Gavin Lamb*

Spectacular sea turtles: Circuits of a wildlife ecotourism discourse in Hawai‘i

https://doi.org/10.1515/applirev-2019-0104

Abstract: This paper examines the discursive practices of sea turtle ecotourism that transform a beach in Hawai‘i into a popular sea turtle tourism destination. I analyze the circulation of an ecotourism discourse of spectacular nature that cycles through several distinct circuits of discursive remediation to produce Lani‘akea Beach as a sea turtle tourism destination. This ecotourism discourse entangles sea turtles and people into a discursive-material infrastructure of spectacular nature which the sea turtle tourism industry in Hawai‘i enlists to commodify human encounters with this charismatic species. Bringing complementary approaches in ecotourism studies and mediated discourse analysis that take human-nonhuman embodied (inter)actions as a starting point for discourse analysis, I trace how this ecotourism discourse itinerates across three distinct circuits of sea turtle tourism: (1) commercial tourism representations (on websites, guidebooks and street advertising), (2) in tourists’ embodied encounters with sea turtles (touching, pointing at, swimming with and talking about actual sea turtles), and (3) through online remediation of these embodied encounters (on social media platforms like Instagram and Facebook). The study suggests implications for how embodied and material approaches to discourse analysis in applied linguistics can bring empirical focus to the (un)ethical dimensions of wildlife ecotourism practices.

Keywords: embodiment, materiality, ecotourism, nexus analysis, human-animal interaction

1 Introduction

The sea turtle tourism industry in Hawai‘i involves floods of sea turtle representations flowing through airports, hotel lobbies, television screens, streets signs, t-shirts, tourist brochures, guidebooks, websites, tour guide talk and more. Spend just a few days walking through the towns and urban
areas of Hawai‘i and you are likely to also see the iconic images of sea turtles appearing on bumper stickers, jewelry, store front logos and tattoos. Since being listed under federal protection with the U.S. Endangered Species Act in 1978, Hawaiian green sea turtles, once on the brink of extinction in the 1960’s and 70’s, have staged a miraculous comeback. In the late 1990’s, the first sea turtles began to appear again at Lani‘akea Beach on the North Shore of the island of O‘ahu after a decades-long absence. Over this period, more and more sea turtles began crawling up onto the sand to sleep during the day for hours at a time. With the onset of this new sea turtle phenomenon, tourism operators in Hawai‘i quickly recognized an economic opportunity ripe for development, marketing ‘Turtle Beach’ towards an expanding ecotourism market of international tourists eager to experience up close Hawai‘i’s spectacular wildlife and nature. Soon, tourists from around the world began flowing to Lani‘akea Beach on tour buses and rental cars in ever increasing numbers. Presently, on an average day at Lani‘akea Beach, local residents are often frustrated with the daily ‘turtle traffic jams’ created as thousands of ‘turtle tourists’ ebb and flow through this beachscape seeking out highly anticipated close up encounters with Hawaiian green sea turtles; to swim and snorkel with these creatures, but also importantly, to memorialize their sea turtle encounters with photographic evidence to share with a global audience on social media platforms such as Instagram.

Like many wildlife ecotourism destinations throughout the world, at Lani‘akea Beach, a sea turtle tourism discourse of spectacular nature (Davis 1997) is circulated across different stages of the tourist experience to transform this beach into a popular sea turtle tourism destination. This discourse weaves together an ensemble of distinct visual, narrative, material, embodied and affective elements to position humans as audience to the entertaining spectacle of wild nature (Milstein 2016). In crafting and circulating tourism fantasies of exotic nature, the sea turtle tourism industry in Hawai‘i lucratively commodifies people’s embodied experiences with nature as a reliable ‘green product’ (Mühlhäusler and Peace 2001). Wildlife tourism hinges on the possibility of intimate and authentic modes of proximal human connection with wild nature. On the one hand, the discourse of spectacular nature shaping wildlife tourism settings, in particular when packaged as a form of nature-based ‘edutainment,’ is argued to establish positive ecological relationships among people, wildlife and the ecosystems we inhabit (see, for example, Powell and Ham 2008). On the other hand, critical social science studies of wildlife ecotourism practices argue that this discourse is tied to Western colonial and capitalist visions of nature that ultimately seek to exploit and control the nonhuman world for human ends (e.g. Lorimer 2015). While definitions of ecotourism remain nebulous, ranging
from any form of nature-based tourism to more environmentally aware and socioecologically responsible forms of tourism (Donohoe and Needham 2006), this critique of ecotourism raises an enduring question about the potential for wildlife-based ecotourism practices to foster ethical and sustainable human-wildlife relationships. Or, instead, if ecotourism is ultimately grounded in an unsustainable global tourism industry that many ecotourism scholars argue is predicated on relentless economic growth and exploitative human relations with wildlife and nature (e.g. Munt 1994; Fletcher 2011).

In this paper, I do not claim to resolve this debate, but argue that a focus on how the discourse of spectacle is actually appropriated and enacted through tourists’ embodied sociolinguistic practices (Bucholtz and Hall 2016) with protected wildlife can provide useful empirical insights into questions about the potential for wildlife ecotourism to foster healthy and sustainable human-wildlife relations. Specifically, I trace how a sea turtle tourism discourse of spectacle circulates across different material, embodied and digital spaces of the sea turtle tourism experience to transform a beachscape in Hawai‘i into a popular sea turtle tourism destination: from the print and online media of sea turtles that cultivate tourists’ anticipations of sea turtle encounters before ever arriving at the beach, to their in situ embodied interactions with sea turtles, and finally to the digital memorializing of their sea turtle encounters through the photographs tourists upload to social media sites like Instagram.

