

# **Ocean, The Final Frontier: The Demise of Turner's Thesis**

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## **Ocean Exploitation**

Frederick Jackson Turner described the role of imperialism in western culture in his prestigious Frontier Thesis of 1893. Turner established that the frontier was representative of American development and defined the nation's character. The frontier was the existence of free land, its continuous recession, and the advance of American settlement westward.<sup>1</sup> Expansionism was not limited to the land, however, but extended towards the sea as this unknown frontier became culturally, economically, and politically relevant to the United States.<sup>2</sup> Knowledge of the ocean's depths reflected the nation's national authority and established its extensive, formal empire.<sup>3</sup>

Celebrated expeditions, such as the voyage of HMS *Challenger*, illustrate the emergence of the ocean as an area of sustained scientific research as well as a highway of foreign trade.<sup>4</sup> The National Geographic Society has funded numerous expeditions while working with prestigious research teams to uncover the mysteries of the ocean ecosystem. These milestones of sea exploration have become popularized through National Geographic's use of photography and ability to reach a large audience. The oceanic images captured by the NGS uncover the deeper influence of western culture's imperialistic approach to the ocean ecosystem and its many life forms.

The Frontier Thesis has shaped the way western culture has approached the ocean for many years, and its presence can be found within the early photographs of sea exploration documented by the NGS. Today, however, its prevalence has become

challenged and arguably broken. An historical timeline of illustrations depicting the sea turtle, as presented by the NGS, reveals an early dominance of Turner's Frontier Thesis that epitomizes imperialism in America. This early dominance becomes reduced by the midcentury and is completely fractured by the early 2000's. By reviewing past and present photographs used by the NGS to represent sea turtles, one can trace the evolution of the narrative of humankind's exploitation of this ecosystem and the eventual termination of the Frontier Thesis.

### **The Study of Seas**

Ocean life and ecosystems have been of interest to many fields of study. Its subject matter has been widely analyzed by critics of the sciences as well as the humanities. Much of the scholarly work devoted to oceans today focuses on the current status of the seas as being threatened. Oceans are undergoing tremendous stress through overfishing, rising sea temperatures, and issues of biodiversity, issues that are largely attributed to humans. An ecocentric approach to oceanic studies places the concern on the inherent value of the ocean ecosystems and life forms, regardless of what they can provide for humans. An anthropocentric approach is much more common in studies today, as concern for the ocean inevitably falls on its ability to provide resources and food for humans. Within this essay, I will contribute to ocean studies by assessing the human perception of this ecosystem over a timeline of 85 years. I will analyze the representation of sea turtles presented in the feature stories of National Geographic to assess their connection to Turner's Frontier Thesis.

Humankind's place in the sea has not always been scientifically motivated. Michael S. Reidy and Helen M. Rozwadowski analyze "The Spaces in Between: Science,

Ocean, Empire” to acknowledge human exploitation of this ecosystem. Their research elaborates upon the human use of the ocean and attempts at controlling it for personal gain. Reidy and Rozwadowski acknowledge western culture’s desire to conquer the unknown, in this case the sea, and the science and technology that made it possible.<sup>5</sup> They trace the historical struggle of humankind to gain better knowledge of the ocean by acknowledging that in order to command the sea, one must be able to understand it.<sup>6</sup> Reidy and Rozwadowski find that the imperial practices and ideologies of western culture have led to the assumption that marine resources should be exploited maximally by people with the knowledge and power to identify and extract them.<sup>7</sup> This mentality supports Turner’s Frontier Thesis and its application towards the ocean ecosystem.

In a similar analysis, Dr. Paul S. Galtsoff addresses humankind’s early fascination of the sea in his article, “The Mystery of the Ocean.” His article discusses the origin of human curiosity with and fear of the ocean by tracing this mentality back to Chaldeans and Egyptians.<sup>8</sup> He references the evolution of oceanic knowledge beginning with fantastic legends and the scientific knowledge that eventually replaced them. Galtsoff describes how the “sea monster” was eventually collected, examined, and then classified.<sup>9</sup> The transition from a mythical fascination of the ocean ecosystem to the extensive body of knowledge that it is today, has allowed humankind to uncover many mysteries within the ocean’s depths.

