoor recreation experiences are commodified through tourism. The current study's findings extend this concept by explaining how outdoor recreation experiences are advertised and commodified through environmental discourse. Additionally, Reis (2012) purposefully avoids a discussion of the social construction of nature and acknowledges this delimitation. The present study's findings include a discussion of the social construction of nature and how it forms the foundation for the commodification of nature through outdoor recreation.

Commodification of authentic nature in Sierra Club trips. The finding that *Sierra* uses authentic nature as a selling point for Sierra Club trips reflects the conundrum that Chase (1986) explains preservationists faced in trying to protect Yellowstone. In the preservationist view, allowing people to visit the park was a concession necessary to protect the park. *Sierra* and Sierra Club Outings seem to be somewhat aware of this paradox, and aim to address it by offering "low-impact activities such as hiking and kayaking" and practicing Leave No Trace guidelines, which are a set of practices that aim to prevent recreationists from leaving any trace of their presence in the wild. Despite efforts to limit human influence on the wilderness, however, the trips still seem to search for the elusive balance between preserving a natural place from human presence and using the natural place for recreational and profitable purposes. Even if the larger goal is to inspire individuals to adopt preservationist ideals, the trips are billed as a

chance to experience a place that most other humans do not get to experience. Language choices evoke uniquely remote places to purposefully communicate that participants are experiencing something special and set apart for their enjoyment. The phrasing and word choice imply that participants will be discovering a secret place for their private enjoyment:

Trek through a canyon so mysterious, its name isn't found on modern maps. With stone battlements impassable to ordinary hikers ensuring our solitude, we'll visit beautiful slots, pools, pour-offs, caves, slick rock, ruins, rock art, and a not-quite-whole-dinosaur.

Another assures “we're not likely to encounter anyone else as we travel cross-country through a maze of narrow slot canyons, steep-sided sandstone domes, and high pinnacles.” The descriptions seem to aim to make the consumer feel as though they alone will experience a piece of authentic, tucked away nature, drawing attention away from the reality that these places are likely at least somewhat well-known and traveled, at least by Sierra Club Outings recreationists.

The findings on the use of wildlife imagery in donation requests reflect research by Small (2011) on the types of species that typically receive the endangered species status. Rather than the endangered species distinction being objective and based in ecological science, beautiful, entertaining, and/or useful species make the cut at much greater rates. Species are not valuable by their own existence, they are valuable because humans deem them to be so. This demonstrates that nature is consistently seen through human perceptions and ideals. It is not all of nature, or all of the environment, that matters most, it is those landscapes and animal species beloved by humans that matter the most.

Rather than featuring photographs and language that relate to other environmental issues outside of wilderness and wildlife protection, donation requests rely upon the culturally-shared concept of authentic and pristine nature to motivate readers to donate. By doing so, *Sierra* reproduces nature-based schema about the environment. The language used explicitly advertises

that donations will be used to protect nature and wildlife for future generations to come. As Fairclough (1995) notes, when examining discourse it is just as important to note what is *not* said as it is to note what *is* said. Calls for donations could feature other environmental issues, or could even readily include humans and other environments in their claims about how the money will be used. There could be images of rooftop gardens or individuals smiling in front of a city backdrop with blue sky free of smog, for example. Contrarily, these requests for donations consistently associate the environment and environmentalism with nature. They also state that funds will be used to protect the kinds of natural spaces featured in the photographs that accompany the donation requests.

These inserts reproduce socially and culturally constructed ideas of nature. Only the grandest wilderness scenes are used, and only the cutest animal species are featured. Nature is a wonderland far away from the human world. One may argue that *Sierra* knows they need to consistently evoke the idea of authentic nature because that is what motivates their readers to donate. Perhaps *Sierra* readers and Sierra Club supporters do mostly care about wilderness protection and that is where they would like their money to go. As this study does not examine reader interpretations, this finding raises questions about how readers and donors may feel about *Sierra's* use of nature to solicit donations, if requests actually motivate them to donate or not, and where they expect their money to go.

