

Bass Pro Shops,
Environmental
Thought, and the
Anima(l)tronic
Dead

Christina M. Colvin

ABSTRACT

This essay collides with the aesthetic of wilderness cultivated by the North American retail chain Bass Pro Shops. Through elaborate displays and décor that render each store part rustic lodge, aquarium, amusement park, natural history museum, and hunting simulator, the stores represent the natural world and its inhabitants as abundant resources for human consumption. The stores' aesthetic is primarily wrought through the arrangement of taxidermied animals. These animals include both traditional wildlife mounts posed in lifelike attitudes as well as animatronic taxidermy that becomes “alive” in response to players' achievements in a shooting range game. By exploring the stores' traditional and animatronic taxidermy as well as its conflation of animal and machine, this essay explores the conception of environmental conservation and animal ontology upheld by Bass Pro Shops.

KEYWORDS

animals
environmental philosophy
visual culture
taxidermy
animatronics





Figure 1. A section of interior of a Bass Pro Shops Outdoor World store with taxidermy and a live-animal aquarium (C. Colvin)

Bass Pro Shops Outdoor World stores immerse visitors in manmade wildernesses. In addition to hunting, fishing, and camping merchandise, the stores display elaborate décor representing North American backcountry. Murals of rivers and mountains, stone fireplaces, ubiquitous foliage, carved wooden signage as well as canoes and prop planes suspended from high ceilings bespeak a wish for outdoor exploration.

Natural objects further provide an aura of authenticity. Across the sales floor, waterfalls and streams run and ripple, trees loom, and turtles and freshwater fish swim in thousand-gallon aquariums. Central to their construction of an ample wilderness are Bass Pro stores' taxidermied animals. Full-body mounts of grazing pronghorn and vigilant foxes top shelves of flannel shirts and camouflage-patterned throw blankets. In the tradition of hunting trophies, dozens of white-tailed deer heads spiral the circumference of a column. Additionally striking are the taxidermied animals arranged in scenes of interspecies interaction. Spanning the edge of one store's second story, white wolves pursue a trio of elk. One of the elk loses his footing to hang in an arrested tumble above the faces of visitors.

This essay explores the relationship between taxidermy and imagination, hunting and environmental thought. Taxidermy designates the practice of preparing and mounting skins for art, preservation, education, and exhibition. For Rachel Poliquin, "[t]axidermy exists because of life's inevitable trudge toward dissolution. Taxidermy wants to stop time. To keep life. To cherish what is no longer as if it were immortally whole."¹ The desire to maintain environmental vitality seems especially urgent during the present era of natural resource depletion, mass species extinction, and global climate change. For Bass Pro Shops, however, taxidermy's uncanny ability to depict "life" after death serves the stores' central aesthetic goal: to portray a consumable natural world. Integrating outdoor scenes and retail, taxidermy and firearms, Bass Pro stores render merchandise and wilderness as available for human use. Through an encounter with the stores' aesthetic choices, I ask: what conception of animal ontology does Bass Pro Shops' taxidermy endorse? And what manner of animal being does the company's environmental philosophy permit?

Bass Pro Shops invests in both keeping and taking life. The founder of Bass Pro Shops, Johnny Morris, has avowed an interest in making his company a "corporate conservation leader." For Morris, the "future of our industry, the sports we serve, and the sports we personally enjoy are absolutely more dependent upon our conservation efforts or how we manage our natural resources than anything else."² The connection between hunting and conservation enjoys a long history in the U.S. and Canada. After sportsman and President Theodore Roosevelt founded the first North American conservation organization in 1887, hunter-conservationists developed the North American Model of Wildlife Conservation, principles designed to guide

wildlife management decisions. In addition to the Model's first tenet — wildlife is public property — the Model proposes that all citizens should have freedom to hunt and fish.³ These tenets oppose preservationist views of the environment that suggest the natural world and its inhabitants should be protected from use.⁴ The philosophy of conservation espoused by the North American Model continues to enjoy support in hunter-conservationist societies today. Some state and federal wildlife agencies, including the National Wildlife Refuge System, advance an understanding of wildlife that echoes the Model: the System's website calls animals hunted in healthy habitats "surpluses that are a renewable resource."⁵ Criticisms of the North American Model of Wildlife Conservation certainly exist and are worth consideration.⁶ For the purposes of this essay, however, I want to consider how Bass Pro Shops stores' taxidermied animals express the conservation philosophy that understands wild creatures as consumable, renewable resources.