The scholarly articles discussed thus far have acknowledged a complicated relationship between humankind and the ocean ecosystem that establishes a power imbalance between the two. Both have referenced the origin of humankind’s desire to utilize this ecosystem and control it through imperial ideology. William Earl Weeks dives

into the controversial subject of imperialism and nationalism linked to the United States in his article, “American Nationalism, American Imperialism: An Interpretation of United States Political Economy, 1789-1861.” Weeks identifies the origin of American imperialism as “the principle of political and economic union and what it promised: safety from attack and the prospect of boundless expansion.”<sup>10</sup> Weeks acknowledges how the central government linked ideological imperative and economic necessity to commercial expansionism.<sup>11</sup> This served as the primary means to Americanize the world as well as stimulate the internal development of the United States.<sup>12</sup>

The visual studies are another category of scholarly research relevant to this essay. The power of images to argue on their own and subtly influence an audience has been considered by many rhetorical critics. Catherine Lutz and Jane Collins wrote *Reading National Geographic* to debunk the magazine’s pictorial representations of non-western cultures. While images seem to tell a great deal about the subjects of articles, Lutz and Collins find that they share even more about the rules of western culture. The two study issues of race, gender, privilege, progress, and modernity through an analysis of visual framing.<sup>13</sup> Lutz and Collins establish that these images and texts largely validate middle-class American values.<sup>14</sup> This book acknowledges the ability for images to embody more than their framed subject. Images in National Geographic are capable of representing western culture ideology through the way that each creature, landscape, or culture is being framed.

### **Images of National Geographic**

The National Geographic Society began as a group led by Gardiner Greene Hubbard in 1888. In his introductory address, Greene stated, “I am not a scientific man,

nor do I lay claim to any special knowledge that would entitle me to be called a ‘Geographer.’”<sup>15</sup> The Society was not an organization reserved for the elite, but rather acknowledged the declining interest in geography within the American population and strove to restore it. The second president of the NGS, Alexander Graham Bell recognized that pictures were an effective way of appealing to the public, stating, “people wanted immediate experience of the world, not the systematic lessons professionals sought to provide.”<sup>16</sup> The magazine, along with its exceptional photography, became the most widely read source of general scientific information in America, its circulation exceeding 500,000 by 1918.<sup>17</sup>

Sea exploration in NGS research programs has excelled since its humble beginnings. The Society has an exceptional list of underwater achievements including the invention of the Aqua-Lung, Bathysphere, and discovery of the long lost remains of the *Titanic*.<sup>18</sup> The NGS has aided in many other scientific discoveries regarding the ocean ecosystem as it strives not only to understand this intricate ecosystem, but also the species that make it their home. The magazine has documented the peculiar life of the sea turtle for many years and continues to do so today. Through the documentation of these images, the evolution of western culture’s behavior towards sea turtles and the ocean frontier have been captured within the photographs.

The texts that I am using for analysis are feature stories of sea turtles by the NGS. I will be focusing on the images and brief captions of sea turtles within nine feature length stories. I have chosen one feature story from each decade beginning in 1924 and ending in 2009. This timeline spans 85 years and will be an excellent representation of the role that the Frontier Thesis has played in western culture. The feature stories include

as many as 13 visual representations of sea turtles and as few as three. Through an analysis of these images, I will be able to gain a better sense of the conflicting roles of sea turtles and humans in the presence of the Frontier Thesis.

The first article I will assess is “Australia’s Wild Wonderland,” written by M.P. Greenwood Adams in 1924. This story includes six images of sea turtles, all of which depict the species as the passive prey of human explorers. The second feature story, “The Great Barrier Reef and its Isles: The Wonder and Mystery of Australia’s World-Famous Geographical Feature,” was written in 1930 by Charles Barrett. This article includes eight images that support Turner’s Frontier Thesis by regarding human explorers as dominant over sea turtles. Many of the images reveal men riding, sitting on, and chasing after sea turtles.

