

Introduction

Since 1964, Sea World of California has occupied a swath of carefully sculpted and lavishly landscaped acres at the southwestern edge of San Diego's Mission Bay Park. In amusement industry terms, Sea World is a marine park, a careful organization of shows, displays, rides, and concessions coordinated around the theme of ocean life. On any summer day, thousands of customers gather in Sea World's stadiums to watch its nature performances; thousands more wander through the larger park, a botanical garden larded with aquariums, souvenir stands, and corporate advertising.

In any year, the vast majority of Sea World's nearly 4 million customers come to see Shamu the killer whale. The park's trademark animal performs four times daily (five or six times daily in the summer) in its own six-thousand-seat stadium. Indeed, Shamu is the most important, best known, and most iconic animal in Southern California, and Sea World is one of the region's prime tourist attractions. But Sea World contains more than whales. A visitor can also encounter the synchronized dances of dolphins, sea otters rehabilitated after the great Alaskan oil spill, pettable sea stars, and stingless sting rays. Marine and freshwater aquariums house colorful fish and striking sharks. Zoological displays show rare Commerson's dolphins, breeding penguins, wallowing walruses, and nesting flamingos. Among the humans one can find stunt-diving Olympic acrobats, competitive jet-skiers, ballet troupes, Russian choristers, clowns, mimes, do-wop singers, and beauty queens. A gondola ride, a stable full of Clydesdale horses, gift shops, restaurants, vendors' carts, concession stands and more gift shops, a multistoried chil-

dren's play area, amphitheatres, and an auditorium round out a continually changing landscape. Outside everyday life, Sea World offers a carnival of visions and colorful, if not exactly novel, experiences. Indeed, as the Sea World publicity slogan goes, "It's not just a park, it's another world."

Viewed from the perspective of tourism and the mass entertainment industry, Sea World of California is a specialized variant of the theme park form, the foremost occupant of the marine animals and ocean nature niche. One of a chain of ten U.S. theme parks and four Sea Worlds, it is owned by the Anheuser-Busch corporation, the world's largest brewer and a packaged-foods and agribusiness conglomerate.¹ Like all theme parks, it is a corporately produced space where entertainment and retail sales can be creatively combined and effectively organized around a core attraction, in this case the performing whales and dolphins. Just as important as admissions for each park's profits are the almost endless concession stands, boutiques, and gift shops offering refreshments and souvenirs of many sorts. As a student in one of my undergraduate classes aptly put it, "Sea World is like a mall with fish," and underwater life is the story that helps us keep shopping. But viewed from another perspective, this theme park is a hybrid public-private institution. Sea World styles itself an urban public resource, a site of animal rehabilitation, marine conservation, research, and education. Hundreds of thousands of San Diego school children and millions more nationwide are exposed to its ocean-themed educational products.

I first became interested in Sea World in 1986. After publishing a book on street performance in the nineteenth century, I was interested in public space in the contemporary city and especially curious about how the processes of privatization were remaking its older collective uses and experiential qualities. Although the streets and squares of American cities have been shaped by commercial and capitalist uses for centuries, by the 1980s the process of the commodification of space had become much more intense. On one hand, older common and residential areas of the city had been weakened and, in some cases, destroyed by the freeway and the exurban shopping mall. On the other hand, these same emptied districts were often reinvented as culture and history malls for tourists, as the image of place was commodified by developers and entrepreneurs. Meanwhile, new private "public" spaces protected from the life of the street sprang up inside monumental corporate towers.²

As I thought about the relationship between commercial culture and the popular uses of space and place, I kept returning to theme parks.

They seemed to me emblematic of the spatial-urban problems I was wondering about, the extremity of the transformation of vernacular and local meanings of place into a standardized product. Searching the literature on architectural history and mass entertainment spaces, I found conflicting emphases in the ways scholars had treated the parks. In the mid-1970s, critical communications scholars had analyzed the Disney media empire, including its theme parks, as part of a critique of the political economy and ideology of American entertainment. The work of Michael Real and Herbert Schiller recognized that Disneyland was a special kind of medium, a space where the older contours of collective recreation were recast into something new, an integrated landscape of meanings unified around consumption. Real and Schiller insisted that even as the theme park has come to be seen as a culturally central site, in a strong sense it must also be recognized as cultural production from the top down. In Schiller's view, since the Disney parks were tied closely to the world of the mass media conglomerate, they served to combine recreation with advertising, marketing, and mass consumption within a framework that misleadingly claimed the neutrality of entertainment. From Real's perspective, Disneyland was a morality play that rehearsed the perspective of a largely white and mainstream American audience within ideological bounds set by the corporation. In the communications critique, places like Disneyland were reinforcements for the status quo.³

