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Reality TV Meets Environmental Realities: Plastic Pollution in *7* vs. *Wild*

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by Savannah Schaufler



Abstract

Since the 1990s, reality TV has grown from a niche genre to a major form of entertainment with global influence. Programs such as *Big Brother*, *The Bachelor*, and *I'm a Celebrity! Get Me Out of Here!* as well as emerging formats on platforms such as YouTube have captivated audiences worldwide and act as a mirror reflecting contemporary cultural norms and societal trends. In today's media environment, where environmental issues are increasingly in the spotlight, reality television has emerged as a platform for addressing present concerns. The German YouTube series *7 vs. Wild*, created by Fritz Meinecke and produced by Johannes Hovekamp and Maximilian Kovacs, exemplifies this by combining survival challenges with real-world environmental issues such as plastic pollution and illegal shark finning. Featuring seven known personalities from Germany and Austria, the show engages participants in a week-long survival challenge. Through their experiences with plastic waste and the island's environmental degradation, *7 vs. Wild* not only entertains, but also sparks critical discussions about the impact of plastic waste and human activity on the environment. This article examines how the second season of *7 vs. Wild*, aired in late 2022, reveals both visible and hidden environmental issues, situating the series within a broader socioeconomic and postcolonial framework. By employing theoretical perspectives from the environmental humanities, media studies, and cultural studies, the article explores how the series implicitly engages with environmental degradation and postcolonial themes, and its potential influence on viewers' perceptions.

Keywords: reality TV, ecomedia, sociocultural discourse, pollution, environmental degradation



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Reality TV Meets Environmental Realities: Plastic Pollution in *7 vs. Wild*

Savannah Schaufler

Since the 1990s, reality TV has evolved from niche genre to a major form of entertainment, with influential programs such as *Big Brother*, *The Bachelor*, and *I'm a Celebrity! Get Me Out of Here!* captivating audiences worldwide (Klaus and Lücke 2003, 210). Despite its popularity, defining reality television remains challenging due to its hybrid nature and diverse formats (Kavka 2012, 5). Often characterized by unscripted content featuring non-professional actors, reality TV blends elements from multiple genres and reflects a wide range of sociocultural and entertainment values (Biressi and Nunn 2005, 1–3; Kavka 2012, 5). Today's media landscape of heightened environmental concern, reality television has the potential to be a platform for addressing real-world issues. Shows such as the German YouTube series *7 vs. Wild*, created by Fritz Meinecke and produced by Johannes Hovekamp and Maximilian Kovacs, demonstrates how reality television can address environmental issues. Filmed on the historically troubled Isla de San José in Panama, the second season of *7 vs. Wild* shows survival challenges and environmental issues such as plastic pollution and illegal shark finning. This captivated a large German-speaking audience and sparked conversations about the serious impacts of plastic waste both on the environment and the more-than-human beings (Böhm 2022).

This article explores the relationship between visible and hidden environmental issues, such as plastic waste, and the island's postcolonial history in the second season of Fritz Meinecke's *7 vs. Wild*, aired in late 2022. Drawing on perspectives from the environmental humanities, media studies, and cultural studies, the analysis situates the series within broader socioeconomic and postcolonial temporalities. Filmed on Isla de San José in Panama—a site with a history of US military chemical weapons testing—the series implicitly engages with ongoing (postcolonial) environmental degradation. This

article also asks whether *7 vs. Wild*, through its depiction of survival and environmental challenges, promotes environmental responsibility.

This article opens with a theoretical framework that focuses on the Anthropocene and related “-cenes” that challenge the simplistic attribution of environmental responsibility solely to humanity (Davis et al. 2019). These “-cenes” are viewed as the interplay between extensive human activities and escalating environmental crises, reflecting historical and colonial patterns (Davis et al. 2019, 4). This article then contextualizes *7 vs. Wild* within contemporary power dynamics and environmental issues, addressing both immediate survival challenges and more subtle forms of environmental destruction. It aims to show how *7 vs. Wild* implicitly engages with exploitation, environmental degradation, and plastic pollution, provoking emotional responses and increasing viewers’ understanding of the environmental responsibility.

