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Florida Econography and the Ugly Cuteness of Econs¹

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In Sidney I. Dobrin and Sean Morey's collection *Ecosee*, Morey (2009) introduces the term "econ" as a way of taxonomizing visual tropes that appear within visual environmental rhetoric. The econ—environmental icon—taxonomizes a way of identifying and theorizing those environmental images that become iconic across mass audiences and symbolic of environmental issues and situations beyond any econ's individual species concerns. The state of Florida heavily relies upon potential econs to promote its tourist industry, its chief economic resource, a resource that depends

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heavily on environmental resources that these tourists come to visit. While, to be sure, tourists may only come to Florida to visit Disney, the Kennedy Space Center, or attend sporting events, most visitors, at some point, venture into the "Real Florida" including its beaches, oceans, springs, marshes, hammocks, reefs, flats, bays, estuaries, lagoons, caves, forests, and other kinds of environments. Within these environments, many tourists also visit Florida to encounter—in a variety of ways—the wildlife of the Real Florida. This wildlife includes alligators, dolphins, fish, birds, corals, and other fauna and flora, groups that may have representative econs that are used in Florida's promotion of its economy and ecologies.

In this article, I pursue two related and interconnected goals. First, I begin with a definition of "econ" and an initial cataloging of econs relative to Florida, or at least how Floridians

and residents from other parts of the state typically view iconic Florida wildlife and how they relate to these icons. In other words, how does Florida become written by and through its icons, and how do those icons come to be written in the first place (how does a nonhuman animal become icon)? However, I then want to question the practice and enterprise of creating icons—iconography—itsself. Doing so obviously has broader implications that extend beyond Florida's current borders and offers an ethical insight into the good and ill that comes from iconography.

Global Icons

As a control against which to compare Florida icons, the following section briefly discusses some characteristics of icons that have broader audience. In terms of national appeal, the bald eagle (*Haliaeetus leucocephalus*) has become iconic for a variety of reasons. First, the bird had already achieved an iconic status through its symbolic role as the American national bird. Thus, the bald eagle's iconic status is bolstered by appearing on buildings, coins, stamps, flags, logos,

and other governmental and nongovernmental texts. The bald eagle's rise as an environmental symbol mostly arose during the mid-twentieth century as its population declined, primarily from eagles consuming DDT that was biomagnified through the food chain, leading to sterility. Once DDT was banned in 1972, the population rebounded. Although the bald eagle was removed from the endangered species list in 1995, and de-listed as threatened in 2007, it still persists as an icon because of its dual symbol as an already-established icon and as a success story for population rebuilding efforts.

Established as an icon, the bald eagle can be used within environmental arguments, on many sides. In 2004, the non-profit advocacy group Americans for Balanced Energy Choices (ABEC) sponsored a 30-second television ad featuring the bald eagle flying through a smog-filled sky. Overlaid with the subtitle "1970," the eagle soars through the polluted sky, lands, hacks on the dirty air, and proclaims "Not a good day for flying."

Cut to present day 2004 with fresh air and clear skies. What could have made such a dramatic difference in the air quality? A voiceover explains that “Thanks in part to clean coal technologies, our air quality has been improving. And by 2015 emissions from coal-based power plants will be 75 percent less than they were in 1970” (Mieszkowski 2004)—thanks in part to clean coal, but with no thanks to the efforts of the Environmental Protection Agency and other government-run environmental regulatory agencies developed post-1970. The nested symbolism of both “nature” and “America” allows this energy company to portray itself as both environmental and patriotic, important given that in 2004 the U.S. had recently begun a new war in an oil-rich land coupled with post-9/11 sensitivities to appearing patriotic. As the already-icon turned into econ through man-made population reduction and increase, the eagle becomes a conduit through which an energy company can produce the “image” of its concern about America and the American environment. Without broad appeal or its

environmental back story, the bald eagle would not have served as an effective econ, and probably wouldn’t be one at all.

On a larger scale, the giant panda (*Ailuropoda melanoleuca*) has become a worldwide econ. The animal is considered endangered due to habitat loss and poaching, and because it has the characteristics of a cute charismatic megafauna, its econ has garnered widespread appeal. Giant pandas became popular zoo acquisitions and were some of the first cultural exchanges between the U.S. and the People’s Republic of China, loans that resulted in the term “Panda diplomacy.” The giant panda became a broader symbol of good will as China began to loan pandas to other countries as well. However, the panda’s popularity most likely benefited not from the exchange of living pandas, but from the circulation of its image through its use as the logo and face of the World Wildlife Fund. Painted by the ornithologist Peter Scott, and partly chosen because its colors—black and white—can be printed on a variety of print

stock and media, the logo has elevated the panda as an icon beyond its representation in the WWF logo alone, a logo that Nigel Williams (2006) offers “has promoted the animal to an icon of conservation efforts,” efforts that have led the WWF to become “the largest privately financed international conservation organisation in the world, with national affiliates in more than 30 countries and a global membership of more than 5 million with nearly 1.2 million in the US alone” (R436-R437). The panda has become the icon par excellence, “the international symbol of conservation” (Williams 2006, R436). Despite its small and shrinking habitat in a remote region of China, the giant panda has dually become an environmental and political symbol, an icon that is recognized as an eco-political image by much of the world.