This sharp and radical cultural critique was explicitly rejected in the theme park studies that emerged after the late 1970s. The 1980s saw a tide of anthropologists, semioticians and, later, postmodernists who conducted textual readings of theme park landscapes. Little effort was made to explore the political and economic workings of the themed spaces or connect the parks directly to their social history.⁴ There was no shortage of sophisticated discussions of Disneyland, for example, but like so much of contemporary cultural criticism, these studies were often based only on a quick visit and depended only on the interpreter for their validity. For the most part, the anthropological tradition celebrated theme parks as marvels of semiotic play, a move that protected them and many other fixtures of the mass tourism landscape from political economic and social historical analysis and, to a degree, from social criticism.⁵ At the same time, however, social historians followed a different trajectory, giving the forerunners of the theme park—the World's Fair, the industrial exposition, and the amusement park—serious attention and investigating the history of American patterns of leisure and recreation. Roy Rosenzweig, Kathy Peiss, and John Kasson, for example, had traced the

cheap but profitable entertainments of the commercial public sphere and argued that they had been a significant force in the transformation of American culture in the early twentieth century.⁶ But little work in the emerging cultural studies literature or in American studies linked the social historians' concerns about the growth of amusements for a mass urban public to theme parks as a consumer good for a contemporary mass market, or to the work they do for their corporate owners.

So I started this work on two fronts. I read widely in the literature on commercial spaces and themed spaces—shopping malls, amusement parks, and world's fairs, in particular. At the same time, I began to study themed amusement spaces on the ground by reading business journalists' reports on the industry. This economic and industrial coverage helped me understand the current and, as it turned out, quickly changing shape of what insiders call the parks industry. As the eighties lurched into the nineties, what I thought of as a seriousness barrier around theme parks was being eroded by changes in scholarship and, no less, by events. In part due to the explosion in the 1980s of an economy of accelerated consumption, in part because of the deepening structural crisis of American cities, architectural historians, geographers, and sociologists turned their attention to the relationship between social life and the intensified commercialization of space.⁷ In the face of continuing urban crisis, it has again become harder to see the theme park as a joyful ritual of national identity. Rather, it is a physical expression of wishes about the urban, social world, and scholars have looked at the Disney theme parks in particular as more than exemplars of capitalist culture. They are literal heralds of a new kind of city made up of spectacular privatized spaces. In his cogent introduction to *Variations on a Theme Park*, for example, Michael Sorkin argues that the logic and techniques of the high-consumption spaces have erased the boundaries between theme park and city and, in the process, emptied urban space of memory and history. Sorkin and his colleagues explore the design ideas and social ideals expressed in Disney's parks and the ways these ideas have been exported into other realms of the built world: shopping malls, resort complexes, planned and gated communities. The process these architectural historians and critics trace has by no means exhausted itself. As I write this introduction, the Disney Development Company is moving into the production of totally planned themed communities.⁸ Cloning controlled recreational space into a corporately built company town, the theme park does more than define places for leisure. It helps redefine the potential for meaningful activity in social space, and social space itself.⁹

In addition to the growing literature on the city as high-consumption tourist district, there has been a surge of interest in the world's leading theme parks, Disneyland and Walt Disney World, due in large part to the international expansions of the Disney company and in part to political and cultural controversies surrounding what is now the world's largest media conglomerate. Writings by Michael Wallace, Alexander Wilson, Susan Willis, Stephen Fjellman, and others critically explore the workings of the landscapes that help create the company's global visibility and bring in vast profits. Scrutinizing the Disney parks' visions of society, their celebrations of the power of technology and corporate creativity, and their constructions of gender, race, and history, these scholars take up again the theme announced by the critics of the 1970s. Although I did not have it to draw on as I began my own theme park project, this perceptive literature is growing quickly. It is no longer confined to readings of the parks, valuable as these are, but increasingly uses ethnographic techniques to explore the multiple and overlapping relationships between mass media-based recreation, mass tourism, and the structures of everyday life.¹⁰

As my background knowledge grew, I thought it would be helpful to study one park closely, watch it in operation, and compare what I was learning about theme parks as mass entertainment and mass communication in general with a particular case. I kept thinking about Sea World of California: I'd only been there once, had gotten a terrible headache, and hadn't wanted to go back. But now I was looking for a site for a case study, and Sea World seemed to me a good one. It was large, part of a chain then owned by the publishing conglomerate Harcourt Brace Jovanovich. With over 3 million visitors per year, it was popular and conveniently located in San Diego, where I usually lived and worked. My research could be continuous and sustained. And since it was not a Disney park, it had not found fame among academics. Not even business journalists had paid it much attention.