Temporal Contexts:

Situating *7 vs. Wild* within Environmental and Postcolonial Temporalities

Recognizing the situatedness of the series requires an understanding of the broader environmental and postcolonial temporalities in which it is set, particularly in terms of current environmental challenges. The ongoing environmental crises encompass several serious issues, including climate change that is characterized by rising global temperatures and extreme weather events (Wang et al. 2023; Diffenbaugh et al. 2017); biodiversity loss that is characterized by the rapid extinction of species and destruction of habitats (Hogue and Breon 2022); and plastic pollution, which not only litters oceans and landscapes with nondegradable waste but also poses waste management challenges, harms marine life through ingestion and entanglement, and is deeply intertwined with cultural aspects of consumption and waste (IPCC 2023; Walsh et al. 2020; Habibullah et al. 2022). In addition, deforestation contributes to habitat loss and climate disruption, while ocean acidification affects marine life by altering seawater chemistry (IPCC 2023; Lawrence et al. 2022).

In the following discussion, different “-cenes” or conceptual time periods and/or spaces are discussed—each illustrating different aspects of modernity and the impact of human activities, yet all interconnected with the histories of colonialism. These (postcolonial) temporalities refer to the ways in which time is understood and experienced in societies affected by colonialism, emphasizing the lingering effects of colonial histories on the past, present, and future. Timescales, which are hierarchical divisions of Earth’s history such as eras, periods, and epochs, are used to frame these periods and provide a structured temporal context that links historical, present, and future perspectives (Bensaude-Vincent 2022, 206–16). Grasping these timescales helps

make sense of the narratives, stories, images, and historical aspects presented in the reality show *7 vs. Wild*, while also providing an understanding of how it is situated within ongoing environmental challenges. To fully grasp the complexity of these issues, however, it is important to also consider timescapes (Bensaude-Vincent 2022, 206–16; Adam 1998, 9–10, 18).

Timescapes extend the concept of landscape into the temporal dimension, capturing the interdependent temporalities of both natural and anthropogenic entities. In contrast to the linear and quantifiable nature of timescales, timescapes emphasize the heterogeneous and dynamic interactions between different temporal regimes, providing a more nuanced understanding of environmental phenomena and the diverse timelines of Earth's inhabitants (Bensaude-Vincent 2022, 206–216; Adam 1998, 9–10, 18). This highlights a web of interdependencies shaped by cultural, social, and technological choices, offering a more holistic view of the environmental issues depicted in *7 vs. Wild*. Furthermore, the overlapping of different timescapes—where colonial pasts, postcolonial presents, and potential futures coexist—reveals persistent inequalities and struggles rooted in colonial legacies. Considering these overlapping timescapes allows us to better understand how historical exploitation continues to shape contemporary environmental issues and global power dynamics.

The concept or timescale of the Anthropocene, as proposed by the Anthropocene Working Group, an interdisciplinary research group dedicated to establishing the Anthropocene as a distinct geological time unit, points to the need for such tools to explain and address the destructive nature of human (extractive) activities (Crutzen 2002, 1–5; Crutzen and Stoermer 2000, 17–18; Ellis 2018, 2024; Horn and Bergthaller 2020). This suggested epoch is intended to align human impacts with geological phenomena, highlighting the effects of human activity on the planet. Viewing climate change as one of the outcomes of the Anthropocene can sometimes reduce it to an abstract issue, minimizing and/or downplaying its sociopolitical dimensions and the multiple ways different communities experience these impacts (Wiggin et al. 2020, xi–xii; Bensaude-Vincent 2022, 206–8). The Subcommission on Quaternary Stratigraphy, which is responsible for recognizing time units within our most recent period of geologic time, has rejected the formal designation of the Anthropocene as an epoch following the Holocene in March 2024. Still, the concept remains widely recognized across various academic disciplines, from the natural and social sciences to the arts and humanities (Crutzen 2002, 1–5; Crutzen and Stoermer 2000, 17–18; Ellis 2018, 2024; Horn and Bergthaller 2020).

The Anthropocene defines the era marked by significant human impact on Earth, leading to its current state of persistent and ongoing crises. This concept transcends the mere recognition of the stratigraphic impacts of human (extractive) activities and is heavily debated and critiqued in academia for representing a “hegemonic model of the ‘human’” (Jagodzinski 2018, 2). It represents a more dominant Western, ethnocentric vision that overlooks the specific roles of capitalist and colonial systems in driving environmental destruction. Therefore, the Anthropocene has faced significant criticism from scholars of different disciplines. Critics argue the need for a broader, more nuanced understanding of time, one that recognizes diverse and overlapping timelines of humanity’s interconnectedness with the environment and other entities.¹