Florida Econs

What, then, does it take to be a Florida icon? Like the description provided in *Ecosee* and in the examples above, icons generally become symbolic and representative of larger movements than just their

particular plight (generally related to their threatened or endangered status regarding extinction). These movements usually do not involve popular cultural or entertainment uses, although, depending on the motivation for selecting an animal or plant, there’s no particular reason why this cannot be the case (as explored below). Thus, an animal such as the sailfin (*Istiophorus platypterus*) is very important to Florida’s economy and identity—it is the state saltwater fish; however, the fish does not represent any movement to protect its own conservation since it’s not threatened, much less become iconic for larger interspecies conservation efforts. While a fish species such as the Atlantic blue marlin (*Makaira nigricans*) is threatened, mainly due to longline bycatch, and serves as the mascot for the Florida Marlins professional baseball team, the marlin does not also stand-in for the plight of other fauna or flora. We can’t properly call any of these species icons, although they could become icons if circumstances change.

As of January, 2013, the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (2013) lists 133 total animal species as threatened or endangered in the state of Florida. Some of these species, such as the Stock Island tree snail (*Orthalicus reses reses*), will most likely never spur a large environmental conservation movement, and thus never be icons, at least not on a scale that extends beyond the Florida Keys. One might classify such animal representations as microicons developed for local environmental concerns, but they would not become representative of other conservation movements as the giant panda has. Toward exploring Florida icons that might (or already do) expand beyond state concerns, the following list explores some possible Florida icons selected mostly according to the breadth and popularity of their distribution and their tie to environmental status and use. As indicated above, the latter requires both that its own species be threatened or endangered and that it has started to become symbolic for wider-spread environmental awareness. Of course, this list is

partial, speculative, somewhat arbitrary, and you might have others you would add to it. It is also an anti-list of sorts, as I argue that many species in Florida have not reached iconic status.

Brown Pelican

Some professional sports organizations have adopted endangered or locally important species for their mascots. For instance, in 2013 the professional National Basketball Association (NBA) team in New Orleans selected the Brown pelican (*Pelecanus occidentalis*). Unbeknownst to most citizens in other states—many of whom were incredulous at such a choice—the Brown pelican is actually an important animal to the local community. Not only is it the state bird of Louisiana, but the Brown pelican “has become identified with efforts to restore Louisiana's coast, which has been damaged extensively by the 2010 BP oil spill and erosion from Katrina and other storms. Images of the pelicans covered with oil were plentiful after the oil spill” (Associated Press 2013). So although

the Brown pelican hasn't reached broader economic appeal, it has moved in that direction since part of its attraction to the New Orleans NBA team was this environmental aspect. How the New Orleans Pelicans continue to use this mascot to advance environmental projects and goals remains to be seen, as the mascot choice may be just a token gesture toward the effects of the BP Oil Spill on New Orleans and Louisiana communities. But the Brown pelican was selected over the other options, "Brass" and "Krewe," which only speak to the local jazz and mardi gras scenes, respectively, and don't touch on an environmental aspect. As Alejandro De Los Rios (2012), writes:

Pelicans may strike some as a bland or even timid choice, but when you consider how the name Pelicans allows the team to form a direct bond with the city and state it represents while also allowing for it to establish its own identity as a brand, you realize it's actually the best choice.... If the team were named Brass or Krewe, it would share the same thought-space as the more distinctive and much older traditions of New Orleans. As the Pelicans, New Orleans would have the

only team name that is also the state bird and would be the only franchise in the NFL, NBA or MLB whose mascot also appears on the state flag. What more could you ask for as a representative for Louisiana on the global stage?

And though it seems counter intuitive, there's actually some exciting marketing potential with the New Orleans Pelicans. Already, there are a few fan-made logo concepts floating around that look pretty cool and the bird itself has proven to be a resilient and apt mascot for all of Louisiana. Even when you consider the possibility that snarky website will jump to showing pictures of oil-covered Pelicans when the team loses, the downside isn't that bad. After all, anyone making the lazy connection to the oil spill will be, intentionally or not, reminding themselves and whoever is listening of an environmental disaster that will affect us for decades to come and should not be forgotten. The name Pelicans could potentially become the face of rebuilding Louisiana's coastline and, as the years go by and the BP oil spill recedes into distant memory, people will hopefully associate the birds more with recovery and what will hopefully be a thriving Louisiana wildlife

and a successful basketball franchise.