2 The discourse of spectacle and sea turtle ecotourism at Laniākea Beach

Laniākea Beach on the North Shore of the island of O‘ahu in the Hawaiian Islands has become an enormously popular tourist destination to encounter Hawaiian green sea turtles in their natural habitat. Transforming this beach space into an extremely popular sea turtle tourism destination is a discourse of spectacular nature (Davis 1997). At a broad conceptual level, this discourse is rooted in a Western ecocultural imaginary that positions humans as audience to the spectacular performance of wild nature (Milstein 2016). In tracing the origins of a contemporary ecotourism discourse of spectacular nature, recent studies have situated its emergence within a broader Western ecocultural imaginary that envisions nature, on the one hand, as a realm subordinate to human mastery, and on the other, as a source of ethics and enlightenment (Wapner 2010). The term imaginary refers to the “socially transmitted representational assemblages
that interact with people’s personal imaginings and are meaning-making and world-shaping devices” (Salazar 2012: 864). This work emphasizes that the transmission of certain representational assemblages is crucially an embodied practice, and therefore, imaginaries only emerge as world-shaping devices through their embodied and material enactment (Appadurai 2015: 224).

While researchers have highlighted several characteristics of how a discourse of spectacle is translated into the local infrastructure and practices of wildlife ecotourism projects (e.g. Lemelin 2006; Ryan et al. 2000), in the sections below I bring focus to two aspects of this discourse in particular. First, this ecotourism discourse is not a bounded and monologic unit but adheres together a contradictory and rhizomatic set of affective, epistemic and material attunements to wildlife (cf. Pietikäinen 2015). On one end of this spectrum, the appearance and behavior of charismatic wildlife are anthropomorphized through comparisons to humans, triggering embodied affects of familiarity, sympathy and connection. On the other end, wildlife are framed as emblems of exotic and wild nature, triggering affects of curiosity and awe of wild nature: wildlife are “sensational animals performing in wild spaces” (Lorimer 2015: 137). Second, the wildlife tourism industry strategically mixes both poles of this spectrum in mediatized representations of target animals. Sea World, as Davis (1997) shows, provides an especially clear example of this where a discourse of spectacle not only manifests in the spatial layout and mediatized imagery that composes these orca shows; it is also entrained into bodies of captive orcas themselves. In training orcas to perform in ways that at once elicit displays of their cuddly, human-like qualities, such as instructing them to wave with their flippers to the audience, trainers also seek to evoke their oceanic power and wildness offering nonhuman portals for humans to connect with wild nature. Here, this dialectic tension inherent in spectacular nature serves to “simultaneously sacralize and trivialize Shamu: the whale is simultaneously a transcendent being and a souvenir” (223).

3 Methods, analysis and data: Circuits of wildlife tourism

To understand how this global ecotourism discourse is produced and circulated in the world, and how it actually comes to have an effect on tourist encounters
with wildlife, studies of wildlife tourism settings are calling for a more concerted focus on the material *circuits of practices* through which this discourse is actually reproduced and made to circulate across ever new moments of tourism activity (Salazar 2010). The circuit metaphor helps bring focus to the series of distinct yet interconnected and routine moments of tourist *performance* that recycle elements of a recognizable discourse across different spatiotemporal stages of the ecotourist experience (cf. Sowards 2012). A primary aim in mobilizing the concept of performance in these studies is to challenge approaches that leave tourists as passive consumers of the images, objects, and narratives created by the tourism industry (Edensor 2001). Instead, tourism scholars have argued for a *circuit of performance model* where “[t]he act of ‘consumption’ is simultaneously one of production, of re-interpreting, re-forming, re-doing …” (206). In other words, tourists do not simply visit tourist attractions, but actively transform the tourist places they visit.

