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Charles Wolf Drimal
The University of Montana

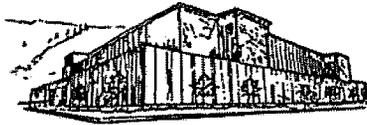
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CAUGHT IN THE HEADLIGHTS:
REFLECTIONS FROM THE MAKING OF A DOCUMENTARY FILM
THAT EXPLORES THE CONFLICTS BETWEEN WILDLIFE
AND OUR AUTOMOBILE CULTURE

by

Charles Wolf Drimal

B.S. Dartmouth College, New Hampshire. 2000

presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements

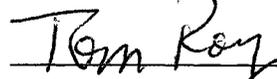
for the degree of

Masters of Science

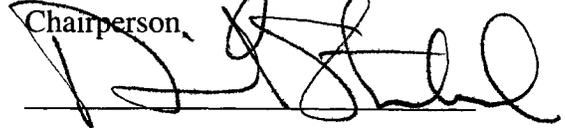
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December 2005

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Chairperson,



Dean, Graduate School

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Caught In the Headlights: Reflections from the Making of a Documentary Film that Explores the Conflicts Between Wildlife and Our Automobile Culture

Chairperson: Tom Roy *TR*

Roadkill is one of the most visible forms of human destruction on the natural landscape. The National Humane Society estimates that one million vertebrates are killed by automobiles on the road each day in the United States. This number continues to increase as speed limits increase, more roads are paved, and more vehicles are driven each day. The documentary film that Margot Higgins and I have produced, entitled "Caught In the Headlights" explores people's reflections and responses to this growing conflict on our roads. This short reflective piece focuses on what I have learned from the process of filming, researching, and studying this subject matter. This is not a written summary of the film but rather a personal meditation on the topic of roadkill.

One of the underlying problems concerning roadkill is the reality that many people do not perceive the road as being part of a greater landscape. People fail to consider the reality that our driving behavior on roads effects wildlife on and around these same roads. The first necessary step to take in mitigating the conflict between wildlife and our automobile culture is to raise awareness about the various levels of destruction generated by automobiles. "Caught In the Headlights" is an attempt to begin to expose the patterns of our social behavior in a new, clearer light. The film plays a role in helping identify patterns such as our society's psychological addiction to getting in a vehicle and driving, as well as our psychological addiction to speed. I argue that the way in which our society reflects upon and responds to the subject of roadkill can be viewed as a lens into our greater relationship to the environment. The problem with roadkill is most directly addressed as a human social behavioral issue. This in itself is problematic due to the fact that reducing roadkill may require behavioral change at an inconvenience to current social norms. I conclude by discussing how our automobile culture creates a societal disconnection to place which further explains our apathy to roadkill.

Roadkill is one of the most visible forms of human destruction on the natural landscape. Most Americans, including myself, have had the direct experience of hitting an animal with their vehicle. The last time I am aware of participating in this unintentional act of violence, I was driving the winding roads of the western Sierra Nevada foothills through native black oak and manzanita. Coming around a blind corner at 25 miles per hour, driving the speed limit no less, a family of acorn woodpeckers flew right across my field of view. Without a second to react, windshield hit wing and I became a witness to the end of one hapless avian creature.

This story is not uncommon. From coast to coast, on the plains, deserts, and in the forests and mountains, automobile collisions with wildlife are ubiquitous. According to the National Humane Society, one million vertebrates are killed by automobiles on the road each day in the United States at a rate of one death every 11.5 seconds. This number appears to be increasing perpetually as speed limits increase, more roads are paved, and more vehicles are driven each day. Even within one year's time, roadkill numbers have increased at a study site near Bozeman Pass, Montana. There, roadkill increased from 130 in 2001 to 179 animal carcasses in 2002. In order to successfully cross over Interstate-90 in this area, large mammals have to navigate their way between over 8,000 vehicles per day on average. As human population and automobile use continue to increase in the northern Rockies, we are likely to see a continued climb in automobile-wildlife collisions as well. The documentary film that Margot Higgins and I have produced, entitled "Caught In the Headlights" is an attempt to explore people's reflections and responses to this growing conflict on our roads. For the purpose of this short reflective piece I will focus my attention on what I have learned from the process of

filming, researching, and studying this subject matter. This is not a written summary of our film but rather an opportunity to share my own personal thoughts on a topic that no road less traveled can seem to escape.

I believe that one of the underlying problems with the subject of roadkill is the reality that many people do not perceive the road as being part of a greater landscape that consists of myriad micro and macro habitats for all walks of life, both human and wildlife alike. Several of the characters in our film have commented on the idea that people get in their vehicles and expect the road to be a pathway without any hindrances or obstructions—a clear passage from “point a” to “point b.” It seems to be a common understanding that Department of Transportation employees post signs when moose, deer, elk, or occasionally bear inhabit an area. But it is a general misunderstanding that these animals travel the woods, mountains, meadows, and wetlands exclusively, and NOT, however, the roads. Too often people fail to consider the notion that the roads that we have built encroach upon the forests, meadows, and valleys that wildlife inhabit. Due to the roads that our society has built, native habitat for wildlife has been fragmented. The result is that animals are forced to cross over a network of pavement with the danger of metal objects hitting them at 35 to 75 miles per hour. It is as if our society has lost a sense of sharing a place with a non-human, yet biotic species. There appears to be a collective understanding in our society that the roads that we have built, widened, and paved, belong to the human realm, and any non-human being that gets in the way does not belong, and furthermore, risks death.