Taxidermy reflects a number of human attitudes toward animals, including the desire to endow singular animals with emblematic status. The taxidermy that Bass Pro stores display may reveal what Kenneth Shapiro calls an animal's "deindividuation" or the tendency to "refuse to live toward an animal as an individual."⁷ As hunting trophies or natural history museum specimens, single animals are positioned as representatives of their species. Using deer as an example, Shapiro suggests that, for many, the term "the deer" "refers to a species as a reified entity rather than as an aggregate of individual deer," making a buck killed by a hunter not "a concretely present individual, for any one deer is largely lived toward as part of that reification, 'the deer.'"⁸ Even though it can depict animals as stand-ins for a reified abstraction — a species — taxidermy can also encourage contemplation of animals as concrete, ecological, and singular. Glenn Parsons suggests that the aesthetic value of animals arises from their "functional beauty," that an animal is beautiful "when its form appears suited to ... its function."⁹ Parsons continues, "Take the cheetah, a creature whose body ... appears 'built for speed.' Virtually every feature or part of the cheetah is manifestly geared to that end: its long legs bespeak a formidable stride, its non-retractable claws reveal its gripping and steering ability, its narrow body and small head bespeak an aerodynamic movement."¹⁰ As aesthetic objects, taxidermied animals invite consideration of the relationship between their physical features and how an environment shaped those features. The absence of motion central to taxidermic representation uniquely encourages

contemplation of how an animal moved precisely because taxidermy implies but cannot capture such movements. Further, a dead animal re-presented provides an opportunity to imagine that singular animal's life — her history, her plans, and her preferences — those incomprehensible experiences that helped make her a distinctive creature. While this individuating approach does not negate that taxidermy requires an animal's death, it does offer an alternative to encountering taxidermy as simply a demonstration of human dominance: the unknowable animal histories to which taxidermy can gesture confront viewers with a limit to human knowledge. As Poliquin suggests, taxidermy has “imaginative potency and potential,” features that should not be overlooked lest animals be deindividuated without critical rejoinder.¹¹

While some natural resources can be renewed, particular organisms certainly cannot be. Therefore, Bass Pro Shops' conservation philosophy — animals are renewable resources — demands the deindividuation of animals and, by extension, the generalization of their behavior. Such a process, for Shapiro, “invests the aggregate of ... non-individuals with a kind of unified being that allows members of the species to be killed as if they were so much grass being mowed.”¹² Bass Pro Shops represents animals as if they possess such a unified being, a fact made clear when we consider the stores' animatronic taxidermy. Animatronic taxidermy combines two typically separate technologies of representation. Jane Desmond distinguishes traditional taxidermy from animatronics: “In taxidermy, humans kill animals and then manipulate their dead bodies to look alive. In animatronics, humans build fake animal bodies, get inside them, and, through their own bodily motions, ‘bring them to life.’”¹³ For Desmond, traditional taxidermy differs from animatronic animals due to the former's use of actual skins to represent dead animals and the latter's use of imposed motion in entirely manmade animal forms. Bass Pro Shops' combination of these two mediums allows the company to represent not only “lifelike” animal bodies through the use of the skins of dead animals, but also animal behaviors through an animatronic simulation of their movements. Whereas traditional taxidermy invites viewers to contemplate that which humans cannot know, moving taxidermy represents animal behaviors and actions as if they were fully known and representable.

Through its imposition of motion, the animatronic taxidermy offered by Bass Pro stores carries the company's philosophy of animals as renewable

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resources to a logical extreme. For one dollar per play, visitors can select one of a dozen imitation rifles that border a replica of a woodsy outpost. After paying, a series of bulls-eye targets lights up throughout the outpost's interior. A shootable object corresponds to each target: the rear bumper of an old, rusted automobile, a lopsided piece of steel awning, a whisky barrel. When a player hits one of the targets, the game rewards her with a sound or animation: the car's tail lights flash, or the whisky barrel resounds with a




Figure 2. Shooting range game with animatronic taxidermy (C. Colvin)

metal clank. Several targets, however, correspond to animatronic, taxidermied animals. These targets also respond with a sound or animation in reward for a successful “shot.” When a player hits the taxidermied coyote, his head, tilted upward in a howl, swivels from side to side. When a player hits a tree stump with a woodchuck suspended above it, the woodchuck spins rapidly on a vertical axis. Hit the bobcat, and the noise of a cat’s cry plays as if the bobcat is in pain. Hit the skunk, and his tail will lift and spray a fine mist in the player’s general direction.