In 1943, the NGS published a feature story entitled, “Capturing Giant Turtles in the Caribbean,” written by David D. Duncan. Similar to the previous two feature stories, this article continues the turtle’s passive role as prey and the humans’ active role as the heroic main character. There are several images within this feature story that display turtle undersides being carved as a way for captains to distinguish their catch from one another. The 1959 article, “Seychelles, Tropical Isles of Eden,” written by Quentin Keynes, establishes human dominance in images that display turtles, “stacked like dishes on a drain board.”<sup>19</sup> This same article depicts turtles placed within cages that are referred to as “watery prisons.”<sup>20</sup>

The 1967 feature story, “Caribbean Green Turtle: Imperiled Gift of the Sea,” written by Archie Carr, reveals a changing western perception of sea turtles. The nine images of sea turtles within the article elevate the importance of the species by

acknowledging their endangered status and the work of the Turtle Bogue Hatchery. The sixth feature story is “One Strange Night on Turtle Beach” written by Paul A. Zahl. This piece was written in 1973 and is significant because the images humanize the role of the sea turtle and vilify the role of the hunter. The article includes ten illustrations that depict the sea turtle as an intricate and incredible species, one caption even referring to a hatching site as “one of nature’s most spectacular phenomena.”<sup>21</sup>

The victimization of sea turtles is continued in the 1981 feature story, “Paradise Beneath the Sea,” written by Ron and Valeria Taylor. The three images representing sea turtles within this piece demonstrate the beauty of the species while regarding humankind as, “the green turtles’ worst predator.”<sup>22</sup> The feature story, “In a Race for Survival,” written by Anne and Jack Rudloe in 1994, further breaks away from the Frontier Thesis by emphasizing the endangered status of sea turtles. The article demonizes hunters of the sea turtle species by referring to them as poachers. There are 13 images that depict sea turtles as “exposed and wary,”<sup>23</sup> through illustrating the dangers that sea turtles encounter on a daily basis. Tim Appenzeller wrote the last article within my analysis in 2009 entitled, “Ancient Mariner.” The four images within this article acknowledge the perilous life of the sea turtle, but emphasize the long history that this species has had on Earth and its incredible adaptability.<sup>24</sup>

In order to assess all nine of these articles and discover the connections between them, my analysis will include three narrative plots. The first category is a character/action-driven plot that regards human explorers as the active characters and “heroes” of the narrative. Within this first plot, the sea turtles play passive roles as the “prey” of explorers. The second category that I assess is a scene-driven plot, where the

human and sea turtle characters become irrelevant as the scene itself fills the leading role. The third plot is character/action-driven once again, however this time the sea turtle plays the active role as “victim.” Analysis of these three narrative plots reveals the past, present, and future influence of Frederick Jackson Turner’s Frontier Thesis upon the species and the implications of its demise.

### **Methodology**

My research is unique from existing studies because I am focusing on National Geographic’s depiction of the ocean, specifically their pictorial representation of sea turtles. I am analyzing these images in order to discover the role that Frederick Jackson Turner’s Frontier Thesis played in the western cultural perception of the ocean ecosystem and its presence today. There is a lack of scholarship that traces imperial ideology within western culture that spans 85 years and does so through pictorial representations. This photographic timeline reveals the transitions within the western cultural perception of the seas and sea turtles. This analysis illustrates the relationship between humankind and what was once a prevalent species in the ocean, all while tracking the relevancy of the Frontier Thesis.

Human interaction with the ocean and ocean species has evolved with the aid of science and technology over the past decades. Throughout history we can see that humans have approached the ocean with fear and curiosity. As our species has gained knowledge and understanding of the ocean, some scholars argue our fear of the unknown has become exploitation of the controlled. Do the images of National Geographic reflect the life of the sea turtle in ways that harm or aid its endangered status? How do these images represent the Frontier Thesis and its place in western culture today? What do



these images say about humankind's comfort level with the ocean as an unknown frontier and how can this ultimately affect the future of the sea turtle species?

I utilize the visual and narrative perspective to trace the images of sea turtles framed by National Geographic photographers. In order to remain as objective as possible, I have filtered my research to one feature length story depicting the life of sea turtles from 1924-2009. The visual perspective allows for an analysis of the framing of images as indicators of western cultural values and perceptions. As the images presented by the NGS remain one of the most influential aspects of the magazine, its photography can serve as a reflection of western culture's mentality regarding each location or species being framed.

The narrative perspective allows me to connect the visuals to one another and illustrate western culture's eventual break from the Frontier Thesis. The images captured by the NGS suggest a power imbalance between humankind and sea turtles. The feature stories regard sea turtles as inferior characters to humans until later in the timeline. It is interesting to assess the role, and role reversals, illustrated within the NGS articles over an historical timeline. The narrative approach ultimately allows me to understand the role that sea turtles have held in the past, what their current role is, and where it will lead them in the future.