Appeals to the wealthy. Michael Brune, the executive director of the Sierra Club, writes a one-page editorial piece near the front of each issue on different environmental topics. In the May/June 2014 issue, he urges readers to get fossil fuels out of their investment portfolios and to use credit cards that support clean energy, such as the One PacificCoast Bank credit card, which is partnered with the Sierra Club. The highlighted quote, placed in the middle of the piece in bold

red text, reads “Is your bank account being used to level Appalachia?” On the next page, a photo of a polar bear and her two cubs sit atop an insert that asks readers to consider a Sierra Club charitable gift annuity. The text reads “Protect wildlife and wild places for future generations and receive annual income – for the rest of your life – at attractive rates, with tax benefits, too.” The minimum donation to become part of the gift annuity program is \$10,000.

Investment portfolios and charitable gift annuities are only financially relevant to upper-middle-class to upper-class people. Both the editorial piece by Brune and the charitable gift annuity advertisement call wealthy readers to action by speaking to their fears about the destruction of nature. This fits with literature by scholars such as Dowie (1996), Gottlieb (2005), and Taylor (2002) that lays out the history of the environmental movement as consisting of a long line of wealthy, influential individuals whose main concern is the destruction of their paradisiacal nature playgrounds. It also seeks to extend this line of literature to update it to the current environmental movement by providing insight into how the concerns of the wealthy are given attention today.

Authentic Nature is Reserved for the Elite

Through its recurring content on outdoor recreation, *Sierra* presents authentic nature as a special place to be visited by a select few. As demonstrated by the elitist undertones in the story “Lost in Time,” *Sierra* does not see authentic nature as a place to be enjoyed by all classes of society. The author uses social class markers to communicate negative connotations about these “regular” people. Pointing out the woman’s Bud Light sweatshirt, cigarette, and religious leanings are used to demonstrate superiority over these people who question the author’s desire to experience authentic nature. “A View with a Room” also reinforces the idea that authentic nature is reserved for a certain class of elite individuals. The way Ron is described in contrast to

the author serves to accentuate the supposed deeper and more authentic way the author experiences authentic nature. The author equates his inability to fully enjoy it to his personal attributes and background, implying that authentic nature can only really be appreciated by some. By including this kind of discourse in the magazine, *Sierra* communicates that there is a singular and particular way of enjoying authentic nature. This way of enjoying authentic nature involves isolated excursions into remote areas with extensive gear and displaying acceptable attitudes about “roughing it” and experiencing dangerous situations. In *Sierra*, an individual’s performance in authentic nature is as important as their presence in it.

These findings lead to questions about how the author of the story and others similar to him would feel if authentic nature was made more accessible to all. *Sierra* implies that authentic nature is a prescription for personal and spiritual fulfillment, but they stop short of indicating that they desire such fulfillment for all people. This conundrum reflects the debates of the preservationist movement as identified by Chase (1986), where preservationists needed public support to set aside lands, yet they did not want the majority of the public to consistently access such lands. These preservationists felt that the masses would ruin the authenticity of wilderness areas, yet they themselves often enjoyed these areas for themselves.

The piece “What Sort of Person Reads *Sierra*?” in the May/June 2014 issue also demonstrates that authentic nature is reserved for the elite, and points to larger considerations about the kinds of people *Sierra* and the Sierra Club want to be associated with. To *Sierra* and its advertisers, the ideal reader is not only environmentally conscious; they are also advanced recreationalists with enough disposable income and skill for extreme outdoor activities and international trips. The mention of “wetlands that you helped save from bulldozers” shows a priority for wilderness protection. The choice to include activities such as climbing a “5.10

granite face” and “battering your way through Class V rapids” show that one cannot just be a leisurely recreationist to be the sort of person who reads *Sierra*. Not only do these activities require a certain skill and physical ability, they also require high-quality gear (the kind of gear advertised extensively throughout the magazine). Additionally, the sort of person who reads *Sierra* is apparently one who takes trips to the rainforest and installs sustainable features to their homes. The choice of such activities indicates that the ideal consumer for *Sierra*’s advertisers is an upper middle- to upper-class individual. While these may actually be the kinds of a people who read *Sierra*, those who do not fit the mold so plainly laid out by the magazine are left out of the narrative promoted by *Sierra* and the Sierra Club. Ultimately, they may also be left out of the environmental movement as a whole if this discourse is present throughout the movement. Although there are technically no requirements to join the Sierra Club or read *Sierra*, the narratives and assumptions present in the discourse of *Sierra* lead the magazine and the organization to become exclusive and reserved for the elite.