These debates surrounding the understanding of time argue for moving beyond a singular, linear view of time to address the complex environmental challenges faced nowadays. This shift challenges traditional anthropocentric views by emphasizing the interconnectedness and agency of all entities. It acknowledges that more-than-human entities—from plants and animals to technologies and other inanimate objects—possess their own forms of agency and subjectivity. By decentering humans, it promotes a more inclusive and ethical understanding of our relationships with the environment and technology, encouraging us to see the world as a complex web of interdependencies where human and more-than-human entities cocreate and influence each other. As a result, various alternative “-cenes” and labels have emerged to challenge or extend the concept of the Anthropocene, each emphasizing different sociopolitical and ecological dimensions of human impact(s). Some of these alternatives, which will be discussed below, highlight how the dominant Western, ethnocentric view of history oversimplifies the global environmental crises by attributing it to an abstract, collective “*anthropos*,” effectively diminishing sociopolitical and historical complexities and also depoliticizing the unequal impacts faced by marginalized communities across the world (Hafner 2022, 149–161; Bensaude-Vincent 2022, 206–209).

One alternative to the Anthropocene is the “Plasticene,” a timescape that contextualizes the geological impacts of plastic pollution within societies and the Anthropocene and considers how plastics reconfigure nature, revealing the multiple destructions they cause (Haram 2020, 1–4). Plastics through their life cycle of production, use, disposal, and degradation, illustrate the interplay between environmental, sociocultural, and technological factors. Derived from raw materials such as crude oil or natural gas, plastics undergo polymerization to form polymers, which are then formed into a variety of products through processes such as extrusion and molding (Plastics Europe n.d.). These products, used extensively across sectors like packaging, construction, and electronics, are influenced by cultural practices and consumption

patterns. For example, the prevalence of single-use plastics reflects their convenience and low cost in many societies. Once discarded, plastics enter the waste stream where they can be landfilled, incinerated, or recycled. However, improperly disposed plastics slowly degrade through photodegradation into microplastics that persist in the environment for centuries (Kubowicz and Booth 2017).

Since the 1950s, plastics have become a defining feature of the geological record (Zalasiewicz, Gabbott, and Waters 2019). Their widespread presence in sedimentary deposits demonstrates their significant role within the concept Anthropocene (Stager 2011, credited to Matt Dowling; Haram 2020, 1–4; Corcoran et al. 2014, 4–8; Waters et al. 2016, 1–10; Zalasiewicz et al. 2016, 5; Zalasiewicz et al. 2021, 1–20; Rangel-Buitrago et al. 2022). Plastics also act as a political and ideological marker of human domination and are therefore referred to by some as the definition of the “Plasticene” (Clinici 2021, 83–84). This concept not only signifies the environmental destruction caused by plastic pollution, but also reflects understandings of broader socioeconomic dynamics linking human activity and capitalist production (Clinici 2021, 83–84; Corcoran et al. 2014, 4–8). It broadens the focus on waste beyond unwanted matter and disposal, aligning with environmental historian Marco Armiero and political economist Massimo De Angelis’ concept of the “Wasteocene.” The “Wasteocene” embodies the tangible effects of mass consumption and the exponential accumulation of waste (Armiero and De Angelis 2017, 345–62). Armiero and De Angelis introduce the “Wasteocene” as an aspect of American historian and sociologist Jason W. Moore’s “Capitalocene” (2016, 1–11; 2017, 594–630; 2018, 238–41), which identifies capital as the dominant force shaping human interactions and driving climate change by exploiting nature for profit (Armiero and De Angelis 2017, 345–62). Consequently, the “Wasteocene” engages with narratives of “racialized capital,” as the “Capitalocene” is rooted in behavioral, structural, and economic conditions (Hafner 2022, 154; Armiero and De Angelis 2017, 347). The exploration focuses on the socioecological dynamics of waste, revealing how power structures and toxic environments contribute to the marginalization of certain communities and areas (Armiero 2021, 10). These alternative “-cenes”—“Plasticene” and “Wasteocene”—emphasize how waste, pollution, and exploitation disproportionately affect marginalized regions, perpetuating the dynamics of extraction and disposability.

The three concepts are discussed in the following context as they engage with environmental issues such as plastic pollution and how the show *7 vs. Wild* implicitly addresses these challenges. *7 vs. Wild* illustrates the impact of these timescapes. The “Plasticene” highlights the ubiquitous presence of plastic waste and its detrimental effects on ecosystems, reflected in the show’s depiction of plastic debris on coastlines. The “Wasteocene” draws attention to the overproduction of waste and systemic failures

in waste management, illustrating how such inefficiencies exacerbate environmental degradation. The “Capitalocene” critiques the capitalist frameworks that drive unsustainable resource use and environmental destruction, providing context for the show’s exploration of industrial progress and its environmental consequences. The show’s focus on survival and ingenuity in nature stands in contrast to the excesses of modern consumer culture. Depicting the harsh realities of survival against the backdrop of contemporary wastefulness, *7 vs. Wild* engages with and critiques environmental impacts associated with the “Plasticene,” “Wasteocene,” and “Capitalocene.”