### **Character/Action-Driven Plot: Hunters as Heroes**

The early feature stories covered by the NGS depicting sea turtles are framed in the backdrop of sea expeditions to distant lands. "Australia's Wild Wonderland," written in 1924 fits this description. The article captures the essence of expansionism in America by placing the role of human explorers as heroes in a character/action-driven plot. Within

the article, humans acknowledge the value of sea turtles only in their ability to produce protein rich eggs and serve as a meat source. The character of the sea turtle remains inferior to the human character, and is even objectified as part of the narrative background. The images illustrate a shallow ecological view of sea turtles that values the species solely upon their ability to benefit humans. The sea turtle is referenced by images as a frequent “captive” of humans. One caption reads, “Female turtles moving to the sea, after being held prisoners all night.”<sup>25</sup> Sea turtle’s are represented as objects to be claimed and captured by humans without any remorse. The character of the sea turtle as a frequent “captive” of human explorers reveals the inferiority of the species role.

“The Great Barrier Reef and its Isles: The Wonder and Mystery of Australia’s World-Famous Geographical Feature” similarly advances a character/action-driven plot. This feature story is also based on an expedition, but expresses another feature of the explorer’s multilevel character. The human explorers are illustrated as dominant over sea turtles in a humorous fashion that continues to dehumanize the species. An image titled, “Turtle riding in Barrier Reef Waters”<sup>26</sup> depicts a man riding a harnessed turtle as if it were some sort of game. In a similar photograph, a man is shown riding a stationary turtle on land describing the species as, “clumsy and deliberate,” with a heading caption that reads, “The Mermaid and Her Steed.”<sup>27</sup> These images and captions regard the sea turtle as an inactive character that cannot do anything about its current situation. The human, on the other hand, is regarded as the active character and is superior to the sea turtle species.

The 1943 article, “Capturing Giant Turtles in the Caribbean” by David D. Duncan, illustrates another character/action-driven plot. Like previous images, the article elevates the human character while degrading the role of the sea turtle. This specific

article, however, introduces the humans' role as hunter to the narrative. Images of noosed turtles, flipped onto their backs, and thrown down a chute into a "Fattening Pen in Key West"<sup>28</sup> illustrate a cruel dimension within the humans' role. An image entitled, "With Painless Carving, the Skipper Brands His Catch,"<sup>29</sup> reveals the cruel manner in which humans objectify this species. The blind assumption that carving a sea turtles abdomen would not cause the creature any pain reveals the mentality of these explorers as truly apathetic to other living species.

The last feature story that displays a similar character/action-driven plot is the 1959 article, "Seychelles, Tropic Isles of Eden," written by Quentin Keynes. Similarly, this article objectifies the sea turtle, valuing it for its enormous size and ability to produce eggs. The sea turtle is regarded as a giant, a monster, and even referred to as a parked car.<sup>30</sup> Images of men sitting on giant sea turtles illustrate the dominance of humankind over the natural world and the presence of the Frontier Thesis. The inactive role of the sea turtle as a captive of human explorers is demonstrated within these images and captions. Sea turtles are continuously referred to as objects and never respected as living creatures. Captions refer to the turtles as living stools, parked cars, or stacked dishes.<sup>31</sup> These images dehumanize the sea turtle species, and by doing so, advance the notion that it is heroic for the human character to dominate over them. As a culture, we are only able to feel sympathy for creatures exhibiting human-like qualities. Until the sea turtle is humanized within the images, it will not receive an active or leading role within the narrative.

The Frontier Thesis is being perfectly captured within the character/action-driven plot of the first four articles. The human character is an explorer who is a dominant

hunter of sea turtles. In the western mentality governed by the Frontier Thesis, this character is a hero. The Frontier Thesis is being represented through the expedition mentality of humans expanding into unknown frontiers with the goals to discover, conquer, and control. Part of Frederick Jackson Turner's Frontier Thesis establishes that the frontier is a place of rugged individuality and independence. Within these first four articles, a sense of adventure and independence is depicted throughout the images of men dominant over sea turtles.

### **Scene-Driven Plot: An Even Ground**

The 1967 feature story, "Caribbean Green Turtle: Imperiled Gift of the Sea," suggests a shift in the western perception of sea turtles. This article takes place at the Turtle Bogue Hatchery in Costa Rica. The hatchery's setting remains a dominant feature throughout the article that differentiates this section of the timeline from others. This feature story marks a switch within the narrative from a character/action-driven plot to a scene-driven plot.