In the empirical sections below, I build on this body of work to chart the *discourse cycles* (Scollon and Scollon 2004; Scollon 2008) of spectacular sea turtles that circulate through the multiply moded material, digital and embodied circuits that reproduce Laniākea Beach as a sea turtle tourism destination. This approach builds on the theoretical framework of mediated discourse analysis (Scollon 2001; Norris and Jones 2005) which takes the *mediated action* as its primary unit of analysis. Analytic attention is first given to how a distinct tourism discourse is appropriated in actual human-wildlife encounters at different moments of situated activity in the sea turtle tourist experience. To do this, I first identify the visual, narrative and material elements that compose a tourism discourse of spectacular sea turtles, and then ask how these elements are routinely mobilized at key moments of the turtle tourist experience to reinforce a narrow mode of human encounter with sea turtles as spectacles for tourist consumption: These moments of discursive recycling in the material world, or what I refer to as *circuits of remediation*, are interwoven in dynamic ways, but for the purposes of clearer exposition in this paper, I chart their linear movement across three distinct tourism stages: (1) the *mediatized representation* of sea turtles in Hawai‘i’s commercial ecotourism media, (2) tourists’ *in-situ embodied mediations* of this discourse at Laniākea Beach, the primary sea turtle tourism destination in Hawai‘i, and (3) tourists’ *online remediation* of these moments of activity at the beach to online social media in the form of uploaded edited images to Instagram (see Figure 1 below):
The analysis to follow draws inspiration in particular from Thurlow and Jaworski’s (2014) sociolinguistic study of tourists’ embodied performances of the Leaning Tower of Pisa in Italy. Here, a steady flow of linguistically and culturally diverse international tourists routinely enact a set of shared performative conventions – pointing at architecture, walking up stairs, doing the ‘Pisa Push,’ and endlessly posting digital photos and videos of these performances online – all contributing to the reproduction of Pisa as a distinct tourist place. A focus on tourists’ situated embodied performances in the material environment aims to elucidate “how tourism emerges as/through a series of mediated actions ... an intersection of different, repeatable practices that are recognized as a specific genre of activity and the group of people engaging in that activity” (Thurlow and Jaworski 2014: 468, emphasis mine). This approach helps bring focus to tourist performances as both highly staged and regulated by the tourism industry on the one hand, but also holding an immanent creative possibility to disrupt these pre-crafted tourism stagings. In addition, in examining wildlife tourism destinations, it is important to recognize how wildlife like sea turtles also contribute improvisational skills and performative conventions of their own that are consequential in the making of tourist places (Cloke and Perkins 2005). For example, both the routine and unpredictable movements of sea turtles can be seen to shape the verbal and non-verbal actions of thousands of turtle tourists flowing through this beachscape each day, suggesting that the lively embodied habits of sea turtles are not exterior to human discourse at this beach, but are constitutive of it.
Finally, it is important to note that my role as a researcher collecting the data below primarily involved my participant observations as a volunteer sea turtle protector, or *honu* guardian (*honu* is ‘ōlelo Hawai‘i or Hawaiian for green sea turtle), for over one hundred hours during a span of two years. The broader research design of the study draws on the ethnographic sociolinguistic principles of nexus analysis (Scollon and Scollon 2004) which aims to trace the various trajectories of recognizable discourses that converge to produce moments of action, while simultaneously examining the linkages with wider constellations of practices these actions produce in consequential moments of human-sea turtle interaction. My investigation into the relation between a sea turtle tourism discourse of spectacle and tourists’ actual discursive practices around sea turtles began through my participation in sea turtle conservation practices at the beach (circuit 2), and only after several months extended outward from there geographically and virtually as I began charting the flows of ecotourism discourse in the routine mediated actions of tourist performances in this beachscape. Data collected included interviews with tourists, as well as audio and video-recordings of tourist-sea turtle interaction to provide empirical insight into the semiotic and material resources composing the distinct embodied and discursive practices of ecotourism at this beach, like snorkeling with sea turtles (circuit 2) or taking sea turtle selfies (see circuit 3). This approach enabled me to trace, albeit in partial and contingent ways, the thickening of discourse-practice linkages that came to form the well-trodden pathways of sea turtle tourism infrastructure that compels thousands of tourists to travel to Laniākea Beach every day.

### 3.1 Circuit 1: Mediatized representation of the sea turtle tourist gaze

Consider the images below of tourist encounters with sea turtles in Hawai‘i selected from some of the imagery from a website advertising a highly popular “Turtle Eco Adventure Oahu Hawaii Tour.” Figures 2 and 3 come from this English-language website aimed primarily at visitors to Hawai‘i from the U.S. mainland that offers customers a “hub of opportunity, adventures, and experiences that are ranked highly. This is one stop shopping for the best in Hawaii” with “no tourist traps allowed.” The imagery throughout the website features dramatic images of Hawai‘i landscapes with tourists engaged in a variety of nature-based activities, from horseback riding and hiking along mountain ridges to wildlife-based activities like swimming with dolphins and snorkeling with sea turtles.
These images provide instances of how the tourism industry crafts a sea turtle tourism gaze. I take this gaze to be one form of a globally pervasive environmental tourist gaze (Urry 1992), and in particular a zoological gaze (Franklin 1999), terms which bring focus to the profound influence the global nature-based tourism
industry has had on shaping people’s everyday imaginings and experiences of wildlife and nature, whether encountered in captive settings like zoos, or in wild spaces like this beach.

There are four important discursive elements that compose the sea turtle tourist gaze. First, mediatized representations of human-sea turtle encounters are composed of various vectors of human-wildlife interaction that are made salient in these images. By vectors, I mean that rather than simply being snapshots of spontaneous moments in the world, these images are strategically designed to incite viewers to imagine the narrative actions leading up to these moments of human-sea turtle encounter, now congealed as frozen actions in these print and digitized images (Norris 2004). Narrative actions are signaled by the implied vectors of human action, embodied positioning, direction of motion, gaze alignments, as well as natural vectors we infer too, derived from our embodied familiarity with natural movements of water, wind, waves, gravity, and animals like sea turtles. For example, in Figure 2, vectors of narrative action are created through the body positioning of the sea turtle implying movement towards the boy, and the boy’s gaze towards the sea turtle, culminating in a thrilling moment of human-nonhuman encounter suspended underwater. Figure 3 further highlights the specific social and affective identities certain vectors serve to invoke, in this case, a mother-child pair exuding affect, revealed through the mother’s elated smile and the baby’s intense focus of curiosity directed towards this creature. In both of these images, the vectors of sea turtle movement towards humans create a sense of authentic encounter with wild nature, being willingly approached or even greeted by wild sea turtles in their natural habitat.