7 vs. Wild

The second season of YouTube reality series *7 vs. Wild*, filmed in early September 2022 and aired on YouTube from November to December the same year, “blurs the lines between a homemade survival diary and a masterfully executed professional reality TV show,” according to Austrian journalist Natasha Ickert (2022, para. 4). Created by Fritz Meinecke and produced by Johannes Hovekamp and Maximilian Kovacs, the show’s second season is set on Isla de San José in southern Panama. The creator and producers deliberately chose this island setting as a contrast to the first season filmed in Sweden 2021 (Fritz Meinecke–Live 2022). This location provides a setting that reflects a postcolonial nation dealing with the long-term effects of environmental exploitation and degradation. From 1944 to 1948, the US military used San José for a program known as the San José Project, testing chemical weapons such as mustard gas and phosgene (Lindsay-Poland 2003, 51–53; Pugliese 2002, 55). These tests resulted in significant environmental contamination and ongoing safety concerns, leading to protracted disputes between Panama and the United States over cleanup responsibilities (Lindsay-Poland 2003, 51–53). In 2001, the Pentagon, which is the US government’s center for military operations and defense policy, had its claims of proper disposal challenged when seven intact chemical weapons, including phosgene bombs and gas cylinders, were discovered on the island (Bilbao 2016, para. 33–37; Pugliese 2002, 55). The discovery led to the immediate quarantine of San José, the closure of a newly built eco-tourist resort, *Hacienda del Mar*, and the eviction of hotel workers and residents (Pugliese 2002, 55). The Panamanian government has since grappled with the extent of the contamination, as the discovered weapons are likely only a fraction of what remains from the San José Project (55). Despite San José’s dangerous past, it has been rehabilitated for tourism in recent years, with *Hacienda del Mar* rebranded to attract eco-tourists. Isla de San José has also become a location for filming reality survival shows, including not only *7 vs. Wild*, but other programs such as *Lone Target* and *Naked Survival*. Developers, aware of the island’s history of chemical warfare, believed the risks to tourists would be minimal (59).

However, ongoing safety concerns and environmental challenges remain, highlighting the difficulty of fully decontaminating such a site (60). By choosing this location, *7 vs. Wild* not only contrasts sharply with the first season's setting, but also exposes the contestants to potential chemical contamination while profiting from a historically polluted island. This decision highlights a broader issue: the show's use of the island perpetuates the legacy of colonial-era chemical warfare without acknowledging its environmental and historical ramifications. In doing so, it implicitly contributes to the ongoing effects of World War II chemical testing and underscores the challenges a post-colonial nation such as Panama face in addressing and mitigating this legacy.

Featuring seven prominent figures from Germany and Austria, known for their diverse content on platforms like Instagram, Twitch, YouTube, TikTok, and focusing on fitness, outdoor activities, reaction videos, and more, the show engages them in an outdoor survival challenge on the island of San José. In addition, the second season of *7 vs. Wild* introduced new elements, such as two emergency medical teams, to ensure enhanced safety measures for contestants and grew their organizational team (Fritz Meinecke – Live 2022). The contestants include Fritz Meinecke (@fritz.meinecke), Ottogerd Karasch (@ottobulletproof), Joris (@joris_rdy), Antonia (@starletnova), Sabrina (@sabrinaoutdoor), Sascha Huber (@sascha_huber_official), and Jens Knossalla (@knossi). Some participants are known primarily by their first name or online alias, which reflects their public persona and how they are commonly referred to by their followers. Isolated from the outside world, they strive to endure seven days on their own, recording their daily experiences with just a GoPro camera. As the days unfold, they face a myriad of challenges, both physical and mental, testing the limits of their resilience and determination. Amid the physical and mental obstacles, participants vie for points earned by successfully completing daily challenges, such as building a bow and arrow from natural materials and shooting at a target (“Pfeil und Bogen”), photographing various animal species with a GoPro (“Naturfotograf”), and creating new outfits from available resources (“Outfit des Tages”), which will ultimately determine the overall winner. Should more than one person prove their skill by reaching the end of the game, the contestant with the highest score in the daily challenges will be the ultimate victor. In this way, *7 vs. Wild* captivates YouTube audiences and reality TV fans alike, blending drama, personal growth, and unfiltered authenticity into a compelling production.