Sierra’s presentation of authentic nature recreation recalls the origins of the Sierra Club. The Sierra Club was founded by white men with enough income to frequently partake in outdoor recreation (Taylor, 2002). For several decades, the Sierra Club remained a white club with members who were very similar to each other in wealth and interests. Today, the organization is more diverse, though still disproportionately white with a higher average income than the general population (Taylor, 2014). Despite some increased diversity, the “club” in Sierra Club seems to still ring true today. One must be a part of an unspoken “club” in order to partake in authentic nature. To be a part of this club, one should have the desire and ability take excursions into remote, human-less areas, which will require a certain knowledge base, physical ability, income, social status, and collection of quality outdoor recreation gear.

Elitism, Exclusivity, and Environmental Justice

Scholars such as Di Chiro (1996), Taylor (2000; 2002), Bullard and Johnson (2000) and others have pointed to a long history of differences between the values of the environmental movement and the environmental justice movement. *Sierra's* discourse reflects many of the values in the larger environmental movement that environmental justice advocates have long found problematic. Specifically, this study's findings demonstrate that *Sierra* prioritizes authentic nature and employs exclusionary language in regards to authentic nature experiences. Content in *Sierra* could be more inclusive by including the voices of those who do not experience authentic nature through extreme activities and outdoor recreation, as there are other ways of experiencing nature that are more accessible to all groups of people.

Outdoor recreation content in *Sierra* tends to come from a masculinist perspective and favor able-bodied people. Most of the stories feature activities that could be categorized as masculine in nature. Lugg (2003) explained that outdoor recreation has traditionally been dominated by males and masculine forms of activity. There has long been an emphasis on physical performance and ability in outdoor recreation, which favors male abilities over female abilities (Lugg, 2003). Outdoor activities in *Sierra* are typically highly pro-active rather than passive, require physical strength and ability, and involve the accomplishment of some end goal, such as making it from one place to another via difficult rapids or climbing a mountain within a specific amount of time. Although women are certainly capable of such activities and many women participate in them, these are more masculine-oriented activities than other forms of outdoor activity and favor the male physiology. Lugg (2003) suggests that rather than favoring activities that involve evaluation of one's skill and ability, outdoor activities can be constructed in a way that focuses on just being present in nature. This would involve letting go of the goal of

accomplishment in outdoor activities, such as the kind of accomplishment and fear-conquering the author yearned for in “We’re Skiing That?” Instead, the experience of simply being in a natural setting can also be appreciated as a valid way to enjoy nature.

The outdoor experience could also become more inclusive of all types of bodies, rather than just able-bodied people. The recreationalists in *Sierra* were generally in great physical shape and did not appear to have any major physical disabilities. They performed activities that required physical exertion and ability, such as extreme skiing, kayaking, mountain biking, and backcountry hiking. Rather than solely featuring these kinds of recreationalists and activities, *Sierra* could feature stories written by individuals with a variety of physical abilities. These kinds of stories do not need to be used in a way that attempts to fulfill a quota on stories written by disabled people, however. They also should not be obviously marked as stories by disabled people. This is what Wendell (1997) terms a “discourse of overcoming” that focuses too heavily on how the individual overcomes their disability, rather than allowing the individual have their personal physical experience be normalized. A story about an outdoor activity written by a person in a wheelchair, for example, does not have to center around how disabled people are able to overcome their disabilities to experience the outdoors. Inclusive outdoor recreation stories could instead be a normalized part of the fabric that makes up *Sierra* and exist alongside stories written by able-bodied individuals.