The first step that seems a necessity to take in mitigating the conflict that presently exists between wildlife and our automobile culture is to raise awareness about

the various levels of destruction generated by automobiles. This, like many social-environmental issues, unfortunately, is easier said than done. While making this film, we asked all of our characters to comment on the topic of whether or not our society is willing to reflect upon the consequences of our automobile culture. It was interesting for me to note that while all characters in the film have some connection to the subject matter of roadkill, most of our characters did not express an optimistic vision for societal change in the future. This begs me to ask the question, why.

The root of the problem appears much more complex than just dealing with roadkill. Our film is an attempt to begin to expose the patterns of our social behavior in a new, clearer light. Hopefully “Caught In the Headlights” plays a role in helping us identify patterns such as the psychological addictions to getting in a vehicle and driving, as well as our psychological addiction to *speed* (beating time by driving). I call these behaviors “addictions” because they are habits so deeply engrained in our psyche that we feel like they are a necessity that we can not live without, and when we are inconveniently cut off from the use of these vehicles, it appears as though our world has fallen apart. It almost seems odd, in this day and age, to choose to walk or ride a bicycle as a primary form of transportation over driving an automobile. To many it is a major hassle.

The truth is that we live in the age of the automobile paradigm. Most of our infrastructure is built on a “drive an automobile to get there” model. Never mind the fact that this type of behavior encourages air pollution, an increase of carbon dioxide and other green house gasses, suburban sprawl, absence of human to human communication while commuting, loss of connection with the natural world that (also) inhabits a place,

road-rage and other commuter anger, hatred, misery and suffering, potentially obesity, certainly lethargy, dependence on foreign oil, arguably war to ensure our continued access to foreign oil, and furthermore, this automobile paradigm is the direct cause of the inexhaustible death toll of both humans and wildlife on the road. Should we just passively accept this as a consequence of our convenient automobile culture and not question these social and environmental repercussions?

One of the difficulties here lies in the fact that creating awareness of the cost of our actions instills a sense of responsibility that demands we do something about it. We might need to actually change our social behavior, and that, as I mentioned above, is inconvenient. On this note I would like to return to a message that I hope is implicit throughout the presentation of our film. The way in which our society reflects upon and responds to the subject of roadkill can be viewed as a lens into our greater relationship to the environment. When the environment is beautiful, clean, and *convenient* for us to experience and enjoy, we deem this good and we are happy with our selves and our place on the earth. When our current social behavior creates detrimental repercussions on the environment that might encourage us to change our behavior at an *inconvenience*, we tend to ignore the root of the issues. Examples of this are air pollution, water pollution, deforestation, habitat destruction (i.e. wetlands, arctic and Antarctic ice fields), and roadkill, to name a few. Instead of addressing the roots of these problems which all point to a need for social-behavioral change, we seek to assuage the problems through technological improvements. In the case of roadkill we are beginning to use wildlife fencing, culverts, wildlife sensory detection systems (just beginning to be experimented with in the United States), underpasses, and overpasses. I am not suggesting that these

are unworthy improvements; they are necessary. But how are they much different than encouraging people to buy hybrids so that they can drive more often and not worry about the price of gasoline or the emissions of greenhouse gasses. These are technological fixes, not behavioral changes. I believe that if we really want to see a mitigation of roadkill we will need to acknowledge the issue as a social behavioral problem and challenge our society to redefine how, when, and why we use our automobiles. We will not be able to properly implement positive change without accurately acknowledging the root of this problem.

Lastly, I would like to comment on the topic of our societal disconnection to place. I had hoped that this subject would be spoken to through the course of our interview process but due to the style of our character driven film, as film makers we did not find it appropriate to probe the subject, and furthermore, the topic did not arise on its own. Nevertheless, it is my belief that the automobile has changed the way we travel through, relate to, understand, appreciate, connect to, and learn from the environment on which we live. For millennia human beings have been a bipedal species. In the context of our time on this planet that has changed overnight. As we have evolved from a species that uses bipedal locomotion as a primary source of travel to a society that uses the automobile as a primary source of transportation we have changed the speed in which we travel through a place from roughly 2-3 miles per hour, depending on the terrain, to 25-75 miles per hour, depending on the state or federal speed limit posted. What's more, the metal boxes that we place ourselves in (also known as cars), unintentionally, though directly, separate ourselves from seeing the new ice on the river in November, the first songbirds of early March, the spring berries of May, not to mention our fellow human

community members with whom we fail to exchange conversation with due to the anti-social nature of the automobile. This then extends to our relationship with both living and dead animals on the side of the road: we rarely acknowledge their place in the ecosystem from the viewpoint of our car.

The common perception that our society currently holds is that at 70 miles per hour it seems difficult, if not ridiculous, to stop and admire a beautiful being, or in times of loss, pay our respects to the deceased. There is a busyness and an insatiable appetite for speed engrained in our society that is truly blinding us from seeing the consequences of our automobile culture. I believe that one message that “Caught In the Headlights” makes clear is that we must begin by acknowledging that a problem exists before we can move on to searching for long lasting solutions.