The visuals and their captions recognize that the once plentiful food source of sea turtles has become depleted and needs to be re-established. The images presented within this feature story degrade the status of humans, while simultaneously elevating the sea turtle to an equivalent role. It is significant that both the humans and sea turtles are being framed as part of the backdrop of the Turtle Bogue Hatchery in Costa Rica. One image displays a man "planting" turtle eggs, which were disturbed in their natural nests, and reburying them in the sanctuary of the Turtle Bogue. Another image frames a sea turtle fitted with goggles that filter sky color as part of a sea-finding experiment at the hatchery. What is significant about these images is not the human or turtle being depicted by the

cameraman, but rather the site on which they are located, and the work that is being done by the Turtle Bogue Hatchery.

While the article emphasizes the scene of the Turtle Bogue Hatchery over the human and turtle characters there, the sea turtle is still gaining an elevated status that has not yet been displayed by the NGS photographs. Prior to this feature story, the sea turtle was deemed an object for human consumption and little concern was given to its declining status as a species. The anthropocentric value placed upon sea turtles is still present within the 1967 feature story; however, the implementation of a Turtle Bogue Hatchery to re-establish the species reveals a new value for the sea turtle.

The pictorial representations within this middle ground often include humans conducting scientific studies or conservation work with sea turtles. Their inclusion, however, does not give them an active role within the narrative. The middle ground establishes the passive roles of both humans and sea turtles in the presence of a scene-driven plot. This transition shifts the attention from the previously idolized human role, to the scene of the Turtle Bogue Hatchery. The images in previous articles assigned the human character as someone who would wrestle, hunt, and brand turtles. Now, the human role has become insignificant in the presence of a hatchery scene that elevates the significance of the sea turtle. The sea turtle species is compared to humankind in one image with a caption reading, “beating flippers like wings, green turtles can swim nearly as fast as a man runs.”<sup>32</sup> This caption is the start of many captions to come that advance the incredible abilities of sea turtles that are anything but passive.

The middle ground also suggests a shift in the dominance of the Frontier Thesis in western culture. The NGS magazine has supplied scientific knowledge to the mass public

for over 125 years. The inclusion of a feature story that is scene-driven by a Turtle Bogue Hatchery suggests that the public perception of sea turtles has changed, or at least is beginning to change. The Frontier Thesis supports an expansionist and dominating approach to land and sea. The absent praise for those who hunt sea turtles within this article is a key indicator that the Frontier Thesis has been challenged in western culture. While the article acknowledges sea turtles as an incredible source of protein, it also recognizes the dangers of over-exploiting and overhunting this species.

### **Character/Action-Driven Plot: Turtles on Top**

“One Strange Night on Turtle Beach,” is the start of a new category within the narrative that re-establishes the character/action-driven plot. The middle ground created by the scene-driven plot in 1967 allowed sea turtles to hold an equivalent role to humans. In the 1973 feature story, the character of the sea turtle becomes even further developed. The article includes images that depict the life of sea turtles as both incredible and beautiful. The sea turtle quickly becomes valued beyond its source of protein. One image displays a beach in Costa Rica covered in Pacific ridley sea turtles with a caption that regards their arrival as, “one of nature’s most spectacular phenomena.”<sup>33</sup> The images emphasize how rare of an experience it is to witness so many Pacific ridley turtles on the beach during the day. The last image is entitled, “Racing for Their Lives,”<sup>34</sup> and displays newly hatched Pacific ridley turtles making their way towards the sea on a course that is “fraught with danger.”<sup>35</sup>

A significant shift occurs within the characterization of sea turtles within these last few captions. The species takes on an active role in their struggle to survive. Sea turtles are described throughout the images as “racing” for their lives, not passively

acknowledging their demise. While displaying the active role of sea turtles, the images and captions also function to humanize them. The captions attribute human qualities to sea turtles that create sympathy for the species. Not only are sea turtles *racing* for their lives, but they are also facing a future that is “fraught with danger.” All of these depictions reveal the sea turtle as a victim who is bravely facing this struggle.