The gendered and ableist narratives in *Sierra* are a piece of a larger “adventure culture” in outdoor recreation, a term used by Jaquette-Ray (2009) to describe the fixation on personal challenge and survival against nature in recreation. Jaquette-Ray (2009) argues that a long-held fascination with making nature the site of personal and physical transformation has created a relationship between environmental thought and ableism. Adventure culture equates getting

closer to nature to risking one's body in nature, which excludes disabled bodies, those without certain physical ability, and those who do not find fulfillment from extreme exertion and risk in nature. Adventure culture is an outgrowth of the idea of authentic nature, as it presumes that risking oneself in nature is the best way to return to the lost paradise that can only be found in authentic nature. There are other ways to appreciate nature, however, such as taking photographs of nature, or gardening. But these forms of activities are not given the same status as activities that fit into the adventure culture, and thus they are excluded from recreation, *Sierra*, and ultimately environmentalism.

Even if *Sierra*, the Sierra Club, and environmentalism more broadly were to move away from gendered and ableist notions of experiencing nature, the reliance on the concept of authentic nature would still need to be confronted. Otherwise, the dependence on authentic nature would simply be reproduced, even if it is being reproduced in a more inclusive environmental discourse. To go further, content in *Sierra* could lessen its dependence on the concept of authentic nature by valuing other kinds of spaces as well. It is possible that personal fulfillment can be found in an urban greenspace in addition to the wilderness. Stories could not only show how the environment can be experienced in different ways, they could also show how different kinds of environments can be experienced. This could possibly help the magazine and organization become more appealing to a broader base of people who are outside of the elite group of individuals to which the magazine currently appeals.

However, for *Sierra*, reconsidering its content may mean reconsidering its source of profit. It seems that *Sierra*, its elite readers, and *Sierra* advertisers are in a mutually beneficial relationship. *Sierra* supplies the content, advertisers supply the ads, and readers purchase the goods sold in the ads. It is possible that inclusive content is not as profitable as the content

currently dominating *Sierra*. *Sierra's* content relies upon adventure culture and the concept of authentic nature, so challenging this deeply held mindset in environmental thought could be too radical for many readers. This may also be why environmental and social justice cannot be fully embraced by the magazine and the Sierra Club. The magazine does not stand to lose advertisers and readers if they simply show support for environmental justice every now and then; in fact, this may be just enough to comfort some readers that *Sierra* cares about social justice before they move along to their regular content. Environmental justice by its very nature may not be as profitable as catering to the values and interests of an elite segment of society. However, by not even attempting to provide more inclusive content and embracing environmental justice, the profit and power structure in *Sierra* is never challenged and “business as usual” continues.

A Pattern, With a Few Exceptions

Sierra is mostly one shade of green. This shade of outdoorsy green can be symbolized by the muted forest green color of a \$229 Patagonia down jacket cleverly featured right after an adrenaline-fueled story about backcountry skiing. Outdoor experiences in authentic nature are central to the identity of the magazine and possibly to most Sierra Club members and *Sierra* subscribers. Stories of excursions into the wilderness are written by skilled outdoor enthusiasts, who foray into places that rarely encounter humans, which is exactly what makes them more exciting to the author. Each issue, even special issues focused on a singular topic (like two issues that focused on food and green universities, respectively), have several outdoor recreation stories woven throughout the magazine, which typically tell the story of one or two individuals trekking through remote areas.

Despite the monochrome outdoorsy green tone of *Sierra*, a different shade occasionally peeks through. These infrequent disruptions to the general theme of *Sierra* are never integrated

enough to move past the distinction of disruptions, and may actually serve to accentuate the otherwise consistent nature-based discourse of *Sierra*. For example, a piece by Michael Brune in the 2011 issue compares modern environmental activists to the eminent figure John Muir. One of these activists worked to draw attention to people being harmed by high formaldehyde levels in FEMA trailers distributed after Hurricanes Katrina and Rita. This story would run counter to many of the themes previously discussed. It celebrates an environmental activist who saw the environment as more than just nature and fought for a healthy environment for a disadvantaged group. The choice to showcase this activist demonstrates that *Sierra* does occasionally include environmental justice-oriented issues in their discourse, even in ways that do not presuppose a human-nature dichotomy and acknowledge a complex environment that human and non-human beings depend on alike.