When I turned to Sea World of California in 1987, I hoped to unpack the connections between public meanings, mass entertainment, and private enterprise. My observational fieldwork began with a positive, scholarly openness to understanding the theme park form and its appeal to its customers, as well as critical questions about Sea World's cultural meanings and effects. Early on, my scholarly attitude toward the park was a mix of fascination and suspicion. My fascination rose because the landscape was rich and complicated and I was ready to look at it. Suspicion persisted, growing out of my own background and my assess-

ment of the contemporary cultural scene. I had a contradictory sense that Sea World and places like it were at once important to study and faintly laughable, and this sense was part of a widely shared, joking disbelief about things Southern Californian. But joking signaled awareness of cultural historic change. Thirty years ago the well-educated, middle-class social world I grew up in viewed theme parks as vacuous junk culture, but this has changed. The social critics and countercultures of the 1960s viewed theme parks as mainstream or “white bread” at best, or worse, authoritarian. But by the mid-1980s, the predominance of the Walt Disney Company had helped redefine theme parks as culturally central sites all Americans (indeed all the world) should aspire to visit. At the same time, mass tourism has drawn a huge proportion of the American population into travel, and themed resorts are prime, even prestigious, destinations. My suspicious attitude was also part of an intellectual tradition. On the one hand, my training as a folklorist undermined condescension. No serious student of popular culture would write off the theme park. On the other hand, my folklore background and personal convictions also place positive value on informal and noncommercial modes of cultural production, privileging them over centrally produced, market-driven culture. While there is no pure place to stand here, no folk-cultural world free from influence by the market and mass media, this distinction between the vernacular and corporately or officially produced culture forces the analyst always to ask what cultural alternatives have been foreclosed, as well as which left open. In short, my critical view of Sea World and theme parks generally included the question, how might things be different, how would culture look and feel if it were produced differently?

I focused first on the ways Sea World constructed its spaces, on how the park represented people and cultures, and how people used the park. Since I saw it as an interesting variant of Disneyland, it didn’t occur to me to wonder too much about Sea World’s own peculiar qualities. I assumed that studying any large park would help me pose and answer questions about the way crowds were moved around, and about the relationships between people, performances, and spaces. In the first year of fieldwork, I wrote several papers—one on a reconstructed urban neighborhood that Sea World had just built, a kind of mockup of the Lower East Side of Manhattan, with ethnically diverse natives singing and dancing a paean to the city and community. I found the “City Streets” show (located at what is now the Bird Showplace) silly and felt distanced from the other customers, most of whom seemed to take it for an accurate

recreation of an eastern, urban past. In a second paper, I explored the representation of another kind of foreignness and mystery at the park by looking at a Japanese pearl-diving show.

These tentative analyses tried to unpack the economics of entertainment in the theme park and to account for the subjects and peculiar qualities of the performance. Reading them to friends and colleagues at academic conferences was fun. I always got laughs as I described in a deadpan way the odd seriousness and lack of irony with which the theme park mixed and matched mass cultural materials. How funny it was that Sea World sandwiched its own recast version of *West Side Story* in between the dolphins and the whales. How ironic and sad that the suburban audience cheered a song-and-dance tribute to city life in a geographical context where urban is a foreign if not dirty word. How hilarious that the “authentically costumed Japanese *ama* girls” had names like Cheryl and Tracy, and how telling that the most important performer in their show was the gemologist who weighed and certified the planted pearl! While Sea World’s human performances certainly revealed much about the shallowness of representation in mass culture, they were just that, shallow, and this made the question of their appeal all the more compelling. The peculiar construction of exoticness and ethnicity, whether Asian or American urban, was World’s Fair lite, a recycling and recombination of midway entertainment staples. Finally, it was hard to stay interested. Anything Sea World borrowed from Disneyland was probably done better at Disneyland, and *West Side Story* looked and sounded better on film. These human performances left me thinking that Sea World was essentially a shopping mall without the talented piano player, an advertising shell in which American mass culture’s odds and ends were recombined.