If the connection between the pelican and the BP Oil Spill is a “lazy” one, then we might concur that the connection between species and environmental issue is already strong and ready-made, ushering the pelican to Louisianan econ status. As a Florida econ, however, the Brown pelican doesn’t quite fit, despite the fact that Pelican Island, located in Florida’s Indian River Lagoon system, was declared the first National Wildlife Refuge by Theodore Roosevelt in part because of the Brown pelican rookery that was threatened by locals seeking plumes for fashion, which “at one point...were worth more than gold” (“Pelican Island History” 2009). While the Brown pelican is certainly native to Florida, has its own history with environmental protection in the state, and could be tangentially tied to Florida’s more limited exposure to the BP Oil Spill, such a connection has not been made.

Florida Panther

Sticking with professional sports teams, the Florida panther (*Puma*

concolor coryi or *Puma concolor cougar*: the exact taxonomy is in question) has become the official mascot of the Florida Panther’s, one of two Florida-based professional hockey teams that play within the National Hockey League (NHL). Given the lack of natural ice within the state of Florida, the use of the Florida panther seems somewhat fitting for the hockey team given that both are extremely rare (only about 100-160 Florida panthers are alive in the wild as of 2011). The Florida panther is a subspecies of the cougar, and represents the only cougar population in the eastern U.S. Unlike the Brown pelican, whose range extends throughout multiple states, the Florida panther’s geographic range is limited to the state of Florida, making it a stronger candidate as a Florida econ.

Similar to the New Orleans Pelicans mascot, the Florida Panther’s mascot choice was open to public voting, with the Panther being the most popular option. However, it’s not clear if this choice was due to the fact that Panthers inhabited the nearby Everglades, or for other reasons. For

instance, while then team owner Wayne Huizenga purportedly wanted to bring attention to the endangered Florida panther, then team president Bill Torrey liked the logo choice because the panther “is the quickest striking of all cats. Hopefully, that's how we will be on the ice” (Peltz 2013). However, the organization did gesture toward Florida panther conservation in a more economic way. Huizenga made an initial donation of \$50,000 to the Save the Panthers Foundation once the official logos were unveiled and also stated that, with each goal save made by a Panthers’ goalie on home ice, the organization would donate money to help spread awareness about the danger the Florida panther faces (Joseph 1993).

The Florida panther was voted the state animal of Florida in 1982 (by students throughout the state) and is available as a Florida state license plate option, but otherwise lacks the kind of economic representation that other animals receive by the state. The Florida panther is hardly used to represent anything else, whether

larger environmental issues or economic interests. What the panther does have going for it, unlike the Miami Dolphin’s mascot, the bottlenose dolphin (*Tursiops truncatus*), is that it’s an animal indigenous to Florida with an endangered status. However, the Florida panther hasn’t vaulted into a well-used environmental icon, most likely for a few reasons. While its uniqueness to Florida satisfies the residency requirement for a Florida icon, its rather generic phenotypic appearance makes it look similar to other species of cougars which works against its ability to represent larger-scale environmental issues. Furthermore, it hardly represents awareness of the endangered ecosystem, the Florida Everglades, in which it inhabits. While the Florida panther could be said to be a local icon, and even garners popular support toward its own conservation, this support hardly extends into a larger environmental consciousness. We could also say that rather than draw attention to the plight of the Florida panther, Huizenga has overshadowed it by commercializing it

into professional sports franchise, circulating the environmental image across the country, but not the environmental message.

American Alligator

Although the American Alligator (*Alligator mississippiensis*) is certainly an iconic animal, and often an icon of ecotourism (an attraction for airboat tours in the Everglades or the St. Augustine Alligator Farm Zoological Park, for instance), a few caveats limit its identification as a Florida econ. First, like the Brown pelican, the American alligator dwells in a range broader than just Florida; even though the alligator is the state's official reptile and the mascot for Florida's flagship university—spawning a "Gator Nation" of *Homo sapiens*—its species name is, after all, *mississippiensis*, and is also the state reptile of Louisiana and Mississippi.

In 1967, the American alligator was placed on the endangered species list as its numbers were significantly depleted through hunting and habitat loss. However, the population quickly rebounded (or was originally

underestimated), and in 1970 was designated Threatened by Similarity of Appearance through parts of Florida, Georgia, and Louisiana, and then throughout its range in 1987. Given this interstate regulation of the American alligator, the environmental problem was a regional problem that included Florida, but did not begin within and transcend Florida. And even within the state of Florida, the perception of the American alligator is regional, serving as a mascot and ecotourism attraction to some, but also as a predictable and routine segment on nightly local news programs as alligators regularly wind up in residential and community swimming pools.