The human character gains attention in the 1981 article, “Paradise Beneath the Sea,” that establishes a new role for human hunters. While the sea turtle’s character becomes described by images and captions as a “victim,” the human character becomes portrayed as the “villain.” This distinction is made through the article’s recognition that man continues to be the green turtles’ worst predator. Turtles are no longer being represented as dehumanized objects that should be hunted. Instead, the images are framing the sea turtle as an active character that is desperately trying to survive. The captions state how hunting this species for their meat, oil, shell, and skin, has reduced sea turtles to near extinction in areas of the world.<sup>36</sup>

The 1994 feature story, “In a Race for Survival,” further establishes the characterization of sea turtles as victims and human hunters as villains. It is within this article that human hunters gain the title of “poachers,” and receive negative attention for their actions. The victimization of sea turtles is revealed through captions expressing the troubled status of the species. “Once abundant, all eight species of sea turtles are now threatened or endangered, pushed toward extinction by the hunting, development, and indifference of humankind.”<sup>37</sup>

The images even acknowledge the dangers of modern fishing practices like longline fishing, “Senseless death overtakes a male olive ridely, snagged and drowned on

a longline set for sharks off Costa Rica's Pacific coast."<sup>38</sup> The article places emphasis on the endangered status of sea turtles within visual portrayals and captions, "Frantic flight propels a newborn black turtle away from its natal beach in Michoacan, Mexico, one of the last major nesting areas for black turtles."<sup>39</sup> This caption acknowledges the sea turtle's will to survive regardless of how few nesting sites are available anymore. It illustrates the severity of the situation and paints a bleak future for sea turtle populations.

"Ancient Mariner" was featured in 2009 and expresses a sliver of hope for the sea turtle species. The title page image displays a leatherback sea turtle gliding through the ocean with a caption reading, "The biggest, deepest diving, widest ranging of all turtles, the leatherback has endured for 100 million years."<sup>40</sup> Although this caption alludes to the resilience of the leatherback sea turtle, the remaining images and captions continue to victimize the species. Visual representations depict the perilous journey that hatchlings and adult sea turtles will experience within their lifetime. The depiction of sea turtles struggling to overcome obstacles and survive continues to humanize their character. The sea turtle is the victim of the narrative, as well as the underdog who has gained the loving support of NGS subscribers. By regarding the sea turtle as a victim, the narrative recognizes the inherent value of sea turtles as living species, rather than exploitable objects for human consumption. In order to establish the sea turtle as a victim, the audience must be able to feel sympathy for them and acknowledge a wrongdoing that has taken place.

### **The Frontier Thesis Abandoned**

As the timeline of NGS sea turtle representations progress, there is a noticeable change in the western perception of the species. A character/action-driven plot



established at the beginning of the timeline completely supports the ideology of the Frontier Thesis and man's role as conqueror of unknown frontiers. The representation of humans as explorers, agitators, and hunters of sea turtles reveals that the public perception at the time supports human domination of unknown lands and species.

This mentality begins to change, however, as the authority of the Frontier Thesis becomes challenged in the 1960's with a transition to a scene-driven plot. Within this transition, the leading hero takes on a passive role that parallels the role of the sea turtle. When the narrative changed from character/action-driven to a scene-driven plot, the human role as conqueror and hunter became questioned, as did the Frontier Thesis. This middle ground elevates the status of the sea turtle, even though it is still being valued as a source of protein. The passive role of humans and sea turtles alike reflects the possibility that the Frontier Thesis was being questioned in western culture. Ideologies work to subtly influence a communal group or culture. The Frontier Thesis played an integral role in the formation of the United States, that being said, its ideological influence couldn't be easily erased. The eventual demise of the Frontier Thesis can be observed only through tracking its presence over multiple decades.

The slow process of a disintegrating Frontier Thesis can be observed through analyzing its presence from 1924-2009. In the later half of the timeline, the sea turtle becomes the active, leading character of a victim. Not only do the images of sea turtles regard the species as victims, but the images also work to demonize the humans who hunt them. The victimization of sea turtles serves as an emotional appeal to the audience that could only be successful if the viewers have broken away from the Frontier Thesis. The demonized role of human hunters within the later half of the timeline reflects western

culture's dismissal of the Frontier Thesis. We can draw this conclusion when the human characters become vilified for performing the same actions, hunting sea turtles, which were once deemed heroic. It was the heroic duty of human explorers and hunters to dominate over sea turtles in the beginning half of the timeline. Although human hunters were approaching sea turtles in the same way as their ancestors in the later half of the timeline, their character was regarded as a villain rather than a hero.