The first episode of the series sets the stage with an introduction that outlines the premise of the show. Viewers watch as the contestants are airlifted to their remote locations, dive into the deep ocean waters, swim ashore, and begin their solo survival challenge on the island for seven days. Awaiting them on shore are dry bags containing

essential tools carefully selected for their seven-day survival stay. Notably, this season imposes stricter rules on gear selection, with most participants choosing fewer than seven items based on self-assessment (Fritz Meinecke–Live 2022). For example, Fritz Meinecke is only equipped with a machete, while Sabrina has a knife, a saw, a fire starter, and a pot with a lid. Additionally, there is a rule change regarding the medical kits. Unlike the previous season, there are now two kits available. Opening the first kit, known as the “2-minute kit,” results in point deductions, while accessing the second kit, known as the “60-second kit,” results in immediate elimination, as it is assumed that the alleged injury is life-threatening and requires immediate action by the medical team to rescue and recover the contestant (DAVE 2022). In addition to these provisions, each participant is equipped with a cell phone for emergencies and technical devices to document their survival stay. GPS transmitters ensure that their well-being is monitored on a daily basis, guaranteeing a prompt response to any emergency. Failure to promptly confirm their status will result in immediate elimination and removal from the island.

Reality TV, Plastics, and *7 vs. Wild*

Media scholars Elisabeth Klaus and Stephanie Lücke (2003, 210) argue that reality TV has transitioned from a fleeting trend into an important genre with its own conventions and cultural impact. Some critics even suggest that it has even redefined television culture (Murray and Ouellette 2004). However, this television format has faced and continues to face considerable criticism. Some critics argued that reality TV merely pandered to the voyeurism of viewers (Wegner 1994, 9). Others point out that reality TV is often not “real.” Many shows are scripted, with events exaggerated for the sake of drama and entertainment. Although presented as reality, these shows involve misleading editing, pre-generated storylines, and staged scenes that undermine the illusion of authenticity. In addition, reality TV has been criticized for its negative political and cultural effects, with shows often seen as vulgar or encouraging promiscuous and dangerous behavior (Booth 2004; Johnson n.d.). The genre is frequently referred to as “trash TV,” a term that carries a heavy stigma and reflects a dismissive attitude toward both the genre and its audience. Austrian content creator, author, and entrepreneur Madeleine Alizadeh (2024) has critiqued this label, pointing out that it is rooted in classist attitudes. Alizadeh argues that calling reality TV “trash” adopts a condescending perspective, implying that those who watch these shows occupy a lower rung in the social hierarchy and are considered less cultured because they choose to consume entertainment that is considered less valuable by (certain) societal standards. This perspective reflects the preferences of the upper and middle classes and devalues the cultural products and interests of others. Labeling reality TV as “trash” thus extends this judgment to its viewers, unfairly branding them as less educated or cultured simply for

their entertainment choices. Alizadeh (2024) emphasizes that this is a form of elitism in which individuals with higher social status or cultural capital impose their preferences on others, deeming them superior and dismissing alternative forms of entertainment as inferior.

By 2024, reality TV has become a massive industry across Europe, the US, Asia, Australia, and South America, with shows like *Big Brother*, *The Bachelor*, and *I'm a Celebrity! Get Me Out of Here!* becoming staples in entertainment programming. These shows have been adapted into various formats and languages specific to their respective countries, demonstrating the genre's global reach, extending even to platforms such as YouTube. Despite their popularity and frequent categorization as reality television, its defining characteristics remain fluid and somewhat ambiguous (Kavka 2012, 2). According to media and cultural studies scholars Anita Biressi and Heather Nunn (2005, 1–3), the term broadly encompasses a range of hybrid genres that emerged in the late 1990s. Cross-media culture scholar Misha Kavka suggests that reality TV generally refers to unscripted programs featuring non-professional actors in prearranged settings (2012, 5–6). A more complex definition might include critical discourses and cultural economies embedded in reality TV. This perspective associates reality TV with low production values, high emotions, and questionable ethics. Notwithstanding these complexities, the defining characteristic of reality TV seems to be its hybridity, combining elements of other television genres rather than creating something entirely new (5).