We cannot faithfully identify the American alligator as a Florida econ because of this expanded range and lack of symbolic cohesion. The American alligator might also suffer from its position as an apex predator. While the bald eagle predaes as well, it hasn't been known to attack humans. In addition, although the bald eagle continues to be an econ even though it is no longer considered

endangered, the alligator may now be legally killed and traded (with proper permitting), and so no longer seems to need any significant conservation protection. This begs the question, does an animal need to be currently endangered for economic status to be conferred? Does an econ have a tenure requirement in order to prove it can last, or can an econ phase in and out of this categorical existence? Since econ, as I've defined it, is simply a category based on accidents, the answer seems to be yes, for like any writing situation, econography is fluid and adapts, and econs can change with circumstances.

Ecosystems

It's also possible that entire ecosystems can become economic. The Florida Everglades, despite covering 734 square miles, becomes somewhat economic. The ecosystem has had its slew of man-made environmental problems from drainage to pollution, and has also had significant restoration efforts, from former Florida governor Bob Graham's 1983 initiative "Save Our Everglades," former Florida governor Charlie Christ appropriating

\$50 million toward Everglades restoration, to the federal government approving \$96 million toward Everglades restoration as part of the American Recovery and Restoration Act of 2009.

Despite this large-scale attention to the Everglades, most of this focus occurs at a governmental level outside of South Florida. This may be due to the difficulty in visualizing the Everglades, which is usually represented by depictions of sawgrass prairies, not the most charismatic or emotionally-provoking of images. The state's license plate for the Everglades features sawgrass, a mangrove tree, and a roseate spoonbill. It's much easier to represent a part of an ecosystem, like the Florida panther, than a whole system. It's also difficult to visualize water pollution, especially when it occurs in a marshy area rather than in clearer water such as springs. Other ecosystems, such as South American rainforests, have become much more economic and have appeared in advertisements for Greenpeace and the WWF; an aerial photograph of a half clear-cut forest can be easily

recognized, identified with, and felt by the viewer. Beyond Florida then, it would be difficult to count the Everglades as an econ the way some other ecosystems have become.

Similarly, coral reefs have become more visualized in Florida culture, but so many images persist of different kinds and regions of coral that it's difficult to see them becoming fully econic in a way that is iconic. Coral reefs have an environmental following and widespread interest, at least in Florida. But it's hard to create an iterable image of these underwater ecosystems and organisms that are so small and complex. Such difficulties of representation point toward potential problems with econs in general—a few overshadow the rest. While the giant panda can help bring awareness to all endangered species, for the panda does represent “world” wildlife, the attention is still on the panda. In an image society and an attention economy, giant econs eclipse the others.

Florida Manatee

In their book on photographic icons, *No Caption Needed*, Robert Hariman and John Louis Lucaites (2007) write that icons “are likely to be established slowly, shift with changes in content and use, and be fully evident only in a history of official, commercial, and vernacular appropriations” (12-13). Econs are no different, and if Florida has an econ, the best case might be made through the slow-moving Florida manatee (*Trichechus manatus latirostris*), a species whose image has changed slowly since the 1800s.

Although a sub-species of the West Indian manatee (*Trichechus manatus latirostris*), the Florida manatee occupies the northernmost range of its sister species, mostly in the warmer rivers, springs, and coastal inlets of central through southern Florida. Although the range technically extends into Louisiana to the west and the mid-Atlantic coast during summers, no one goes to Maryland to view manatees in the wild. Thus, the manatee is considered a Floridian, and as Solomon, Corey-Luse, and Halvorsen (2004) have pointed out,

Citrus County “has more manatee-related tourism than any other county in Florida” (102). This county, which includes the towns of Crystal River and Homosassa Springs, contains many spring-fed clear waterways and thus a refuge for the temperature-sensitive manatee during the colder winter months. Besides being home to Crystal River Preserve State Park and Homosassa Springs Wildlife State Park—a mecca for manatee tourists—Highway 19 and the econography of the towns are full of depictions of manatees.

In terms of actual economic benefit, Solomon, Corey-Luse, and Halvorsen (2004) have determined that the benefit manatees bring to this area account for a net benefit between \$8.2 and \$9 million. As they advise, “This large positive value suggests that the residents of Citrus County should forego further development that conflicts with the Florida manatee and obey the SMS [safe minimum standard] rule of preservation at the current or a larger population level” (113). Furthermore, these authors conclude that the manatee produces

enough economic benefit that residents would pay to help protect the manatee.