### **Images that influence**

The photographs taken by national geographic are representative of cultural values and perceptions, specifically for western culture. When a photographer frames an image, they choose what to include as well as what to leave out of their visual representation. When viewing these images in a timeline, it is noticeable that as the photographs progress from 1924-2009 the focus of each visual changes. It is the visual framing of each image that differentiates the leading character from the inferior character and their relationship towards one another. The visual influence of framing extends beyond deciphering character roles and into what western culture has to say about them.

The setting in which a character is framed illustrates how cultures regard their role. The early photographs of sea turtles objectified as prey almost seem to incorporate the species as part of the background. These images display the sea turtle on land, where it is most vulnerable, being dominated by humans. The sea turtles are rarely framed within the ocean where they are able to move with ease and escape from predators such as humans. Each framing within the early representations reveal a vulnerable and inactive sea turtle character. The cultural perception of the sea turtle is being linked to a slow, inactive beast that should be hunted by human explorers.

Even when the scene itself becomes the main focus of the framing, it is revealing a cultural perception being linked to both humans and sea turtles. The article depicting the Turtle Bogue Hatchery establishes an anthropocentric notion that it is the human duty to rehabilitate the sea turtle species. The constant portrayal of the work being done at the hatchery, over any single human or turtle being framed reveals a shifting cultural portrayal of the sea turtle species. The framing of the Turtle Bogue Hatchery ultimately degrades the role of the human character and elevates the role of the sea turtle. Both human and sea turtle are washed into the backdrop of the Turtle Bogue Hatchery, but the very concept of a hatchery acting as its own leading character distinguishes the shifting perceptions of western culture.

The visual framing within the last section analyzed reveals yet another shift in western culture that ultimately breaks away from the Frontier Thesis. In earlier depictions, the sea turtle was framed upon the land, in a state of vulnerability and inactivity. The last section of analysis similarly frames the sea turtle upon the land in a state of vulnerability and inactivity; however, this time the framing has a different agenda. The photographs of sea turtles on land in the earlier decades seemed to suggest the beast-like qualities of the species and their incapability of escaping hunters. The later photographs frame the turtles, vulnerable on land, but as victims. Within the later images, they are being framed upon the land as a way to add an emotional element for the species.

### **Who's the Hero?**

Visual representations within the National Geographic magazine reveal a multilevel human character regarding the ocean frontier and its many life forms. From 1924-1959, humans are upheld as heroes by hunting and conquering sea turtles. In 1967,

their role as heroes is diminished and seemingly insignificant in the presence of Turtle Bogue Hatchery. The Frontier Thesis is broken in the later half of the timeline when the human role becomes vilified from displaying the same characteristics as the “heroes” from earlier decades. After the first character/action-driven plot, the role of a hero is seemingly absent from the narrative. Once the human role as “hero” becomes removed and transformed into “villain,” no one fills this void. The last section of the narrative replaces the role of a hero with the role of a victim, leaving no one to save the species.

The absent hero in the second half of the timeline suggests a dismal future for the sea turtle species. The timeline has arguably shown a dismissal of the Frontier Thesis by placing the role of hunters as villains, but the sea turtle species is still endangered and facing extinction. This void may suggest that while humankind recognizes the endangered status of sea turtles, they do not know how to fix the damage that has been done. By victimizing the sea turtle through visual representations and captions, western culture is seemingly dealing with the situation by acknowledging the wrongdoings of others, particularly poachers. The reality could be that humans do not know how to save the sea turtle species and instead of blaming themselves for the damage, they are pointing the finger at poachers and hunters instead.

It is also possible that a hero character exists, but is not human. The framing of sea turtles in the later half of the timeline recognizes the resilience of the species and their impressive lifespan on earth. The 2009 article features the leatherback sea turtle that has endured life on Earth for 100 million years. Perhaps the NGS is portraying the sea turtle itself as its own salvation. Perhaps the point of leaving a hero character out of the narrative is to suggest that the sea turtle species is quite capable of saving itself as long as

humankind simply leaves it alone. The sea turtle, although seemingly incapable by western culture, is a strong and resilient species that has adapted to an ever-changing planet for millions of years. In this sense then, perhaps the best thing humans can do for the sea turtle population is give it the respect that it deserves as a living, breathing, capable, species. While this portrayal could be sincere, it is also possible that it is yet another way to remove human responsibility from the issue.