Through each issue, there are other stories and features on environmental issues outside of outdoor recreation and nature preservation, but, they are highly likely to be related to fossil fuels or climate change. The theme of dirty fossil fuels and fighting climate change was apparent throughout each magazine. The majority of these articles contain this text at the end of the article: “This article was funded by the Sierra Club’s Beyond Coal campaign.” Rather than fossil fuel and climate change related stories being included in *Sierra* organically, they are included because the Beyond Coal campaign paid for them to be there.

The March/April 2015 issue is worth noting as an exception to the rule as well. This issue revolves around the topic of food and environmentalism. Titled “The Food Issue,” this issue approaches food and the environment comprehensively and holistically. It not only draws attention to animal welfare concerns in relation to food production techniques such as

Concentrated Animal Feeding Operations (CAFOs), it also explains how such troublesome techniques can impact humans and damage the environment.

This issue stands out because it was widely different from the other five issues and the general theme of *Sierra*. Perhaps this is why *Sierra* called out its difference from other issues by actually titling it “The Food Issue.” It is as if *Sierra* made sure to signal to readers that they were just stepping away from the norm for this one issue. This exemplifies the overall findings about the way *Sierra* constructs environmental discourse. When environmental issues are covered comprehensively or feature a social justice viewpoint, they are the exception to the rule and treated as such. Meanwhile, associations of the environment as nature and displays of authentic nature are interwoven into the discourse and contextual identity of *Sierra*.

Although different in several respects, these findings are evocative of Collins’s (1997) findings about uncomprehensive attempts made by businesses and organizations to create diverse workforces. After political pressures to diversify, Collins (1997) found that many organizations were simply placing black individuals as the directors of affirmative action programs or minority divisions, rather than fully integrating diversity into the organization and including diverse identities throughout the hierarchical structure. By featuring alternative environmental discourses occasionally and pointing them out, yet making outdoor recreation a consistent and identifying part of *Sierra*, it seems as though *Sierra* attempts to make a “quota” for covering such issues, rather than incorporating them consistently throughout each issue.

Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research

The current study examined themes within the environmental discourse of *Sierra* magazine. While this research may provide insight into this topic, it is unable to speak to how the magazine is actually being consumed and interpreted by readers. To address this limitation and

further contribute to this line of research, future studies could include the perspectives of Sierra Club members and/or *Sierra* readers. Quantitative and qualitative analysis of the interpretations of those who consume the magazine would be useful and further develop the present study.

Perspectives of producers of the magazine could also be examined in future studies. Collecting interview data from producers of the magazine, including editors and writers, could be insightful and give a greater explanation of how and why *Sierra* chooses its content. It is possible that producers of the magazine have quite different interpretations and frames about their content in relation to themes of authentic nature, the commodification of nature, elitism, and the place of environmental justice in the magazine.

There were a few unanswered questions that arose during the course of this study. For one, it was unknown if companies were paying to put product images and information in the magazine, or not. Occasionally, *Sierra* would feature products around a central theme, such as camping products or vegan soups. It would be important to know if these products were sponsored by outside advertisers, or if they were placed in the magazine in a more organic manner. It was also unknown if some writers were freelance writers or paid staff writers. It could be useful to better understand how writers are chosen to appear in the magazine and if there is any difference between content produced by freelance writers versus staff writers. Another unknown is many issues of the magazine go to *Sierra* members as compared to the newsstand. This consideration may be important, because it is unknown if *Sierra* is most concerned about catering to their core base of members or if it also has a larger audience in mind.

Future research on this topic could also compare mainstream environmental discourse, such as *Sierra*, to discourse produced by the environmental justice movement. While it was important for this study to look at how the most powerful environmental movement in the U.S.

constructs discourse on the environment, it would also be important to distinguish mainstream environmental discourse from that of the environmental justice movement. Finding environmental justice discourse that is comparable to mainstream discourse may be a challenge. But if that challenge were addressed, such research could expand knowledge on this topic and further differentiate the mainstream environmental movement's conceptualization of environment from the environmental justice movement's conceptualization of it.