However, such protection was not always afforded the Florida manatee. Theresa L. Goedeke (2004) has composed an extensive study on the change in perception amongst Floridians toward the Florida manatee. In part, she surmises that the “Florida manatees had value solely as a game species at the turn of the last century. As a result, as with many species in the New World, they were relentlessly pursued” (103). Naturalists persuaded the state to protect manatees, leading to a ban on hunting that was passed in 1893. Poaching continued despite this ban, and the manatee population continued to fall. Viewing the manatee in the wild was much different during this time period, with David Fairchild (1917) remarking that “[t]ourists have always had an inane desire to shoot the entirely helpless animals” (344), and so manatee spectatorship was not always a visual encounter only. Many immigrants to Florida misunderstood the manatee, and many locals felt the animal was a nuisance, thinking it

preyed on fish stocks, and boaters complained of manatee backs breaking their propellers. Abuse of manatees continued into the 1970s, even after the manatee was listed as an endangered species under the Endangered Species Act, with a Center for Action on Endangered Species report finding that

Manatees are molested regularly in Florida. Cement blocks have been dropped on their heads in the Miami Canals, one was seen with a garden rake embedded in its back, their eyes are poked out, and they are shot at by children and adults apparently for "sport" or target practice. During 1975, several shooting incidents were reported, but apprehending violators is difficult. (Wray 1976, 14)

This is hardly the perception of the manatee today. Although some manatee abuse was intentional, much also came from boaters who didn't know the manatee was present sub-surface. Goedeke explains that the more people learned about the manatee—an awareness that was scientific but also visual through signage and other images—the more attitudes about the manatee changed.

Eventually, the manatee became more respected and the need to protect it clear. The ultimate sign of the manatee's full transfer to econ came once people began to align it with other species and whole ecosystems. As Goedeke further notes, "The species' ecological uniqueness and importance as an umbrella species were united, which meant that were the manatee protected then a plethora of other species and systems would be protected by default" (110). Furthermore, Rose (1985) has noted that "The manatee is a sign of the health and integrity of the Florida ecosystems on which it depends" (592), and Charles Lee—the executive vice-president of the Florida Audubon Society—has stated that "The manatee is an indicator of the pressures that we're putting on the marine environment due to the introduction of anthropogenic influences" (qtd. in Goedeke 2005, 110).

It seems that to become an econ, to become a symbol, perhaps requires that it first (almost) become a martyr. The rare becomes valuable, becomes

worth circulating, but it first has to be made rare. Arguably, the manatee has become more valuable as a tourist attraction and a point of advertising once the numbers of manatees were reduced to make them more exciting to see. This isn't to say that manatees were purposely killed to enact such a strategy, only that the process of becoming an econ often takes such an unfortunate route. In many ways, years after its extinction, the dodo has become a de facto econ as warning, a kind of albatross, reminding humans of their capacity for natural destruction. The dodo's song, as referred to in David Quammen's book on island biogeography, reflects the iconic nature of the econ to create awareness and spur communities into action, or for communities to spring into action and create an econ. The econ helps to label, categorize, and at the same time is itself categorized. The econ spreads an awareness, a trigger of particular knowledge about a nonhuman animal. As Goedeke notes, "Once knowledge, which could be experiential, folk, or scientific is gained about a species, people then label or categorize the species. This, in

turn, further defines the cultural relationship with the animal that influences how people treat the animal, both as an aggregate and on an individual basis" (101).

Between its cute ugliness, its ecotourist and economic appeal, and its use to refer to larger habitats and conservation concerns, the Florida manatee comes closest to becoming a more widespread econ in the mold of the bald eagle or giant panda. However, even though the manatee-as-econ can help shed awareness and engagement with environmental problems, the very practice of creating and using econs, or accepting them as such, is fraught with other problems—an ugly cuteness that should not be overlooked.

Disrupting Econs

Is it advantageous for a Florida econ to become econic in a more general way? The move toward the manatee's broader appeal becomes a move toward a more limited category system in how images of Florida would be used, consumed, remixed, and understood. While the move toward

simplicity, i.e., fewer representative species, might seem to make environmental communication more efficient, this efficiency itself communicates other information about these species and the species left out. While starting out situated, econs tend to become universal, losing their particularities toward the general. In this way, the evolution of a Florida econ moves toward just “econ” and away from its association with Florida. To understand what may happen to Florida econs, the damage they might do if removed from one image ecology into another, it’s important to understand how econography works more generally.