All of the stores’ animatronic, taxidermied animals, when struck with a player’s “bullet,” exhibit reactions that imitate or hyperbolize behaviors often associated with the represented species. By portraying animals that repeat the same reactions again and again, the stores suggest that animals do not possess capacities for flexible behavior. Communication, threat response, and capacities to suffer are represented as mechanical, predictable, even humorous reactions. The singular coyote, skunk, woodchuck, and bobcat whose skin is displayed become collections of generalized, knowable habits. Moreover, within the context of the shooting range game, the animatronic taxidermy asserts that animals exist to be killed: they “activate” or become alive only when a player has successfully shot them. These animals are, as Donna Haraway would likely agree, ontologically available for killing.¹⁴

As Bass Pro Shops’ animatronic taxidermy shows, an understanding of animals only as natural resources — as *products* of natural systems — discourages recognition of their role as *producers*: as architects and engineers of diverse, lived environments. Repudiating longstanding theories that equate living beings to machines, biologist Jakob von Uexküll declared in 1934 that “[w]hoever wants to hold on to the conviction that all living things are only machines should abandon all hope of glimpsing their environments.”¹⁵ For Uexküll, animals cannot be thought independently of their unique perceptual worlds, a conception of animal being that calls attention to animals’ involvement in complex systems of interdependency and flux. Despite Bass Pro Shops’ dedication to environmental conservation, their animatronic, taxidermied animals — preserved from decay, predictable in behavior, and available for killing — embody a fantasy of continuously renewed, undifferentiated, consumable creatures untethered to dynamic ecological forces and overlapping lived environments. The stores’ reduction

of animals' concrete materiality and ecological importance undermines any realism in its wilderness aesthetic.

As what Friedrich-Karl Holtmeier calls "ecological agents," animals shape environments, and environments shape animals. Ecological thinking therefore necessitates a consideration of animal agency: of the perceptible and imperceptible, representable and unrepresentable acts of animals. As evinced by Holtmeier's book, *Animals' Influence on the Landscape and Ecological Importance*, animals act as builders, pollinators, transporters, parasites, producers, consumers, and more. Holtmeier suggests that "[t]he influence of some species on their habitats is hardly perceivable, while the effects of others may even be spectacular."¹⁶ Reducing animal being to an invariable set of traits cannot capture the fullness of animals' contributions to ecological systems, nor does such a reduction account for the "hardly perceivable" acts of animals that flicker on the edge of human awareness.¹⁷ The limits of human experience and knowledge prevent full comprehension of the extent of animals' contributions to their (and our) environments. Rather than claim nonhuman acts to be few, might we turn our imaginations toward barely-perceptible wildernesses and landscapes, animal worlds we live among yet cannot fully understand? 

Notes

- 1 Rachel Poliquin, *The Breathless Zoo: Taxidermy and the Cultures of Longing* (University Park: Penn State University Press, 2012), 6.
- 2 “How an Outdoor Store Became a Conservation Leader,” Accessed July 12, 2015, <http://media.basspro.com/pdf/Conservation.pdf>.
- 3 “The North American Model of Wildlife Conservation, Sportsmen, and the Boone and Crockett Club,” The Boone and Crockett Club, Accessed July 10, 2015, http://www.boone-crockett.org/conservation/conservation_NAM.asp?area=conservation.
- 4 John Muir is perhaps the best-known advocate of preservationism. For a nuanced distinction between conservation and preservation, see Bryan G. Norton, “Conservation and Preservation: A Conceptual Rehabilitation,” *Environmental Ethics* 8, no. 3 (Fall 1986): 195–220.
- 5 “Why Are Hunting, Fishing and Trapping Allowed on National Wildlife Refuges?,” *U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service National Wildlife Refuge System*, Accessed November 8, 2012, <http://www.fws.gov/refuges/hunting/whyAllowed.html>.
- 6 For one such example of critique of the North American Model, see Michael Nelson et al., “An Inadequate Construct?” *Wildlife Professional* 5, no. 2 (Summer 2011): 58–60.
- 7 Kenneth Shapiro, “The Death of the Animal: Ontological Vulnerability,” *Between the Species: A Journal of Ethics* 5 (Fall 1989): 183–93, 184.
- 8 *Ibid.*, 184–5.
- 9 Glenn Parsons, “The Aesthetic Value of Animals,” *Environmental Ethics* 27 (2007): 151–69, 161.
- 10 *Ibid.*, 162.
- 11 Poliquin, *The Breathless Zoo*, 81.
- 12 Shapiro, “The Death of the Animal,” 185.
- 13 Jane Desmond, “Displaying Death, Animating Life: Changing Fictions of ‘Liveness’ from Taxidermy to Animatronics,” in *Representing Animals*, ed. Nigel Rothfels (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002), 159.
- 14 For an exploration of “killability,” see Donna Haraway, *When Species Meet* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 80.
- 15 Jakob von Uexküll, *A Foray Into the Worlds of Animals and Humans: With a Theory of Meaning*, trans. Joseph D. O’Neil (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), 41.
- 16 Friedrich-Karl Holtmeier, *Animals’ Influence on the Landscape and Ecological Importance: Natives, Newcomers, Homecomers* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2014), 440.
- 17 *Ibid.*

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