Despite often seen as superficial entertainment, reality TV can act as a kind of cultural mirror that engages with and reflects everyday experiences, even if it is perceived as peripheral to significant social issues (Lindemann 2021, 7). According to American sociologist Danielle J. Lindemann (2021), this genre, while frequently exaggerated and sensationalized, highlights key elements of particular cultures, including “collective preferences, societal norms, and taboos” (7). In the media landscape of 2024, which is characterized by growing environmental concern, media platforms have a significant impact on public discourse. Reality television in particular has the potential to highlight real-world issues and inspire individual actions, such as altering consumption habits, participating in environmental organizations, and advocating for climate change, through its narratives. Research by the USC Annenberg Norman Lear Center's *Media Impact Project* has examined the representation of health and social issues in scripted media. The analysis of scripted content from 2016 to 2020 found that only 2.8 percent of 37,453 episodes and movies contained climate-related keywords (Giaccardi, Rogers, and Rosenthal 2022, 2–5). The *Media Impact Project* conducted a second study of unscripted television from September 2022 to February 2023. This analysis covered more than

200,000 hours of programming across 48 US broadcast and cable channels. It identified 75 climate and sustainability keywords that were mentioned 28,424 times. The most commonly used keywords included “vegan,” “vegetarian,” and “carbon footprint” (Rogers, Weinstein, and Rosenthal 2024, 10). Reality TV alone accounted for 1,138 mentions of sustainability terms, with these segments generating 181 million views (Rogers, Weinstein, and Rosenthal 2024, 4–5, 9–10, 27–28). In an interview, Max Boykoff notes that climate-related content is often subtly integrated rather than directly addressed in unscripted media. This approach makes climate issues more accessible to audiences that might otherwise be disengaged (Veltman 2023).

7 vs. Wild illustrates plastic pollution through its images and video clips, making this problem more relatable. Set against the backdrop of an island’s natural beauty, the show contrasts this pristine environment with the omnipresent modern waste. The series not only showcases the contestants’ interactions with plastic debris found on the beach but also reflects broader implications of environmental degradation. By featuring and addressing plastic waste, *7 vs. Wild* actively participates in the conversation about environmental degradation and the waste generation.

Plastics have become an integral part of modern life, celebrated for their durability, versatility, affordability, and practicality (Nielsen et al. 2020, 1). Its applications are vast, ranging from food packaging, electronics, construction materials, automobiles, household appliances, medical equipment, textiles and clothing, sports and recreation gear, among others. Plastics play a crucial role in promoting sustainability by preserving food, improving vehicle efficiency, and insulating electrical cables (1–2). However, these benefits are often overshadowed by the serious environmental issues plastics cause (Nielsen et al. 2020). As plastic waste accumulates in streets, rivers and oceans, beaches, and forests, among others, the once-celebrated benefits of this material are increasingly called into question. This dichotomy underlines the complex relationship with plastics, highlighting both its indispensable utility and the significant environmental challenges it poses. This accumulation and resulting pollution reflect the systemic inefficiencies in the management of plastic waste, a key aspect of the proposed timescape “Wasteocene.” The misuse of plastics and their accumulation as waste is a direct result of contemporary consumption patterns (Dennis 2023, 27).

Plastics infiltrate every facet of human and more-than-human lives—food, water, air, and even bodies. Research indicates that plastic particles are ingested via contaminated food and water and absorbed through lungs, transforming external pollutants into internal, “biological” elements (Lehner et al. 2019, 1752; Schaag 2020, 14). Moreover, the proliferation of plastics and their ubiquitous presence in ecosystems and human bodies

is symptomatic of the “Capitalocene.” The relentless production and consumption of plastics, driven by industrial and economic interests, is consistent with the critique of the “Capitalocene,” as the convenience of the material is prioritized over its environmental costs.

The evolving meanings and cultural ambivalence toward plastics have exacerbated plastic waste by assigning low value to these materials, making them easily disposable (Konrad 2023, 13). Initially perceived as symbols of cleanliness and efficiency, disposables have led to ethical justifications for wastefulness. Sociologist Gay Hawkins (2018; 2019) argues that the notion of disposability has rendered waste ethically insignificant, framing it as a technical rather than a moral issue. Hawkins defines cultures of disposability as systems in which objects and materials influence human behavior, values, and social norms. Items considered “disposable” are intended for immediate disposal rather than reuse, fostering a culture that often neglects their potential value. This consumer ethos equates freedom with the freedom to waste (2018; 2019). Focusing on the term “trash” in relation to reality television and plastic waste demonstrates how objects—be they media, materials, or other things—are consumed and subsequently labeled as “trash” or “disposable.” Identifying something as “trash” is often associated with the attributes of cheap, inferior, worthless, and therefore often perceived as insignificant. This negative connotation contributes to the inferiority of materials, ideas, preferences, and even people. Which raises the question: Who determines what is valuable and what is considered “trash,” both culturally and materially? While plastics are ubiquitous and essential to modern infrastructure, their accumulation often occurs in neglected areas such as landfills or in less industrially advanced countries. This demonstrates inequalities in waste management, with plastic waste disproportionately affecting countries and communities with fewer resources. Similarly, the labeling of certain forms of media as “trash TV” influences public perceptions. Not only does such a label diminish the perceived value of the content, but it also perpetuates stereotypes about the audience by suggesting that they are less sophisticated or cultured. This interplay between media and material “trash” reinforces existing power dynamics and shapes cultural narratives that dictate what is considered valuable and what is not.