Econs become iconic and symbolic, representative of larger movements or associations. We’ve seen this with the bald eagle and the giant panda. The World Wildlife Fund uses the giant panda to represent their organization, and the panda has become—partly because of their use—widely identification with the endangered species category as a whole. As a result, we can hardly call this animal from China, which has become an

important eco-political image for the whole world, a “Chinese econ.” Icons are useful for environmental rhetoric because, as Hariman and Lucaites point out, icons are “usually recognized as such immediately” and are “capable of doing the heavy lifting required to change public opinion and motivate action on behalf of public interest” (12). Like the iconic photos Hariman and Lucaites are concerned with, the econ takes similar strategies and often reflects “topical orientations and social knowledge taken for granted in political argument” (30). Even though an iconic photo or an econ depict a particular—either an event or figure—the icon references a contingency, a potentiality. Or, it has the potential toward potentiality, for it may also attempt to close off potentials, signifying the natural, the essential.

For the econ, *as* an icon, deals with the *doxa* of a community, what seems natural and taken for granted. The econ displays not specialized knowledge, but what everyone already knows. As Hariman and Lucaites further note of iconic photographs, the

iconic “draws on stock images...and stays within the realm of everyday experience and common sense” (30). Even though econs often depict large megafauna, as Steven Baker and Greg Garrard note of other media, and even though many econs display exotic species, econs bring the exotic within the domain of the everyday, within the realm of the *oikos* as *domos* rather than ecological. For we often begin econography through our children’s toys, books, and other media.

But of course, the econ is ecological, existing within a media environment, where it competes with other images and econs. Some of these econs are different but share the same message, and sometimes the econ is the same, but means differently. However, due to this allusiveness, perhaps we can say that the econ can’t actually do this heavy lifting since the econ always contains this doubleness within itself. The econ, easily recognized, can gather meanings and audiences, and can gather because of its openness of meaning, one filled with a particular connection to a particular exigency.

But because of this openness, it can easily be assimilated toward other uses, severing the strong bond with one group to establish connections with another. The econ does not create strong bonds, then, but tentative networks.

In their work *Ecospeak*, M. Jimmie Killingsworth and Jacquelyn Palmer (1992) identified the ecospeak or environmental communication as a kind of Orwellian doublespeak and since Dobrin and Morey’s ecosee is a visual extension of ecospeak, then ecosee, and the econ, is a doublesee. Like Wittgenstein’s duck-rabbit, the econ is what W. J. T. Mitchell (1994) describes as a metaimage, one that identifies itself as an image, and like the duck-rabbit, one that shows the impossibility of seeing both versions of the econ at once, producing a blind spot. However, despite the impossibility of seeing both at once, the duck-rabbit makes one aware of this blind spot, aware of the incommensurability of seeing two at once. The econ subscribes to a way of seeing nature that is not seeing nature, but is itself a kind of

metapicture that, if understood as iconic, draws attention to itself as a con. But we must become aware that icons exist as such.

So, I want to move beyond this discussion of Florida-specific icons and the iconographic aspects of the icon to discuss this particular duplicity that icons contains. For although the representation of animals, nature, or environment more broadly are recognizable in icons, this very perception creates imperceptions in the hidden work icons perform. As John Berger (1977) and Kenneth Burke (1954) have both separately stated, "a way of seeing is also a way of not seeing," and icons have a built-in blind spot. For the moment that an environmental image becomes an environmental icon it also becomes an environmental con.

The first con is that to the nonhuman animal itself, and how we perceive that animal. Although we might agree that a bald eagle makes a good representative animal for how we'd like to perceive the country (free, fierce, apex), the animal's general

behavior in the wild isn't indicative of how iconography will ultimately depict the animal. Steve Baker (2001), in discussing uses of animals within nationalistic imagery, states that "the symbolism itself is a rough-and-ready symbolism. It is in no way hindered by the fact that its meanings need owe nothing to the characteristics of the animals it employs" (62). Even if an animal is behaviorally docile, the animal may be rendered fierce and intimidating. Although his point was not to argue against the bald eagle as a national symbol, Ben Franklin once wrote: "For my own part. I wish the Bald Eagle had not been chosen the Representative of our Country. He is a Bird of bad moral Character. He does not get his Living honestly...Besides he is a rank Coward: The little King Bird not bigger than a Sparrow attacks him boldly and drives him out of the District" (McMillian 2007).

Iconic representations also misrepresent groups of species and ecosystems. Greg Garrard (2012) notes that "documentaries often carry the conservative message that an animal is rare, but then depict large

numbers of them. Absent animals do not make exciting viewing" (175). Garrard also shows how most nature documentary focuses on "charismatic megafauna" such as elephants and giraffes. We have already seen this trend in icons as well. The most widespread icons are composed of such animals, including the bald eagle, giant panda, humpback whale, and polar bear. Moreover, citing Karla Armbruster, Garrard discusses how documentaries compress time and space, providing a concentrated highly-defined and separated view of these megafauna in their habitats. We look not in panorama but through the microscope, a microscopic image that is devoid of the microscopic. The icon, even when analogous, makes nature increasingly digital and disintegrated.

