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THE ALASKA SPORTSMAN

Including Iron Dogs and Sled Dogs

Say Goodbye

I recently watched a TV program entitled "Say Goodbye," an in-depth report on the plight of various animals which are facing extinction at the hand of man. It obviously was propaganda intended to kindle the fires for conservation and that's fine.

"But the part covering polar bear hunting was pretty terrible. The hunt was staged by helicopter. When the big bear was sighted, the helicopter flew low so that the down-draft terrified the bear—he plunged desperately into the water and out onto the floes time and again, this way and that, looking distraught, not knowing what he was doing. The helicopter landed and hunter with guide shot the bear. The picture then showed the bear fatally wounded and struggling in distress.

"As if this were not enough, the picture then repeated the performance, this time with a huge mother bear with two beautiful cubs. They shot her and showed a close-up of her head in dying agony while the cubs at a little distance looked on wistfully, not knowing what it was all about and giving the impression that they were left to their fate.

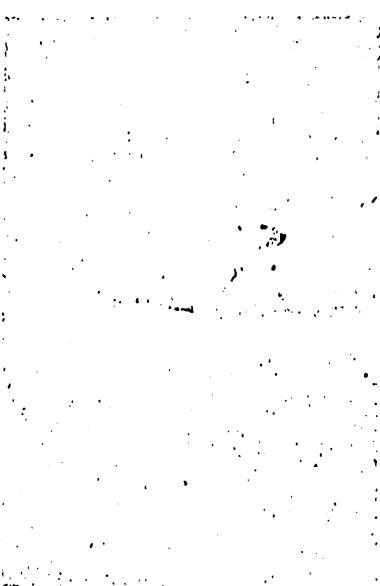
"There was the definite impression and certainty that this particular cold-blooded slaughter was staged purposely for publicity and propaganda. I am sure the Alaska game laws are designed to prevent any such situation and destruction in such a manner."

Richard Bullock
Fitchburg, Massachusetts

Mr. Bullock's letter was one of many received by ALASKA commenting on the polar bear scenes in "Say Goodbye" which was nationally televised by NBC in the southern 48 states in early January and in Alaska several weeks later. Alaska's Governor William A. Egan and the Alaska Department of Fish and Game also received more than 100 letters about the polar bear scenes in "Say Goodbye."

Alaskans were amazed to hear about the polar bear scene because Alaska's game regulations prohibit taking game "by the use of helicopter or rotorcraft, in any manner, including the transportation of game, hunters, or hunting gear." Further, polar bear regulations have long prohibited the taking of cubs or females accompanied by cubs.

At first word, game officials decided the illegal helicopter hunt for illegal polar bears must have taken place somewhere other than in Alaska. The Department of Fish and Game then obtained a copy of the film from NBC and the mystery was solved.



Alaska Dept. of Fish & Game

The pitiful and brutal polar bear scenes were largely the result of clever editing and additions to the sound track.

Lee Miller, an employee of the Game Division of the Alaska Department, had provided the producer of "Say Goodbye" some film of his work in capturing and marking polar bears for scientific study. Helicopters and tranquilizer dart guns were used to capture the wild bears. Miller's film showed a tranquilized sow bear weaving her head up and down, as such bears sometimes do ("a closeup of her head in dying agony" in Mr. Bullock's letter). Miller's film also showed the two cubs referred to in Mr. Bullock's letter. Miller, of course, fastened tags to the immobilized bear, and removed a tooth so he could determine its age. He measured her, and weighed her in a sling lifted by the helicopter. He took a milk sample, injected dye into her blood, fastened a collar around her neck, and painted a large number on her side. He also cowered with the two cubs.

These scenes, of course, were not seen in "Say Goodbye."

One polar bear scene that appeared in "Say Goodbye" was apparently a genuine hunting event—except that in sequence it appeared immediately after the aerial photos taken from a helicopter of a frantically fleeing bear. While the hunter was shooting, the sound track carried the swishing noise of a slowing helicopter rotor, giving the impression that the hunter and guide had just stepped from the machine.

In early February, Dr. Boyd Skille, Anchorage, was reported to be planning to file suit against NBC, narrator Rod McKuen, and others (he and others did so in mid-February just before polar bear) responsible for production of the film. He said that part of the polar bear footage was some that he took during a polar bear hunt at Point Hope in 1964. Dr. Skille claims his legitimate hunting film was interspersed with Alaska Department of Fish and Game film in such a way that it gave the impression that a helicopter was used to chase down and shoot a mother polar bear in front of her two cubs.

According to Dr. Skille he loaned the film to a local photographer for repair, and suddenly it appeared on the widely-publicized "Say Goodbye."

The sound track sounds like it included pitiful moans from both of the bears—the one that was actually shot, and the tranquilized animal. What sounded to us like two rifle shots were on the sound track with the genuine hunting scene, and one on the track just prior to the closeup scene of the head-weaving, tranquilized sow.

There was virtually no narration during the polar bear scenes, although at the beginning of the film, the narrator, who, according to the credits, was Rod McKuen, said that the film to follow was "beautiful and true" and "beautiful and bloody."

Alaska's legislators, in session at the time, viewed the film, as did members of Alaska's Attorney General's staff. Careful study of the film, along with Lee Miller's film, quickly revealed that not all was as it appeared to be although it was also apparent that no game regulations had been broken.

The overall message of "Say Goodbye" was admirable. It showed some species of wildlife that are truly endangered and in some cases it explained why. It showed other species that are not in danger, without saying as much, implying that they too were endangered by man. It did not show species of wildlife that have benefited from the changes man has made in the environment, of which there is a good number.

The use of film taken during scientific, conservation-oriented work, and film taken during a legal hunt, to produce a distorted picture of polar bear hunting was unfair, unethical, and unnecessary.

Deputy Commissioner Ben Hilliker, of Alaska's Department of Fish and Game commented:

"There was no need to portray this message with the obviously misleading portions of 'Say Goodbye.' The story of our environmental decline and our problems with endangered wildlife is strong enough without the use of film editing, splicing, and other techniques."

Jim Rarden