Second, just as important to the composition of the sea turtle tourist gaze are not only the vectors that have been strategically made visible and salient, but the vectors of action that have been silenced in the composition of these mediatized representations as well (Thurlow and Jaworski 2010; Jaworski 2019). This is particularly apparent in the strategic erasure of non-intimate human others in mediatized representations of human-sea turtle encounters. That is, there is a noticeable absence of other strangers in images such as the presence of other tourists or, as I examine more in the circuits below, the protective actions of sea turtle conservation activists operating in the same space. In sum, representations like these of solitary or intimate pairs of tourists encountering wild sea turtles invoke expectations of authentic encounters with these creatures in the wild, far from the crowds of overrun tourism destinations, a point many ecotours explicitly make in their appeals to potential turtle tourists, describing journeys to ‘secret locations’ far from any overcrowded ‘tourist traps.’

Third, the sea turtle tourist gaze is not just about perceiving sea turtles in particular ways, but as I have suggested above, evoking anticipations of proximal
embodied encounters with sea turtles shot through with an array embodied sensations and affects. In other words, mediatized representations of human-sea turtle encounters are designed to trigger an affective response of “compulsion to corporeal proximity” where “[t]o be there oneself is what is crucial … Co-presence then involves seeing or touching or hearing or smelling or tasting a particular place” (Urry 2002: 154). The sea turtle tourist gaze, then, is an embodied gaze (Jaworski and Thurlow 2011) where visuality is synesthetesthetically woven together with other bodily sensations of anticipated experience.

Finally, the sea turtle tourist gaze only enters into tourists’ lived experience as tourists encounter it in embodied engagement with the material world, whether in brochures, websites on their laptop or smartphone screens, in print magazines, or on street signs. This foregrounds the further issue that it is important to analyze the ‘geosemiotics’ of how the discursive elements that compose these mediatized representations of sea turtles are actually encountered and mediate interaction in the material world in situated moments of tourism activity (Scollon and Scollon 2003). For example, Figures 4 and 5 below show a few moments when tourists encounter mediatized representations of the sea turtle tourist gaze while walking down the street:

Figure 4: Waikīkī turtle tour vendors.
Figure 4 is one of multiple kiosks located throughout Waikīkī where vendors interpellate passing tourists with enticing imagery and spoken discourse (‘turtle tours!’) of the sea turtles at Laniākea Beach. Figure 5 shows one of several “free brochure stands” where advertisements for this and many other turtle tour companies can be found. These brochures and magazines are heavily circulated at key tourist points of contact (shopping areas, hotel lobbies, street corners), and are printed in several languages including English, Japanese, Korean, Mandarin, and Spanish, indicating the language backgrounds of the primary tourist markets in Hawai‘i. Through this emplacement of a discourse of spectacular sea turtles, a diverse array of tourists are strategically recruited into a material-semiotic infrastructure of sea turtle tourism, manifesting in the thousands of tourists that arrive at Laniākea Beach daily on tour buses, in rental cars, and by foot in search of sea turtles.

3.2 Circuit 2: Embodied mediation at Laniākea Beach

Moving from circuit 1 to circuit 2 now, the question becomes this: how is the sea turtle tourist gaze appropriated, if at all, in tourist’s real-time interactions with
Sea turtles at Lani‘ākea Beach? Tourism scholars have argued that “it is too simplistic to portray this as a one-way, pre-programmed flow of images from tourism and media organisations to tourists, who in turn reproduce this received imagery” (Urry and Larsen 2011: 187). In other words, the discourse of spectacle described above does not determine tourist behavior towards sea turtles. Instead, while tourists may appropriate the seductive imaginaries of sea turtle tourism, these commercialized images and accompanying narratives aim to trigger, they are not mere receptacles of the turtle tourist gaze, but are active producers, or potentially disrupters of it. In particular, circuit 2 brings focus to the routine embodied performances that tourists produce at Lani‘ākea Beach through their real-time encounters with sea turtles at the beach. Here, I examine the configuration of practices that compose the distinct performative conventions of tourists’ embodied behavior around sea turtles, such as recurring bodily movements, pointing, and actions mediated by digital photography. I refer to these recurring combinations of practices as performative conventions because they repeatedly emerged in tourist-turtle encounters across a diversity of international tourists from different linguistic backgrounds in my observations.

For example, when tourists arrive at Lani‘ākea Beach, they are often surprised to encounter an alternative discourse emplaced throughout this beachscape of sea turtle conservation. Signs and ropes are emplaced around sea turtles daily at this beach by a volunteer group of sea turtle activists, or honu guardians, who seek to encourage a ‘respectful viewing distance’ between tourists and sea turtles of 10 ft/3 m. For example, consider Figures 6–8 below that show some of the elements of this conservation discourse emplaced in the semiotic landscape of Lani‘ākea Beach: educational signs describing sea turtle ecology, protective red ropes placed around basking sea turtles, official warning signs invoking federal laws, hand-crafted signs made by community activists for sea turtle protection displaying the names of familiar individual sea turtles, and ethical statements in English, Japanese and features of Hawaiian language such as ‘show turtles Aloha,’ a Hawaiian term, here indexing a notion of respect or care for sea turtles.

The discourse of wildlife conservation materialized through these signs involves a combination of educational and legal/threat based messaging common in the communication materials of both grassroots activism and state-based wildlife protection efforts in the United States (Abrams et al. 2019). The emplacement of these signs in spatial proximity to sea turtles basking a few feet away indexically links specific individuals of the species and their unique biographies, such as Hao in Figure 7, to these environmental discourses of legal wildlife protection and an ethic of respect. When tourists from a variety of linguistic backgrounds encounter this infrastructure of sea turtle conservation
Figure 6: Sea turtle regulation and identification signs at Laniākea Beach.