So, we might say that the icon cons us in this way as well, distracting us with one way of seeing so that we don't see something else. Although we are taught through the icon that the iconic animals are rare, and that they have an intrinsic value within an economy that assigns value based on scarcity, the same proliferation of

those icons, the signifier, outstrip the realization of the few numbers that actually exist, the signified. This is quite evident in the manatee. Again, the image of the manatee is one of the most represented icons in the state of Florida, appearing on billboards, artwork, license plates, marine navigation signs, souvenirs, you name it. The image of the manatee often illustrates the peril its species faces by focusing on its high potential for extinction. Through its use as a marketing device, a company can appeal to the audiences who care about manatees, an animal that becomes symbolic of entire coastal ecosystems and communities. In this iconic way, images of manatees serve not just as a ubiquitous icon that can represent other endangered species, but entire ecosystems, families, classes, ideas, or the entire concept of nature as a whole. For instance, imagetexts that combine an image of a manatee with the tagline "The Real Florida" say and show something about how we iconically construct nature, in this case Florida. With the manatee, one can simply appropriate an icon with established

environmental storylines and use that image as a rhetorical device to lure in tourists, to present the illusion that Florida has a “natural” essence, or to suggest that the state has such a high investment in the well-being of the manatee that it couples the image of the manatee with the image of the state as a whole, even if the state’s actual legislative and enforcement practices belie this message. In fact, the amount of manatee images far outnumbers actual, living manatees, and this preponderance of images, like Garrard’s discussion of nature documentaries, suggests not that the species is endangered but quite the opposite: that the population is healthy and thriving, that there are enough manatees for everyone.

To understand the econ through semiotics alone, through a signified/signifier relationships, is too easy and unreliable, for these animals represented as such become simulated and hyperreal with no discernible referent. Thus, no action is called forth on behalf particular individuals. Coca Cola’s polar bears, for instance, are CGI animations. The

manatees in Florida are figurations, abstracted, removed from an environment of water and placed within a medium of spectacle. Viewers come to know the manatee through the hyperreal, and this perception suggests hypernumbers of “real” manatees. Through such hypernumbers, like other icons, econs offer powerful strategies for dissemination and circulation. As Hariman and Lucaites also write, the icon is “Easily referenced, and due to the proliferation of digital technologies, easily reproduced and altered,” offering “a means to tap into the power of circulation and the rich intertext of iconic allusiveness for rhetorical effect” (12). Econ share this iconic property as they become appropriated for a variety of purposes across a variety of media.

Because of this allusiveness, of the ability for the econ to serve as an open sign, econs can also be used to environmentally con an audience. Particularly in advertising, an econ’s job is to complete the con by closing debate about an image, even if it fails to do this. Icons, like categories,

condense nature, isolate it, and limit the kind of thinking that can be done about it. ABEC's commercial, as ekphrased above, attempts to claim partial credit for saving the bald eagle. If one is unaware of the timeline surrounding the first photo of the earth from space (via Apollo 8), the first Earth Day, the EPA's founding, and the environmental zeitgeist of the time, then they may believe ABEC's claims. As Marshall McLuhan (1964) writes, "All this adds up to the compressional implosion—the return to nonspecialized forms...the seeking of multi-uses for rooms and things and objects, in a single word—the iconic" (328). The seemingly open econ becomes closed in meaning because it implodes all of nature, all of the endangered species, all of what it means to be Floridian, all of what it means to be environmental, all of *whatever* into a single econic representation, no matter in which iterations those econs appear. The econ is multi-use, but not as open a sign as we might hope (or fear).

Even when derived from a photograph, the econ moves beyond

the photographic representation to an image that gathers, an openness that is also closed. It becomes, in many ways, a choral space in which meanings and identities shift depending on the viewer. As McLuhan also explains, in contrast to representational art, "iconographic art uses the eye as we use our hand in seeking to create an inclusive image, made up of many moments, phases, and aspects of the person or thing. Thus the iconic mode is not visual representation, nor the specialization of visual stress as defined by viewing from a single position" (334). Such gathering, as read through Heidegger, offers a metaphysics in nature quite distinct from a metaphysics based on literate categories. For like Heidegger's concepts of concealment and unconcealment toward *aletheia*, the econ reveals but also con-ceals. In revealing certain animals that we notice, the econ determines which animals get to count, concealing the unseen not portrayed to be an econ, even as the econ's logic is one of inclusion and not representation. By constantly referencing a particular species as an econ, and with an econ,

one excludes other life forms. Thus, focus is given to a particular species continuously, not allowing others to be seen. Econography creates visual niches for some species and competitively exclude others.