But I was focused on what Sea World’s managers regard as filler. It took a good friend to point this out and redirect my attention. Sam Schrage supported my view of Sea World as a complex spatial machine for extracting profits from its customers, and he agreed with me that I should try to understand it as a cluster of performances dealing with central and contested social relations. But I wasn’t looking at the park’s key performers, he argued, and so I was missing the point. I had to start watching the killer whales because what was really important and completely unexplored about Sea World and places like it was its way of dealing with nature in general and marine mammals in particular. This helped explain why visitors did not seem to greet the park’s landscape and performances with the ironic detachment a postmodernist might predict. Indeed, from what I could observe and the conversations I could join

in, most customers entered the theme park with a sense of purpose and high seriousness, determined to contact something rare, special, and powerfully meaningful. Visitors to or residents of a city focused on the Pacific coast, they were going to meet Nature in the form of reconstructed reefs and coves filled with approachable sea creatures, commemorated in a rich variety of commercial souvenirs. Sam was right: I was missing the point. To say that Sea World is a powerful, profit-generating machine and leave it at that was to miss something. Even if I thought that representations of people were a more important part of American commercial culture than performing animals, Sea World's audience doesn't agree. For them, the oceans and their animals are the central story, and class and labor, race, ethnicity, and gender—Sea World's representations of humanity—seem peripheral to the nature plays being performed all around.

But I had not thought much about the problem of the representation of nature in commercial culture, and I began to ponder how to study a theme park built around animals and environments. In one way, Sea World and places like it are the most ersatz cultural artifacts possible. They are carefully constructed, expensively maintained artificial worlds that most of the time fairly successfully conceal their own extreme artificiality. According to Western common sense thought, *nature* denotes a sphere of authenticity and purity, an anticommercial world outside the marketplace.¹¹ In the late twentieth century, the oceans might seem the last remote place, an anticultural world teeming with nonhuman life and free from the burdens of history. This sense of the isolated authenticity, even the sacredness, of wild nature as a cultural category, was probably one reason audiences found my papers so hilarious. When I juxtaposed descriptions of singing, dancing urban natives with descriptions of synchronized back-flipping dolphins, the profane and the sacred became obscenely confused. And this confusion is one of the things that makes places like Sea World so fascinating: a theme park about wild nature is either so peculiar that it makes no sense, or contemporary culture is so thoroughly rationalized that it makes perfect sense. One friend said to me after watching Shamu the killer whale perform, "This is the worst thing I've ever seen in my life." But his minority opinion might be irrelevant, at least from the point of view of the cultural analyst. The Shamu show is a standardized experience, in which a very large, paying audience has a vivid and visual encounter with a huge, tamed-wild animal. As such, it is an amazing cultural phenomenon. Operating on the same principles as the core show, all of Sea World is an immediate, see-

able, touchable consumer experience, a spectacular story about nature in general and oceans in particular. It is one of the most popular and available versions of the wild that contemporary American and international tourists can encounter.

I had started out resistant to Sea World's appeal because it is so intensely commercial, but as an analyst I had an obligation to try to understand the pleasures offered by its product. Now, as I tried to follow my friend's suggestions, I felt another tug of resistance. I'm not an "animal person," and I couldn't easily access the sources of the audience's enthusiasm for the trained animal shows. I knew nothing about whales and dolphins, so I'd have to learn to be interested in them. But the more I watched them, the more significant and compelling they seemed, not, from my point of view, inherently interesting as creatures but as occupants of an odd social space in California culture. I noticed that images of whales and dolphins suffused the commercial material culture of Southern California, from postcards and murals to charity appeals to designs cast on wedding rings. As the tidal zone is a margin between life on land and in the sea, whales and their kin, as mammals, occupy a similar liminal space between humans and the living ocean. Since the mid-1970s, whales and dolphins have been caught up in a tide of popular spiritualism and cross-species identification, prompting imaginative writing, art, music, and healing.¹² There is a kind of cult of the marine mammal abroad—but did the successful theme park create this popular commercial celebration, or did it just profit enormously from a vernacular enthusiasm? I felt drawn in and intrigued by the carefully crafted environment of the entire park even while I was alternately horrified and bored by the animal performances. But the question kept coming up—how would one study a nature theme park? What questions were worth asking and what methods should be used?