Figure 7: An adult female green sea turtle basking at Laniākea Beach identified as Hao.
for the first time, their situated embodied practices reveal a dynamic tension that unfolds between this conservation discourse and a tourism discourse of spectacular sea turtles as I explore in more detail below.

3.2.1 Body movement and positioning

One of the most exciting prospects of visiting Laniākea Beach is the potential opportunity to swim with sea turtles. When not resting on the beach, sea turtles can often be found foraging on the green algae growing on rocks along the shore, allowing tourists to simply wade into the nearshore area to swim with and touch them in their watery environment. This poses a dilemma for conservation volunteers at this beach, however, as the red ropes and signs are confined to land, leaving only the verbal admonitions of the volunteers to prevent people from getting too close to sea turtles in the water. For example, it is a common sight to observe volunteers instructing tourists swimming with sea turtles in the nearshore area of the beach on how to appropriately interact with the sea turtles swimming by them (e.g. 'give the honu space!' 'Just let them swim by you'). A main concern of these volunteers is the tendency for tourists to surround a
swimming sea turtle, leaving it ‘trapped’ amidst a swarm of eager tourists. This can be seen in Figure 9 for example, as tourists clad with snorkel gear wade around a sea turtle just under the surface of the water.

Furthermore, Figure 10 shows how the ‘built’ infrastructure of red ropes and signs of the conservation volunteers only goes as far as the shoreline. Here, tourists occupy both land and nearshore waters as they observe sea turtles, showing how volunteers and tourists continually (re)organize their embodied interactions to navigate the affordances and constraints of this beachscape as a liminal space between terrestrial and aqueous worlds. We might say that the beach is a natureculture contact zone (Haraway 2008) composed of mutually imbricated human and nonhuman modes of communication. In other words, tourists may strive to represent sea turtles as particular kinds of creatures, and in ways that have consequences for how embodied human-sea turtle encounters actually unfold. But the meandering movements of sea turtles also fold human embodied interaction around their nonhuman bodies as well, as these creatures oscillate between land and sea throughout the day. In this view, sea turtles’ ways of representing (Kohn 2007) Laniākea Beach need to be understood as an
agentive communicative force interpellating and transforming the trajectories of ecotourism discourse and practice emerging at this beach. In granting that beach spaces are composed of heterogeneous modes of communication including animal practices too, it becomes important to attend to how tourists mediate the beachscape as much as the beachscape – as a symphony of human and nonhuman entanglements – mediates them as well (Adams 2016).

3.2.2 Pointing and naming

At Laniākea Beach, pointing at sea turtles seemed to be an activity fundamental to doing being a tourist, accomplished through public displays of environmentally coupled gestures and utterances (e.g. exclaiming “there’s a turtle!” while pointing the turtle out to nearby others). This highlights how pointing at sea turtles reveals a tourist desire to construct joint understandings of sea turtles with co-present others. When pointing and naming are framed within the commodification of tourism encounters with sea turtles, they also serve to remediate a discourse of spectacular

Figure 10: Shoreline sea turtle observations.
nature through the body by positioning tourists as audience to the performance of sea turtles. Achieving corporeal proximity to sea turtles is vital to pulling off the sea turtle tourist experience successfully, and pointing becomes an incipient form of achieving this through a gesture that enables a mode of a wildlife experience mediated by the haptic-optic contact with spectacular nature just out of – or blocked from – reach. To illustrate this, consider Figures 11 and 12 below.

Figure 11: Pointing to a sea turtle in the distance.

In Figure 11, a tourist points to a sea turtle in the near shore area of the beach. It is worth noting that this tourist is also wearing a t-shirt with imagery of three blue sea turtles imprinted on the back, itself indicating the highly commodified representations of sea turtles found throughout Hawai‘i. Figure 12 reveals another moment of pointing, this time amongst tourists wading in the near shore area in the midst of swimming sea turtles. Here, a woman in the foreground points to a turtle foraging on algae next to her, directing the attention of a man holding a digital camera to a nearby sea turtle. Notice the woman in the background too, actually touching a turtle submerged in the water. These moments of pointing, identifying and even touching sea turtles are visceral and emotional experiences for tourists that are often punctuated by staccato
outbursts of verbal excitement that attempt to capture the thrill of the moment. Here, pointing is coupled with affective and epistemic stances that serve to “generate certain kinds of ecocultural knowledge that constitute aspects of nature as considered, unique, sorted, or marked” (Milstein 2011: 4).

Stances taken up in the situated performance of pointing, here as I observed by English- and Japanese-speaking tourists, highlight the affective displays (‘Wow’ or ‘Sugoi!’) and epistemic discernment (‘what’s that on it’s shell?’ or ‘move aside! It’s coming up, it’s coming up!’) that often accompany pointing (see Figure 13 above). Examining the momentary affective and

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Examples of stance-gesture couplings in the moment of sea turtle encounter</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>English stances</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Wow, it’s right there!”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“That’s so cool!”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“What’s that on it’s shell?” ((pointing to a ‘PIT’ tag tracking device – Passive Integrative Transponder – glued to a sea turtle’s shell))</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Figure 13:** Stance-gesture couplings in English and Japanese.
epistemic stances people take towards sea turtles sheds light on the synesthetic interweaving of vision, embodiment and material place that configure the specific ecocultural emotions and knowledges that mediate these cross-species encounters (Goodwin 2003). The routine recurrence of similar stance-gesture couplings I observed across a linguistically diverse groups of tourists that flow through this space suggests that these embodied moments of pointing are more than spontaneous, one-off events, but are instances of performative conventions that have stabilized to some degree to calibrate the forms that human-sea turtle relations repeatedly take here. On the one hand, these performative conventions involve situated practices such as embodied pointing and naming that remediate the discourse of spectacular sea turtles. But equally integral to these human-nonhuman experiences is not to just gawk at the spectacle of nature, but crucially, to spotlight the spectacle of self as much as, if not more so than the spectacle of nature, an issue which I turn to next.