Disposability, Survival, and *7 vs. Wild*

Reality TV serves as a lens through which to explore contemporary issues and societal values. *7 vs. Wild* moves beyond the survival challenges faced by German and Austrian “celebrities” and explores topics of resilience and self-reliance as well. The contestants are confronted with finding food and drinking water, building shelters, and coping with isolation and the weather conditions. It also addresses themes of environmental

responsibility, linking survival experiences with broader conversations about environmental awareness. The show contrasts the contestants' picturesque surroundings with the harsh realities of environmental degradation and pollution, highlighting the complex relationship between humans and the natural world.

San José initially presents itself as a paradise, evoking a romanticized vision akin to cinematic portrayals of pristine beaches and azure waters. Yet, this illusion quickly shatters as reality is marred by extensive plastic debris. Strewn across the shores are plastic bottles, chairs, fishing nets, flip-flops, and various other synthetic items, or objects labeled disposable—a testament to humanity's pervasive environmental impact. This leads contestants on *7 vs. Wild* to contemplate on societal issues about environmental degradation, with their emotions ranging from initial excitement upon discovering useful materials to eventual introspection regarding the severity of plastic pollution. Contestants Sascha Huber, an Austrian content creator, and Ottogerd Karasch, a German paratrooper, YouTuber, and survival trainer, expressed alarm over the conditions on the (waste) littered island. Their observations sparked a discussion among fans on Twitter, where many expressed their heartbreak upon seeing the extensive waste captured in the video footage, condemning the reckless pollution of the planet (Lampen 2022). This prompted numerous viewers to voice their dissatisfaction with current waste management practices, and thus their individual responsibility (Lampen 2022). This evolving awareness among the audience can be seen as a catalyst for environmental responsibility—a recognition that extends beyond mere concern and encourages individuals to engage more consciously with materials as such and the environment.

The contestants' use of GoPro cameras to capture their daily lives on the island provides a raw and immersive perspective that invites viewers to engage intimately with these personal stories. This also allows viewers to connect with the contestants and feel their struggles in real time, even though the show is pre-recorded and not live. The authenticity of these portrayals is heightened by the close-ups and natural lighting created by the absence of any other filming equipment. The series cuts back and forth between the contestants, presenting selected scenes that offer a snapshot of their individual experience. By incorporating timestamps and day sequences into the footage, the show provides clarity on the timeline and unfolding of each contestant's experience. The natural ambient sounds—the rhythmic crash of ocean waves, the whispering wind, the hum of flies and bugs—deepen the narrative of the survival show and portray the contestants' immersion in nature.

For the participants, these plastic products become not just symbols of environmental harm but resources essential for their survival over the seven days.

Dismayed by the sight of pollution, they realize the practical utility these materials offer. The footage shows contestants demonstrating their ingenuity by repurposing these found items such as plastic tarps, fishing nets, ropes, and bottles to create tools and shelter. They use these materials to make bows and arrows, for example, or to collect food and water. This adaptation shows a sense of ingenuity in using available materials to meet their basic needs amidst challenging conditions, reflecting a resilience born out of necessity and, perhaps, environmental awareness.

This discussion builds on the earlier exploration of disposability by examining how *7 vs. Wild* illustrates how contestants repurpose plastic debris into essential tools and shelter, challenging the ingrained cultural mindset of disposability. By transforming discarded plastics into useful tools and shelter, the show shifts the perception of these materials from waste to valuable resources in survival contexts. The contestants' skill at repurposing plastic waste into functional tools emphasizes the claim that items designated as disposable are not inherently devoid of utility. This portrayal can prompt viewers to reconsider societal norms around consumption and waste. The contestants' dismay over the island's plastic pollution evolves into an appreciation for the practical value of these materials. This change in perspective may inspire viewers to evaluate their own consumption habits and consider the environmental impact of disposable products.