Like theme parks, nature's circulation in commercial entertainment culture has hidden, mostly unnoticed, behind a gravitas barrier. While the humanities have developed a long tradition of studying representations of nature, for the most part this scholarly tradition has, until recently, ignored nature's place in contemporary popular culture. There are several reasons for this neglect. While a great deal of inventive work has been done on the history of landscape painting and wilderness photography, and on nature in early advertising imagery, in modern commercial culture nature still has the status of a backdrop.¹³ Nature's uses in the mass media are safe, and marine nature may be even safer since it is seemingly removed from the human environmental conflicts ex-

pressed on land. The ubiquity of nature programming on PBS and cable networks, to take an example from television, is due in part to its reputation for being wholesome, inoffensive, and cross-generational in its appeal, which perhaps also makes it seem boring and trite.¹⁴ In studies of advertising, the pervasive use of the natural to sell products has come in for little critical examination, perhaps because nature seems to lie outside the important, contentious terms of race and gender.¹⁵ The pervasiveness of the use of nature in commercial culture is exactly why we should study it. Cultural history and cultural studies have begun to provide a basic, orienting framework for viewing these representations.

One piece of the framework is Raymond Williams's insight that ideas of nature naturalize and help obscure relations of power. In Williams's general view, the idea of nature itself and the way it has been worked out in poetry and painting are part of a selective cultural tradition encoding a long history of deeply exploitive social relations.¹⁶ Ideas of nature both express profound social longings and help conceal the unequal relations on which industrial societies are built. If they do not explicitly follow in Williams's tradition, groundbreaking works by feminists have detailed the close relationship between general cultural constructions of nature and conceptions of gender. An eclectic but growing tradition of work destabilizes the notion of nature as authentic, emphasizes its connections to relations of power, and encourages examination of the whole range of cultural practices for producing, showing, and using something called nature. In particular, Donna Haraway deals with museum exhibits and traces the ways the study and display of primates sustain cultural narratives about women and "primitive" peoples.¹⁷ In the case of mass consumer culture, nature's reach, diversity, and popularity means that however formulaic the artifacts—nature theme parks, for example—the stories they tell are stories to be reckoned with. They are there, in part, because the producers of mass culture have a lot of knowledge about how nature appeals. And however we define it, the mass-produced, popular-culture version of nature is a major source of imagery and information shaping public understandings of environmental and scientific questions. The pervasiveness of nature as mass media content ought to attract the interest of cultural studies and communications scholars. But while communications scholars have extensively tracked the representations of violence, races, genders, and professions in the mass media, it is striking that they have not given such categories as nature, wilderness, or the environment more than the most rudimentary analysis.¹⁸

To take Sea World seriously, we have to view it as one stream of a flood of nature representations that greets North Americans daily. These images and stories percolate in entertainment, advertising, television, news reportage, film, consumer goods, and shopping malls, as consumer culture and the mass media make the nonhuman world visible to an unprecedented degree. On television, nature programming that bridges vast stretches of space and time is an enormously popular staple, ranging from inexpensive filler shows employing stock footage to high quality nature documentaries such as *Nature*, *The Nature of Things*, *NOVA*, and *National Geographic Explorer*. And everywhere, and more diffusely, in genres of commercial mass culture ranging from the television advertisement for Clorox bleach to the scenic postcard at the drugstore, images of the pristine pastoral and the untouched wild add to an ever multiplying stock of visual representations of nature.

Outside the visual media, the culture of tourism has also developed a wide range of ways of showing and knowing about nature, from aquariums, zoos, dioramas, and performing animals to packaged adventures and ecological tourism. At the relatively inexpensive end of the market, nature tourism includes old-fashioned camping and hiking at state and national parks; at the high end, it includes catered and guided tours for the very wealthy to such exotic sites as the Galapagos Islands.¹⁹ Present-day tourism powerfully reproduces older imperial and colonial relationships between the first and third worlds, very often through the medium of mass consumption of exotic nature.²⁰ Americans also experience nature through the world of everyday material culture, especially decor and fashion. Highly successful retail chains such as the Nature Company offer mass-produced fashionable clothing and custom-made home decorations themed “nature” and “the outdoors” to a carefully studied, upscale audience.²¹ Although its emphasis is strongly on seeing, Sea World also joins these experiential and retail constructions of nature. All these diverse phenomena are connected by the ways they circulate arguments about what nature is and how humans ought to think and feel about it, through the culture of consumption. On one hand, these products and media appeal to and even embody contemporary popular concern with nature and the environment. On the other hand, popular culture, mass media, and consumer goods play a profound although mostly unexamined role in shaping people’s understanding of and relationship to the biological world. In her study of the Nature Company, Jennifer Price argues that shopping for nature commodities is a safe way to express environmental concern within the familiar satisfactions of consumerism, even while this ac-

tivity is structured to dampen awareness of the environmentally exploitive aspects to mass consumption itself. In the representation of nature, it is this problem of the gaps between what we are shown and what we can't see, between what can be thought and what might be imagined, that frames the problem for studying Sea World.²²