3.3 Circuit 3: Online remediation of tourist-sea turtle encounters

The final circuit I examine involves the online remediation of tourists’ embodied and digital photographic practices around sea turtles. A focus on circuit 3 draws attention to how tourists compose digital photographs of their proximal embodied encounters with sea turtles with an eye towards uploading these images to online social media platforms like Instagram. Instagram has become one of the most popular platforms for circulating digital photography, with around 500 million people using the social media platform globally, and with about 32% of all internet users owning an Instagram account (Greenwood et al. 2016). These statistics provide some indication of how pervasive the practice of digital social photography has become, and in this case, a technology that is profoundly structuring wildlife tourist settings throughout the world. This is perhaps most apparent in the proliferating photographic genre of wildlife selfies. As I explore in more detail below, the in situ crafting and online remediation of tourists’ selfies with sea turtles is indicative of how charismatic wildlife are increasingly mobilized as a discursive resource for constructing mediatized narratives of the self, which in turn contribute to larger digital identity projects of virtual self-branding (Georgakopoulou 2016). In attending to the real-time moments of activity through which elements of the sea turtle tourist gaze are appropriated in circuit 3 through tourists’ photographic practices around sea turtles, in this
section I bring focus to the embodied practices that serve to compose both sea turtles and tourists as spectacles for a social media audience.

3.3.1 Digital photography: Capturing the moment of sea turtle encounter

Consider, for example, Figures 14 and 15 below of two pairs of tourists maneuvering around sea turtles to capture an image not just of a sea turtle, but of themselves with a sea turtle. These images serve to illustrate how digital photography does not just enable new kinds of images to be produced, but has profoundly restructured the conventional embodied practices that have come to increasingly characterize wildlife tourism destinations:

![Figure 14: Doing the ‘turtle hold’ pose.](image)

In Figure 14, a tourist performs a ‘turtle hold,’ a forced-perspective illusion of physically holding a turtle through manipulating the position of the subject’s hand in relation to a sea turtle at some distance away (see Figure 17 below). Here, these two girls work as a team to position themselves in order to perform this photographic illusion of holding a sea turtle in one’s hand. The barriers placed around sea turtles by conservation volunteers require tourists
to take photos of sea turtles from a distance of at least 10 ft/3 m, and the girl posing for the shot in Figure 14 above negotiates this boundary by standing just at the edge of the red rope barrier. In Figure 15, two tourists (a woman in the foreground and a man in a blue shirt squatting in the background) position themselves on either side of a sea turtle to capture the image of the man with the sea turtle in the foreground, but noticeably with the woman looking through the screen of her phone.

What is notable in these embodied practices is the routine *teamwork* tourists engage in to achieve their photographic goals around wildlife (Urry and Larsen 2011: 213). These practices provide some instances of how the technology of digital photography is restructuring participation frameworks involving tourist interactions with objects, people, place and especially wildlife. Most tourists, for example, arrive at Laniākea Beach in various *withs* or “a party of more than one whose members are perceived to be ‘together’” (Goffman 1971: 19), which include groups such as couples, families, or fellow tourists travelling together on mass tours. Scollon (1998), in his study of the semiotic practices involved in analog photography, examines how a *with* polarizes into a *watch* in the act of photo-taking, in which ‘the spectacle together with its watchers constitutes the watch’ (92). As Figures 14 and 15 show, the watch being produced in these
moments does not simply polarize humans into watchers and wildlife into spectacles, but blur humans and wildlife together as the spectacle. A major affective force shaping wildlife tourist photography then, is not simply tourists’ desires to capture images of spectacular wildlife, but to capture the spectacle of self in contact with the wildlife tourist attraction or destination, what Thurlow and Jaworski (2014) aptly refer to as **spectacular self-locations**. The proliferation of wildlife selfies on social media in particular, as I discuss below, suggests that wildlife are less a spectacle sought after, and more an incidental prop mobilized to accrue status for people’s social media identity projects of endless self-branding.

On the one hand, an important difference between analog and digital photography, as Jones (2015) points out, are the series of ‘secondary watches’ that are produced after the photo has been snapped. At Laniākea Beach, this often involves tourists gathering around their smartphone or camera screens to evaluate the digital photo they have just taken, or also likely, selecting and editing these images, along with composing accompanying narratives, to be posted on social media. On the other hand, “[o]ne element of this series of actions that seems to have remained unchanged is the pose: when people become aware that they are being photographed …” (294). In wildlife tourism settings, tourist poses with wildlife like sea turtles are an important site for empirically investigating how the wildlife tourist gaze is actually appropriated in tourists’ embodied performances. In other words, posing with wildlife like sea turtles with an eye towards sharing these images on social media are akin to what Scollon (1998) refers to as a ‘view-sign’: moments when tourists appropriate poses previously encountered in the mediatized representations of sea turtle tourism, and reenact these elements through their own poses with sea turtles at the beach.