In addition to research that considers environmental justice discourse, some research could be conducted that examines these themes in the larger context of the entire mainstream environmental movement. While the Sierra Club is a fitting representative of the mainstream movement, this research cannot be said to fully and accurately reflect other mainstream environmental organizations or the mainstream movement as a whole. Future research could examine other mainstream organizations in order to gain a clearer picture of how these themes and findings may, or may not, be present across the mainstream environmental movement.

There was also a political presence in *Sierra* that was not extensively covered in this study. Frequency counts of codes indicated that political content appeared regularly in *Sierra*. While it was observed that this political content was typically anti-Republican in nature, analysis in this area could be extended in future research. Questions remain about the motivation behind the inclusion of political content, how political content is received by readers, and how *Sierra's* political leanings fit in the larger context of the magazine as a whole and the Sierra Club.

There does appear to be a link between *Sierra's* prioritization of wilderness protection, its ideas about authentic nature, and the failure of the magazine to integrate environmental justice perspectives. One element of this finding was that authentic nature was used extensively for donation requests. Specifically, the use of attractive animal species in these requests related to

previous research on the tendency of the scientific community to value attractive species for the endangered animal status over others. This raises questions about how the scientific community may be favoring wilderness protection over environmental issues related to social justice and the health of communities. It may be the case that scientific research is more heavily invested in researching environmental impacts on natural spaces and wildlife, whereas research on the impact on human environments is sparser. Research could be conducted in this area to examine scientific literature on different types of environmental issues to better understand how such issues are valued and prioritized in the scientific community. A meta-analysis of scientific literature may be a useful way to approach this topic.

A final limitation is this study's exclusive focus on hard copy, print editions of *Sierra*. Examining the print edition of *Sierra* magazine was an appropriate way to answer the research questions of this study and better understand the publication and the Sierra Club in relation to the broader themes and concepts of this study. However, it only gives insight into the content itself, not how it is *received* by readers. *Sierra* is also published online and provides users the ability to share their stories on their social media accounts. There is also a top trending section online where stories are ranked according to popularity. Examining how users are interacting with the magazine online could show what kinds of topics and stories users prioritize and find most interesting. It would also give greater insight into how the Sierra Club extends its environmental discourse to an online space.

Sierra Online

To gain an introductory understanding of how *Sierra* content may be received by readers, a brief analysis was performed which examined "Most Popular" content on *Sierra's* online website. Before concluding, the results of this analysis will be briefly discussed.

The “Most Popular” content is a list of the ten most popular stories on the website for the day. It changes somewhat each day, but many stories remain on the list for several days or longer. The “Most Popular” list of stories was logged over a period of seven days from February 22 to February 28, 2017. These stories were then approached with the same methodology as the print magazines. The list of codes developed through the analysis of the print magazines was used to code these stories. Table 3 shows the results of this coding. Some codes were not relevant to this content because stories are not advertisements or donation requests, so these codes were left out of the table. Some codes were counted more than once for the same story because a story was popular on more days than one. Also, a new code was added while analyzing this content, because a certain type of story continually appeared. This code relates to animal and wildlife content. The species in the animal and wildlife stories were always examples of the “attractive species” described by Small (2011). For example, one story was titled “8 Interspecies Animal Relationships Prove That Love Is All You Need” and featured unlikely animal pairs, such as a gorilla and kittens.

Table 3. Sierra online code frequencies.

Code	Frequency of Appearance
Overtly Political	24
Animal/Wildlife	22
Fossil fuel/climate change	12
Authentic nature	10
Environmentalism Lifestyle	10
Nature-Based Schema	6
Anti-Nature-Based Schema	6
Upper class/upper-middle class	5
Outdoor recreation	3
Human-Nature Dichotomy	3
Environmental Justice	3
Anti-Human-Nature Dichotomy	0

One of the main findings: outdoor recreation content only appeared in one story in the popular category, despite its frequency in print. One reason for this may be that there seems to be less outdoor recreation content on the website than in the magazine in general. However, another reason may be that *Sierra* readers are not as interested in outdoor recreation content as the magazine's content would lead one to believe. Another consideration that must be taken is that *Sierra* online is accessible to anyone, whereas the print version is available only to subscribers. Further research would need to be conducted to determine if there are any differences between print subscribers and online readers in how they value outdoor recreation content.