Armed with these thoughts, over the next several years I focused on Sea World's nature displays and especially its performing animals. Wondering where the theme park's traditions of animal display had come from, I read about the history of zoos and circuses, the performative structures of carnivals, and the ideology of natural history museums and national parks. I taught courses on tourism, animal performances, and nature and the environment in the mass media, using my teaching and discussions with students to try to understand what was happening in the whale shows. (The students were usually intrigued, and I learned a great deal from their comments and questions.) At the park, I tried to combine the historical and anthropological perspectives I'd gained with fieldwork, spending countless dollars on admission passes, film, and sunscreen, and endless hours watching, photographing, and recording whale, sea lion, dolphin, and bird shows. I asked my undergraduate students to tour Sea World, the zoo, or a museum and write papers about their impressions. I dragged my infant daughter, relatives, and friends through the park.

At the same time, I collected the unending flow of local San Diego press and television coverage of park events. The predictable and regular reporting on Sea World announced new animals, exhibits, and landscapes, charity events, and special performances, and it described animal research at the park. Less predictably, there were animal rights demonstrations outside the park and disputes between management and employees to follow. And life and death matters at Sea World could occasionally break into the national news, as when whales were born or killed in accidents, when trainers got seriously hurt, or ownership changed corporate hands. My bulging archive of press clips, local documents, and Sea World ephemera, along with the files of local governmental agencies, disclosed the history of the tourist attraction's interpenetration with the city and region, as well as the development of a national theme park industry. Surely this history was also part of the context shaping the theme park, its performances, and the perceptions of its audience. I became aware that Sea World had a local history of its own, one that was characterized by a close relationship to the growth of San Diego. And as I tracked Sea World in the popular and special-

ized business media, I saw that the park devoted prodigious effort to building a local, public identity for itself. The relationship of this identity construction to nature needed to be traced in its own right.

In 1991–92, a year’s release from teaching allowed me to begin sustained fieldwork. Since I was now familiar with the park and its workings, I needed to test my understandings against the knowledge of the people who made Sea World run, and so I sought permission from its administrators to conduct interviews with management and personnel. This access took a discouragingly long time to obtain, as I was forced to work my way up from the park’s public relations office in San Diego to the highest levels of Anheuser-Busch in St. Louis (and word had it, to members of the Busch family themselves). There was no reason for Sea World or its corporate owners to give me permission to do interviews. My repeated visits would take up considerable staff time and, I insisted, they could have no right of review or editorial control over my manuscript in return. (Sea World repeatedly requested this prerogative.)²³ Three things conspired, I think, to get me the access I sought. First, I provided management with a general description of my book project and assured them truthfully that I was not an animal rights activist.²⁴ Second, I assured them that I would respect “off the record” disclaimers and would not disclose sensitive information that might disrupt a marketing plan. This was not a hard promise to make since nearly everyone I would talk to had experience dealing with journalists if not academics, and as I pointed out, the pace of scholarly publication is so slow that it would be very unlikely that I could inadvertently unveil sensitive facts. Third, I was unthreatening but persistent. I told the managers over the phone, in writing, and in person that I sought to understand more about the park’s place in the life of San Diego, and how they understood their work. Once I had gained formal access, I still faced resistance from a series of public relations directors in the form of endless unreturned phone calls and long delays in meeting my requests. My goal of finding out as much as possible conflicted with the public relations department’s job, which, as in any industry, is not to give out information but to carefully control it. Here the basic fieldworker’s techniques of reading up on the details and refusing to go away proved powerful. When I was able to display expert knowledge of the economic ups and downs of the industry, it was harder for theme park representatives to refuse to talk with me or brush me off as a neophyte. The formal permission from St. Louis headquarters helped a great deal: it gave me license to keep coming back with more questions. Finally, over several months I got the in-

terviews I needed with Sea World administrators and employees in the marketing, food services, curatorial, animal training, public relations, education, and entertainment departments.