Specifically, analyzing circuit 3 involves attention to (1) the strategic (re)embodiment of facial expressions, gestures and poses previously encountered by tourists in mediatized images of sea turtles in brochures, magazines, websites and other discursive channels (see circuit 1 above), (2) the material and semiotic ‘identity elements’ (Norris 2004) tourists strategically surround themselves with and/or digitally layer onto their selfies in post-production: beaches, the ocean, palm trees, and sea turtles, as well as narrative stances, emojis, and hashtags, and (3) identity elements strategically erased from the frame that might detract from the desired spectacle being crafted, such as traces of other non-intimate tourists or the sea turtle protection activities of conservation activists. To briefly illustrate these points, consider Figures 16 and 17 below, retrieved from the social media platform Instagram over the course of 2016–2017 by searching the hashtags #LaniākeaBeach and #TurtleBeach:
Figure 16, for example, captures the moment of reaching out to touch a sea turtle on the head. The act of touching a sea turtle, while never quite realized in the mediatized representations of sea turtle tourism media found in brochures and websites, nevertheless seems to be the logical vector of action made relevant by the sea turtle tourist gaze. In other words, this gaze tills the soil for tourists to step into a *funnel of commitment* (Scollon 2001: 166–167), leading tourists along a journey towards ever more proximal embodied encounters with wildlife that ideally culminate in the achievement of tactile contact with the physical spectacle of nature. Identity elements interwoven with this pose of touch include an added comment in Japanese: "触っちゃダメだったみたい。知らなくて触っちゃいました。ごめんなさい。" ("It seems it was prohibited to touch sea turtles, I didn’t know and touched them anyway ... ((sea turtle emoji)) Sorry ((sea turtle emoji)).") By cohering together this constellation of visual and narrative identity elements in this post, this Instagram user at once invites scrutiny and appreciation of her sea turtle encounter, while simultaneously emplotting herself within
an unfolding storyline recounting her discovery of a sea turtle protection discourse after this photo was snapped. She accomplishes this, in part, through a series of narrative stancetakings that index her epistemic shift (‘I didn’t know’) and ethical reattunement (‘sorry’) to touching sea turtles as a transgressive act.

Furthermore, Figure 17 provides an example of the forced-perspective shots described in Figure 17 above. Here, the pose the woman enacts involves cupping her hands around a sea turtle at some distance away. I did not find instances of this particular pose in commercialized media of turtle tourism, but poses that cup, hold, and even create hand-shaped hearts around nearby sea turtles are pervasive in the selfies tourists share of their sea turtle encounter at ‘#TurtleBeach.’ Through seeing other tourists perform these poses on social media, “tourists learn from each other the places to see, the ways to behave (or not), and the things to say ... ” as they reanimate through their embodied
poses Instagrammable acts of the sea turtle tourists gaze: “that socially conditioned complex of representations and practices by which tourist destinations [and tourist attractions like wildlife] come to be organized and consumed” (Thurlow and Jaworski 2014: 465). In addition, accompanying Figure 17 is the caption, “must give them/respect their space” followed by a turtle emoji and smiley face emoji. Similar to Figure 16, the poster invites participation into a storyline of ethical attunement to sea turtles, yet paradoxically while the narrative stance being taken urges its audience to maintain a respectful distance from sea turtles, the pose simultaneously seeks to possess the sea turtle within the tourists’ forced-perspective grasp.

Both Figures 16 and 17 reveal efforts to erase other (non-intimate) tourists and, in particular, the semiotic landscape of sea turtle conservation discourse at the beach. Examining the sea turtle selfies taken at Laniākea Beach and shared on Instagram suggest a more pervasive tourist desire to recreate the proximal embodied encounters they have seen in commercialized representations of sea turtles that depict close human contact and connection with sea turtles in the wild: a landscape absent of traces of human presence. At the same time however, as tourists increasingly discover wildlife tourism destinations through social media rather than more traditional channels of commercialized tourism media, the line between circuit 3 and circuit 1 becomes blurred. In other words, commercial advertising of the sea turtle tourist gaze increasingly mirrors tourists’ own construction of this gaze, rather than the other way around, for example, when tour operators create their own Instagram accounts to circulate their clients’ selfies. This reveals how the sea turtle tourism industry increasingly embraces social media, and the mediatized representations of self-branding it turns on, as its primary advertising conduit (see Urry and Larsen 2011: 187).

As other scholars of tourists’ embodied photographic performances have noted, “[p]hotography emerges as a complex fusion of practices that are both predictable and reactionary and align general ethical viewpoints with unpredictable responses that arise in the immediacy of the moment of photographing …” (Scarles 2013: 900). At Laniākea Beach, these unpredictable responses include tourists contingent and on-going reattunement to the affordances and constraints of the built semiotic landscape of sea turtle conservation. Yet central to composing the circuits described in this paper are the performative conventions sea turtles themselves contribute to the human social practices at this beach. This agentive identity of sea turtles perhaps becomes most apparent when these creatures disrupt the steady flow of turtle tourism on days they choose not to show up at the beach at all. On these days, as thousands of tourists steadily arrive at a so-called Turtle Beach absent of sea turtles, tourist performances of disappointment and confusion reveal their dashed fantasies of having a good time with sea turtles. These moments shed light on how
the sea turtle tourism industry’s efforts to enlist sea turtles as reliable participants are disrupted by nature’s “unpredictability which on occasions refutes staged performance and representational strategy” (Cloke and Perkins 2005: 921).