One question we might ask is what is the mechanism, what is the institution that sets the guidelines and priorities for such competition? Our first grasp may be capitalism, and while this answer needs more explanation than I have time to give it here, within an ecology of spectacle we might heed Guy Debord's (1995) theories and extrapolate what happens to images of animals when populating an image environment. As he writes, "the spectacle in its generality is a concrete inversion of life, and, as such, the autonomous movement of non-life." For Debord, a society of the spectacle only results from a choice that we've already made, and that choice is capitalism. And as Debord also explains, the spectacle is capital accumulated to the point that it becomes image. Despite the altruistic uses to which many organizations put the econ, we might say that rather

than subvert a capitalist ethos that often harms such animals, it instead reifies it, producing more visuals to be consumed as image. For as the manatee has shown, in a capitalist framework, scarcity only increases an animal's economic value as it undercuts its genetic, ecological, or other forms of worth. Of course, a literate metaphysics of scientific categories gives us this species problem in the first place, a logic of cuts and separation that the econ is meant to overcome through its logic of inclusivity, but which fails to do so because what it tries to include is antithetical to the logic of speciesism which it falls prey to.

In another sense of icon, the rich and famous become sought-after because of their rarity, and econs become the celebrities, faces, and fashions of nature, thus helping their circulation. Baker remarks that for the advertising image, only cute, perfect animals are used. With the econ, we similarly see mostly those aspects of the environment that are cute, majestic, and aesthetic. We hardly see the cockroach, nary an opossum nor a

robin, mostly because these animals are not part of larger environmental narratives of sustainability and preservation. However, a few other reasons exist for their exclusion. One, they don't live in "natural" environments; they live in urban, suburban, unnatural environments, using these labels of natural and unnatural loosely. Second, these animals don't have the rarity which makes them valuable. Their images mainly circulate to suggest they are ordinary, or pests to be eliminated. These animals are out of fashion, unlike the polar bear, elephant, bald eagle, or manatee.

To the extent, then, that the econ reflects a logic and metaphysics of capital, of capital's roots in "head," and by extension the face, perhaps the biggest "con" that the econ shows us is not of the animals itself, but of ourselves, ourselves as we would like to think we see nature, and thus not showing it to us at all. Again, Debord offers that "The modern spectacle shows us what society *can deliver*, but within this depiction what is permitted is rightly distinguished from what is

possible." Part of this con is to present the permitted as the only possible, limiting other possibilities. That is, within the location of the econ, we produce a blind spot that makes the econ invisible even as we gaze directly upon it.

As Cary Wolfe (2003) has similarly discussed, as the images we make of animals become reified, so do images of "the" human. Or, as W. J. T. Mitchell (2003) explains, "The reduction of the complex plurality of animals to a singular generality underwrites the poverty of a humanism that thinks it has grounded itself in a human essence" (xii). Likewise, as Sean Cubitt (2005) writes, "Our fascination with animals belongs to [a] deep uncertainty about ourselves, and underpins the work of making cartoon depictions of the creatures with whom we share our world and to some unstill degree our nature" (25). At best, it seems that econs serve what W. J. T. Mitchell identifies as totems, a category of image that lies between aesthetic objects and idols. In *Iconography*, Mitchell (1987) explains that "Totems

are not idols or fetishes, not objects of worship, but 'companionable forms' which the viewer may converse with, cajole, bully, or cast aside" (114). I think many of us view econs this way; I certainly have and probably still do. We think that we can discern when an econ is being used as a faithful totem toward some purpose we agree with versus when it's simply pitching us a product.

But at worst, we get suckered into the con the moment we accept one use as somehow better than the other, when they both have the power to simply reterritorialize nature back into the spectacle, one undergirded by a capitalism that would exploit the represented animal when possible. But the econ even cons more altruistic spending of capital. Some conservationists, such as Chris Packham, have lamented that the econ cons some environmental movements as a whole. Packham has stated that it's "pointless" to breed pandas in captivity since "there is not enough habitat left to sustain them" ("Chris Packham" 2009). The money spent on panda conservation would be

more useful for other environmental causes, and Packham has boldly offered "to eat the last panda if I could have all the money we have spent on panda conservation put back on the table for me to do more sensible things with" ("Beyond Cute and Cuddly" 2007). For Packham, the panda "is possibly one of the grossest wastes of conservation money in the last half century," a con created through the practice of econography.

For Baker (2000), the answer to a more ethical representation, if that's a value that we want to achieve, is not to create the animal's form as iconic representation, but its line of flight, its movement. As Deleuze and Guattari (1986) note, the singularized image of a recognizable animal is "still too formed, too significative, too territorialized" (15) to create any ethical impact with how we relate to nonhuman (and even human) animals. We may agree or disagree on whether we want to promote a more ethical representation of the nonhuman, but doing so would have to move beyond representation of form towards lines of flight that

escape the econ, or at least recognize it for the con it might be.

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