As noted above, my access was formal and sponsored, and the information derived from the interviews should be read with this in mind.²⁵ Nonetheless, I found that after an initial chat, most of the employees I met were happy to talk to me, even flattered, as people usually are when someone is interested in what they do all day.²⁶ These interviews were supplemented by in-depth discussions with several former employees who had worked at Sea World over a long period of time and could give me a strong sense of the park's evolution.²⁷ All these conversations allowed me to test the ideas I'd developed in reading and observation against the understandings of insiders. During this same year, I also conducted a field study of elementary school children to approach what Sea World meant to them and their families and in the classroom. I interviewed a small number of teachers, school administrators, and, with Sea World's permission, some of the instructors, parents, and volunteers who participated in Sea World's education programs.²⁸ And I attended Sea World's assemblies and special programs and wore out my shoes following along on school field trips and guided tours.

The result of these years of archival, observational, and interview research is a detailed account from several different angles. *Spectacular Nature* looks at Sea World from economic, local historical, spatial, and experiential perspectives, as well as from the point of view of its management and at least some of its customers. It is not possible to understand the park and its performances without this layering of context and perspectives. Two key trajectories are woven together in my exploration of Sea World's work and meanings: the problem of public space in an era of advancing corporate privatization is entwined with the problem of the representation of nature and the environment in the contemporary mass media. If at first I thought these topics were distinct, over time I understood that at Sea World they were not separable. Sea World, it turns out, represents new private institutional uses for nature. While it produces ocean-life stories for mass consumption, it is also inventing a public educational role for itself by providing curricular materials, classroom programs, teacher training, and media products to San Diego schools. When I looked at Sea World as a corporately produced public space, I saw a business offering a blend of information about marine animals and their environment in a commercial form that increasingly claimed the legitimacy of the traditional public educational domain. It

seemed centrally important that this didactic product had as its main subject the appeal of wildness and the popular fascination with marine mammals. Nature was Sea World's educational product, and its entrée into schools and public life. Conversely, when I examined Sea World as a collection of arguments about the nature of the nonhuman world, it was impossible to cordon off the park's performed stories from their corporate origins. The peculiarity of Sea World is, in fact, how well and tidily these dimensions—the private, corporate, and the transcendent natural—fit together most of the time. Each facet of the park infuses the meanings of the other. Sea World is full of corporate stories about nature, and nature stories about the corporation.

The first part of *Spectacular Nature* traces Sea World as a place and an experience in a local and national tourist economy. In chapter 1, "Another World: Theme Parks and Nature," I sketch the theme park industry that is the context for Sea World and begin an exploration of the appeal of the other world that is its special nature product. Against a very general background of the social history of the representation of nature, I argue that Sea World is a unique case and a central example of the nature stories that are told through the American commercial media and mass-produced popular culture. These stories have a long past, and they carry particular class, ethnic, and gender codings and implications. Chapter 2, "The Park and the City," traces Sea World's local history and development as an institution straddling the public-private boundary. The workings of the park's landscape, its structure as time, space, and human effort, are traced in chapter 3, "Producing the Sea World Experience: Landscape and Labor." I take up Sea World's entry into the expanding market for nature and science education in chapter 4, "Enlightenment Lite: The Theme Park Classroom." Education and instruction make up Sea World's other, less material landscape, one that can be exported far beyond the physical park. Since Sea World's education products are explicitly built around the park's spectacular animals, they serve, in addition to their didactic function, as a way to market the park to its audience and thus to reproduce the park as paying attraction and going concern. The ways Sea World's spectacular entertainments are produced, and the peculiar constraints of working with live animals and a variety of species, are taken up in chapter 5, "Routine Surprises: Producing Entertainment." The central and paradigmatic animal event at Sea World, the Shamu show, I analyze in detail in chapter 6, "Dreaming of Whales: The Shamu Show." Here, I pay attention to the embedding of gender and ethnicity in the performance and, especially, to

the relationship between the celebrity whale and its corporate parent and sponsor. From different directions, each of these chapters adds to the picture of Sea World's work with landscapes, plants, animals, and people, and of the ways it communicates its ideas about nature, science, and the environment. In a conclusion, I assess the general messages about nature and the environment that Sea World sponsors for its large public, and I return to the problem of the private, corporate production of public discourse around nature and the environment. Despite its emphasis on the specificity of local cases, my argument is that Sea World is resolutely a part of contemporary American and increasingly transnational corporate culture—its arguments are not just recyclings of older cultural patterns and ideologies. Rather, they sit and fit neatly in a contemporary context of the realignment of much of public life and cultural meaning in the United States today.