Although readers may not be heavily interested in outdoor recreation stories online, they are certainly interested in animal and wildlife stories. These kinds of stories were continually apparent and would often remain in the popular category for several days. This may indicate that readers do have a preference for wildlife and wilderness protection. This could explain why *Sierra* and the Sierra Club use wildlife so extensively in donation requests. It may also give insight into why the Sierra Club tends to give heavy support for wilderness and wildlife conservation, as it does reflect the values of its supporters.

Political stories comprise the most popular content. This may indicate that readers are interested in environmental content that uses political interpretations of environmental issues. Some of the content seemed to indicate that politics is the best way to solve environmental problems. For instance, the story "Ready to Join the Resistance? Here Are 3 Online Tools to Help You Organize," encourages readers to use an online program called "Swing Left" that shows activists where swing districts are located. The goal is to get activists into swing districts in order to give the House of Representatives back to Democrats in the 2018 election. These findings are interesting, because it seems that readers heavily rely on politics as a means to

achieve their environmental goals. Although politics are influential in determining environmental policy, it is not necessarily the case that electing Democrats is a sure-fire way to save the environment. This has especially been the case for environmental justice, as environmental justice has traditionally not enjoyed significant, effectual political action towards its aims, even during Democratic administrations (Konisky, 2015). These data may show the differences between the mainstream environmental movement, which relies on institutional means to achieve its aims, and the environmental justice movement, which feels institutions are a part of the problem. It is important to note, however, that these data were collected soon after a presidential election. Nearly all of the political content revolved around incoming President Trump, his cabinet, and/or the majority Republican Congress. Thus, this content could be skewed due to the contentious political climate at the time. Further research over longer periods of time would be needed to understand the priority of political content for readers.

It is still unclear how these stories become a part of the “Most Popular” category. For one, it is unknown if they are the most clicked upon stories, most shared, or a combination of different measurements. Also, it is unclear why some of these stories are on the popular list. For some, it may be a simple explanation – a larger number of people were interested in them and enjoyed reading them. Other stories, however, may have garnered more traction because they are more controversial. This does not necessarily mean that they were well-liked by readers or reflect reader preferences. For example, “Toward a Moral Case for Meat Eating” makes the argument that eating meat can have a moral and ethical backing. At the bottom of the article, the top comments from Facebook users were extremely angry about the content of this article. It may be that this article was more popular because it was more controversial and more people clicked on it because they did not agree with it, not because it accurately reflects *Sierra* readers. More

research be performed to examine Facebook comments in addition to popular articles to gain a better sense of how readers receive different kinds of content.

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION

This study is important as little research on the discourse of mainstream environmental organizations has been conducted, particularly with a critical method. The field of mass media communication can benefit from the findings of this research as this study attempted to fill several gaps in the literature and contribute to knowledge on environmental discourse. The environmental movement could also benefit from this critical examination of the topic, as it attempted to call into question long-held ways of communicating about the environment and its associated problems and solutions. This could help the movement to advance away from the assumption that the natural sphere must be prioritized at all costs, even above human health and well-being.

On one hand, the Sierra Club identifies as an organization aiming to “enlist humanity to protect and restore the quality of the natural and human environment,” but on the other hand, its magazine implies that nature preservation is equivalent to environmentalism and perpetuates the idea that authentic nature is the ultimate environment. Moving forward, it may be necessary for the Sierra Club to confront the ideological and philosophical contradictions in its organization and publications. What does the Sierra Club want to be – an environmental organization with interest in outdoor recreation and nature preservation, or a nature preservation and outdoor recreation organization with interest in environmentalism? Without assuming a false choice between these two alternatives, the question does need to be asked because the Sierra Club describes itself as an environmental organization, not a nature preservation or recreation organization. The motto implies that it strives to protect the environment for all, not just those

who primarily value the environment for its recreational utility and have enough wealth to generally be shielded from substantial environmental impacts to their health and wellbeing. As the magazine and the organization move forward, perhaps a greater range of environmental issues can be discursively presented in a more holistic manner, where authentic nature is not so embedded into the identity of the magazine and its discourse.

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