Episode four, which featured the distressing sight of lifeless baby sharks washed ashore—served as another visual reminder of human-caused environmental destruction. This scene triggered public discussions and concern, galvanizing support for environmental initiatives. In response to this outcry, German biologist and environmental activist Robert Marc Lehmann utilized his live stream to shed light on the issue of illegal shark finning (Robert Marc Lehmann – Mission Erde, 2022; Udowenko 2022; Schameitat and Schiller 2022). Shark finning involves the cruel practice of cutting off a shark's fins and discarding the rest of the body at sea, often while the animal is still alive (Mignon 2024). The fins fetch high prices for shark fin soup, a delicacy in East Asian cultures, driving the persistent problem of shark finning across Latin America (Mignon 2024). Despite Panama's legislative efforts to restrict this practice, enforcement of regulations remains inconsistent, allowing illegal shark finning to thrive due to insufficient monitoring and implementation capabilities, corruption, and the profitability of the trade (Ramírez and Dalby 2023). Following Lehmann's explanation during the live stream, a viewer encouraged others to support Lehmann's environmental and conservation project, *Mission Erde e.V.*, resulting in a generous donation of 100,000 euros (Udowenko 2022; Schameitat and Schiller 2022). *Mission Erde e.V.* is an organization that works to preserve biodiversity and protect habitats, reflecting a broader public

interest in conservation. While *7 vs. Wild* has not directly led to policy changes, the donations to the conservation organization underscores the show's impact in sparking conversations and more environmental awareness.

The visible pollution on the show has encouraged viewer engagement, as evidenced by the substantial donations. Noteworthy, there is no direct evidence linking the show to changes in individual behavior or environmental policy. Such media, however, help raise awareness about environmental issues, according to literary and film scholar Alexandra Weik von Mossner (2017, 3). Narratives—whether in books, films, or television—are important for making sense not only of imaginary worlds, but also of the real world (Weik von Mossner 2017, 3–6). Engaging in reading or watching are “highly embodied activities” that engage the senses and mental processes, allowing us to emotionally connect with and experience the events and interactions depicted (3). These narratives become mental simulations that resonate with the viewer, sometimes influencing how one thinks and/or behaves (3). In *7 vs. Wild*, the depiction of waste, disposability, and the resourcefulness required to survive in a remote environment becomes more than just entertainment. It triggers this “embodied response” in some viewers, as evidenced by the donations, highlighting their engagement with the show's discourse about the environment and its degradation.

Communication and media scholar John A. Duvall (2018) highlights in his book *The Environmental Documentary* the significant potential of environmental media, particularly documentaries, to raise awareness and inspire action on environmental issues. Although the immediate impact of *7 vs. Wild* may be limited to increased discussion and charitable donations, the show's ability to engage viewers on a sensory and emotional level emphasize the growing recognition that environmental narratives play an important part in encouraging and building stronger environmental consciousness and engagement. This “embodied response,” in which viewers feel the participants' discomfort as they see the amount of plastic waste washed ashore, serves as an entry point for broader environmental reflection (Weik von Mossner 2017). As Weik von Mossner (2017, 7) points out, environmental narratives often convey the sensory experience of interacting with one's own surroundings and experiences, and through such imagery, media can affect emotions, attitudes, values, and behaviors.

Conclusion

7 vs. Wild blends survival challenges with a portrayal of environmental realities, capturing the contestants' experiences on Isla de San José. Set on a postcolonial island with a history of environmental exploitation, the series contrasts the idyllic image of a paradise

with the harsh reality of pervasive plastic pollution. The plastic debris, washed ashore and made visible through the show's footage, underscores the harmful impact of disposable plastic use. The series also exposes the ongoing exploitation of San José, which, despite its picturesque appearance, bears the hidden burdens of past chemical warfare testing. The lingering presence of harmful chemicals poses a threat not only to the local wildlife but also to the humans who visit or reside there. This is further emphasized by the discovery of dead baby sharks, victims of the cruel practice of shark finning—an example of how economic and cultural practices can lead to the exploitation and suffering of animals for human gain. Through these environmental and survival narratives, *7 vs. Wild* not only entertains but also raises awareness about issues of pollution, exploitation, and the broader impact of human (extractive) activities.

Viewer engagement with *7 vs. Wild* has been considerable, with many expressing concerns about the plastic pollution depicted and supporting environmental initiatives through substantial donations. This response reflects the viewers' willingness to contribute to conservation efforts, although direct evidence linking the series to specific behavioral changes is limited. While *7 vs. Wild* has not directly led to any policy changes in German-speaking countries, it has sparked important discussions about environmental accountability and various often-invisible impacts of pollution and exploitation.

Note

¹ For a detailed discussion, see Hafner 2022; Bensaude-Vincent 2022, 206–16; Gómez-Barris 2019; Jagodzinski 2018; Whyte 2018; Di Chiro 2017, 487–505; Lorimer 2017; Malm and Hornborg 2014.

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