As the reader will have no trouble telling, *Spectacular Nature* has a political reference point. A basic premise of this work is that theme parks and tourist attractions are never mere entertainment and recreation. No matter how much Sea World's operatives insist on the innocence of entertainment, it represents and shapes the world in ways that have implications.²⁹ Selectively interpreting reality to and for their customers, the park's producers try to discover and respond to what they think their customers want. In the case of Sea World the reality to be interpreted is named marine nature. But implied in the notion of nature is a set of contested problems, including local and international histories, environmental problems, and people's relationship to the physical environment generally. In this light, Sea World's entertainments, as materials to help make sense of the world, have important consequences.

I began this introduction by telling a story about how I refocused my guiding questions in the process of research. It was not only my perspective that changed during the course of fieldwork. The park and its larger social context changed, too. Sea World got physically bigger, changed corporate hands, revised its landscape and architecture several times, and reassessed its market. Its managers shifted their rhetorical strategies to meet popular protest and suit their changing evaluation of their audience. The popular environmental politics of the 1980s and early 1990s increasingly forced the theme park's managers to perceive their customers as "caring about" nature, animals, and the environment, and it encouraged them to align the park's entertainments the same caring way. At the same time, as I detail in the chapters to follow, a series of deaths and serious accidents involving the orcas and their trainers in the

late 1980s forced Sea World to adopt a very aggressive strategy of portraying itself as a rational, educational institution. In particular Sea World became more explicitly environmental and educational during the years I documented it, although “environmental” and “educational” have a very limited sense in the park. Changes in both dimensions responded to public relations pressures and reflected new corporate marketing strategies.

All this might seem like a story of progress: a strictly money-making institution decides to become more “educational,” the better to serve its customers and a general public. For me it is not so easy to see the transformation this way. As my Sea World study progressed, conservative electoral and cultural politics and social policies gathered strength in California and the United States, turning even more sharply right in fall 1994. As I write this in 1996, Southern California now seems set to lead the way in accomplishing a radical governmental and cultural agenda that will include the privatization of public property and institutions, including much of education, as well as the restriction of immigration and citizenship rights, the dismantling of social welfare programs, and the mangling, if not overthrow, of environmental protections. Is it preposterous to locate a nature theme park in this social political context? At the very least, if a visit to Sea World expresses concern about the environment (as Sea World’s advertising proposes), Sea World’s affluent audience acts on this sentiment in a thoroughly private and corporate context, and one where the definitions of nature and environmental problems seem reassuringly separate from other political issues.

In the middle 1980s, when I began this project, the theme park as public space seemed like an intriguing metaphor. By 1996, it is less a metaphor than an incipient reality. I have already noted that the theme park suffuses entertainment with advertising and public relations. But there are more boundaries to blur. In the current context of discussions about dismantling public education, when Sea World argues that it produces a sound environmental-educational product, it is not hard to imagine that the theme park might soon replace the classroom. Indeed, I argue here that in some ways it has already done so. Similarly, given the growing enthusiasm for subcontracted, long-distance instruction via video and computer, Sea World’s education and media departments may soon find themselves producing courses for schools and colleges, a project that is already well under way in San Diego. Given the increasing commercialization of formerly public functions and the swollen rhetoric claiming that private enterprise can always do public work better, such sce-

narios are entirely plausible.³⁰ Sea World's entrance into the schoolroom would be another step in the injection of a corporate view into the content of education, as well as an extension of control over the educational process. Such incursions could and arguably already do limit and distort democratic control over education, over what can be taught and learned.³¹ Whether or not such scenes come to pass, Sea World and places like it have had an important role to play in heralding the growing role of the private corporation in producing public services for a profit, just as they have been important in promoting the private corporation as environmental activist and educational philanthropist. Sea World is successful in its public roles in part because it has occupied the entertainment space of nature so well and mobilized the universalistic meanings of nature so aggressively. Whether this corporation and others like it ought to occupy such an ample space is a different question, and I hope this book will help educators, parents, and citizens address it.

Sea World's versions of nature—carefully produced, manufactured, and coordinated from a mega-corporate point of view—are, of course, not the only ones available. But never before have images of nature had such a direct and powerful link to corporate capitalism or such wide dissemination through the mass media. The same forces involved in the biosphere's exploitation have an important stake in nature's definition and representation. Let's explore these unexplored connections.