### **Implications**

The research and analysis of this project largely deals with how the public perceives the natural world and regards their place within it. The National Geographic Magazine has tremendous influence through its ability to appeal to the general public through visuals that serve as a reflection of western values. The way in which photographers frame each visual and present the natural world to the public can greatly impact how the public responds to the specific species or landscape being framed. By utilizing the visual and narrative perspectives, I have been able to track the lifecycle of Frederick Jackson Turner's Frontier Thesis in western culture through the photographs of sea turtles documented by the NGS.

In order to trace the presence of the Frontier Thesis I divided the visual timeline into three plots. The first four articles presented a character/action-driven plot that upheld the human character as the active role and the turtle character as the inferior role. The perception of human hunters and explorers as heroes cemented the Frontier Thesis' dominance in western culture at the time. These images worked to dehumanize the sea turtle in a way that validated the actions of hunters. There is a clear pattern of

exploitation of the species within the first four articles that supports the Frontier Thesis in western culture.

The 1967 feature story, “Caribbean Green Turtle: Imperiled Gift of the Sea,” shifted the narrative from a character/action-driven plot to a scene-driven plot. The significance of the Turtle Bogue Hatchery over any other aspect of the images alludes to a challenged Frontier Thesis in western culture. The scene of the hatchery emphasizes a value of the sea turtle that acknowledges the dangers of over hunting the species. This recognition serves as a prerequisite to further development of the sea turtle character and the transition of the human character.

The character/action-driven plot becomes present once again in the articles from 1976-2009 as the sea turtle becomes the victimized, active, leading character. Sea turtles become humanized through visual representations that present the species actively struggling for survival. The sea turtle simultaneously becomes the underdog of the narrative whose tragic struggle gains public support. The praise that was once associated with human hunters in the narrative quickly shifts into blame for leading this imperiled species to extinction.

The Frontier Thesis was once pervasive within western culture, but has noticeably become shaken and arguably broken over the timeline of 1924-2009 regarding the sea turtle species. The first feature stories depicting the life of the sea turtle were in fact articles of sea expeditions and expansionism. The main goals of expansionism on such expeditions were seemingly to collect, conquer, and control the unknown. The unknown species became scientifically studied and observed over a course of decades and eventually became valued beyond a main ingredient of sea turtle soup. The moment

human hunters transformed from heroes to villains, the dominance of the Frontier Thesis had been broken.

National Geographic articles depicting sea turtles today promote the species as endangered but magnificent. Today's oceanic narrative continues with illustrations of a sea turtles victimized by human hunters among other predators. A missing hero from the narrative could suggest that humankind simply doesn't know what to do to help the struggling species, that the hero character is in fact the sea turtle itself, or that they do not want to take action at all and instead remove their responsibility from the matter.

The ocean ecosystem has become exploited by the human race, largely due to a desire to control and conquer on behalf of the Frontier Thesis. This analysis established that the Frontier Thesis is no longer applicable to western culture's perception of the seas. That being said there may be hope for the ocean ecosystem and its many life forms now that the Frontier Thesis has been broken.

After analyzing countless visual representations, it seems that the photographs taken by the NGS of sea turtles are framed to help humankind cope with the near extinction of a species by placing the blame elsewhere. The recent images and captions regard poachers and hunters as the ones who have wrongfully exploited the species, thus the blame falls directly on their shoulders. By placing the blame elsewhere it removes the average person's responsibility from the matter altogether. The issue with this mentality is that the average person is the one reading National Geographic feature stories, not the poachers. By removing the responsibility from the main viewer, there is a slim chance that these feature stories will actually motivate a significant change for the future of the sea turtle species.

This leads me to the evaluation that the photographs taken by the NGS are not being framed with the intent to motivate real change for the species, but rather help western culture cope with the eventual extinction of sea turtles and find peace that it wasn't the average person's fault. The missing hero is then an excuse to not act at all. There are multiple ways to interpret the absence of a hero character towards the end of the narrative. It could symbolize that humankind honestly doesn't know how to save the species, that the sea turtle species is its own salvation, or that we have already removed our responsibility from the sea turtle species and would rather not act at all.

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