4 Conclusion

Examining the interwoven circuits of performance of sea turtle tourism in Hawai‘i, grounded as these circuits are in the profit-based motives of the wildlife tourism industry, raises critical questions about whether all tourist actions with wildlife ultimately reproduce exploitative relations with animals as commodified spectacles for human entertainment. Or instead, do ecotourism practices, and tourism more broadly, hold the potential to foster healthy and sustainable human relations with threatened wildlife like sea turtles, and the wider ecosystems they inhabit? Empirical studies of tourism performance in applied and sociolinguistics have tended to shore up the former claim, emphasizing the exploitative colonial and capitalist logics that mediate tourists’ semiotic practices. As Thurlow and Jaworski (2014) argue,

> Seemingly innocuous acts like pointing at, posing in front of, or ambling through a tourist site enact the neocolonial agenda which underpins even the most ‘eco-friendly’, ‘cultural’, ‘sustainable’ or ‘alternative’ kinds of tourism ... Ultimately, the practices of tourism, whether verbal or nonverbal, realise an ideology of conquest through the control and possession of space. (p. 484)

This perspective takes tourists’ embodied movement and gestures to be indexical of circulating colonial and capitalist imaginaries, surfacing in each performance as “as momentary enactments of genres (i.e. ways of inter/acting) and styles (i.e. ways of being), but also as discourses (i.e. ways of representing)” (Thurlow and Jaworski 2014: 483). In the context of wildlife tourism, this suggests that momentary acts of pointing at, swimming with, touching, and taking selfies with sea turtles are inextricably interwoven with a colonial-cum-capitalist discourse of human mastery over the natural world. Ethnographic research on the discourses and practices of wildlife tourism contexts lend support to this view. For example, in her ethnographic study of the communicative practices shaping orca ecotourism, Milstein (2016) argues that “the edutainment model [of wildlife tourism], a product of Western consumer culture, falls short of the claims that tourists will become attuned to complex interconnected, and vulnerable ecosystems they visit” (245). At Laniākea Beach, this suggests that the potential for ecotourism projects to assemble healthy ecosocial relationships among tourists, sea turtles, and local communities is severely limited. This is despite ecotourism stakeholders’ claims of successfully reconciling environmental ethics
with the commodification of tourists’ proximal encounters with wildlife in the form of eco-friendly edutainment products. And while the volunteers’ communicative efforts at the beach may educate and prevent tourists from getting too close or touching sea turtles in momentary human-sea turtle encounters, the degree to which such brief communicative events encourage ecotourists to develop more enduring pro-environmental attitudes, identities and practices remains unclear.

However, in seeking to better understand what actually happens in situ in tourists’ embodied interactions with wildlife in particular places, a growing body of ethnographic research on ecotourism is calling for greater attention to how ecotourism destinations are assembled from ecotourists’ specific embodied experiences and communicative practices with wildlife and nature that produce both healthy and damaging human-environment relationships (Gren and Huijbens 2015). In Hawai‘i, for example, there is growing public concern with ecotourists seeking to create and circulate ‘wildlife selfies’ on social media sites like Instagram (see circuit 3 above), increasingly pointed to as a fast-growing social media practice fueling an exploitative wildlife tourism industry at ecotourism places like Lani‘ākea Beach and around the world (see Daly and Luce 2019). It also remains underexplored how a critical applied eco-linguistics (Appleby and Pennycook 2017; Stibbe 2015) might better register the posthumanist question concerning the agentive and communicative capacities of wildlife themselves that participate in and transform the more-than-human discursive infrastructure constituting ecotourism destinations (but see Thurlow 2016). Finally, ecotourism practices only emerge through our embodied communicative events and experiences with a broad range of wildlife and natural places. Understanding how ecotourists anticipate, enact and memorialize these diverse events and experiences will be an important nexus of practice for applied linguists to critically investigate both the positive and damaging effects of human-wildlife ecotourism assemblages proliferating around the world.

References


Davis, S. G. 1997. _Spectacular nature: Corporate culture and the Sea World experience_. Berkeley 
and Los Angeles: University of California Press.


Edensor, T. 2001. Performing tourism, staging tourism: (Re)producing tourist space and practice. 
_Tourist Studies_ 1(0). 59–81.

Fletcher, R. 2011. Sustaining tourism, sustaining capitalism? The tourism industry’s role in 
global capitalist expansion. _Tourism Geographies_ 13(3). 443–461.

Franklin, A. 1999. The zoological gaze. In A. Franklin (ed.), _Animals and modern cultures: A 

Georgakopoulou, A. 2016. From narrating the self to posting self(ies): A small stories approach 
to selfies. _Open Linguistics_ 2(1). 144.


(accessed 9 October 2018).

Hospitality and Tourism_ 14(1). 6–22.


Jaworski, A. 2019. The art of silence in upmarket spaces of commerce. In M. Pütz & N. Mundt 
(eds.), _Expanding the linguistic landscape: Linguistic diversity, multimodality and the use 


Lemelin, R. H. 2006. The gawk, the glance, and the gaze: Ocular consumption and polar bear 

Lorimer, J. 2015. _Wildlife in the Anthropocene: Conservation after nature_. Minneapolis: 
University of Minnesota Press.


Milstein, T. 2016. The performer metaphor: “Mother nature never gives us the same show 
twice.”. _Environmental Communication_ 10(2). 227–248.

Mühlhäusler, P. & A. Peace. 2001. Discourses of ecotourism: the case of Fraser Island, 


Thurlow, C. 2016. Queering critical discourse studies or/and Performing “post-class” ideolo-


