Dear Sirs:

NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC has been an international and socially welcoming institution for so many years, presenting the often wrongly maligned Roma, a sprawling people who’s identity has and still remains shrouded in mystery, in nothing if not a positive light. It is a delicate and difficult task to educate the public on a society so hard to penetrate as the Roma, who, much like a lost civilization, supply little evidence of their true inner-workings as a society. However the program American Gypsies, slated to air later this month on the National Geographic Channel and which purportedly takes a peak inside the New York-based Johns family, is at risk of being a conflict of interest not only for the Roma but also for National Geographic because this family, as detailed further in this letter, is far from representative of the Roma community. It is without a doubt that any viewer of this show will see this family as a model for all so called “American gypsies”, and this would indeed be a tragedy, damaging both the image of the Roma and that of National Geographic. The show’s description already starts out on the wrong foot with a stereotype of gypsy-as-fortune-teller with the line “how to make a fortune in the fortune-telling business”.

Perhaps it is not the Roma who are looking to make a fortune here, but the minds behind this program at the “Golden-rectangle”. It is probable that National Geographic is aware that “Gypsy culture” has been a popular subject in the media recently, and it seems possible the Channel may want to feed off of this trend at the expense of the people involved despite its not-for-profit status. The only possible outcomes of airing the program are that it would
provide a poor understanding of who and what the Roma are, and the knowledge that the Romani American population is not sufficiently equipped to combat racial stereotyping legally. Furthermore, if one were to consider the making of a series presenting a family of American Jewish crooks as Jews generally, or a black street gang were presented as representing African Americans generally, there would be a massive outcry, and such projects would die aborning. The proposed American Gypsies is no different from these hypothetical, backwards, examples. Already a proposed series on an American Muslim family has been cancelled, presumably for fear of legal backlash.

It is claimed that this is not a documentary about Romani Americans, but just about one family. Does this mean that the words “Gypsy” and “Roma” or “Romani” don’t occur anywhere in the series? They will be, of course. But will there be a disclaimer? Will there be a statement to the effect that this family is criminal, this family is not representative of the hundreds of thousands of Romani who live in our country, and in fact has been ostracized by that population? Will our history be presented factually? Reference to the 550 years of slavery in Eastern Europe, from whom the Johns family descends? Will there be reference to Himmler’s genocidal Final Solution of the Gypsy Question in the Holocaust? Or will all of the real history be put aside in favor of fishing trips to Florida and visits to the mall?

Hundreds of thousands of Roma live in our country. Most stay in the background for fear of racial discrimination. State and county laws specifically aimed at Roma have existed until as recently as 1989, some of which are listed in my book Danger! Educated Gypsy. Although we are protected from this as a class under the terms of Title VII of the 1968 Civil Rights Act, few Roma are aware of it or use it as a means of legal redress. One organization, however, called Romani Zor, with a Romani American attorney, Joseph Nicola, has recently been incorporated to monitor the present situation, and anticipates a class action suit following this series. I am a Romani. I am a senior faculty member at a leading university. I am a former White House appointee. I am a state commissioner. And I am deeply insulted by this. If there is doubt about the extent of racial bigotry targeting Romanies in our country, visit www.topix.com/forum/city/texarkana-tx/T97FHETB5P7O16PBA.

Use of the word “Gypsy” is problematic. It is a word we dislike, and which was officially dropped from all of its internal documentation at the Second World Romani Congress in 1984. The use by journalists of its equivalent in other languages (e.g. Zigeuner in German, Cigan in Serbia) has been banned. The “Gypsies” in the British and TLS series “My Big Fat Gypsy Wedding” are not in fact Romani at all, but a white population of Irish descent. The definition of “Gypsy” (or “gypsy”) is already vague in people’s minds, most of whom think it
is a behavior rather than an ethnicity, and National Geographic’s imprimatur will only serve to reinforce that misconception. If the general public’s exposure to “American Gypsies” is presented under National Geographic’s trusted name, then disrespectful and inaccurate perceptions of our people will have been confirmed.

The Johns family has a very bad reputation, and is shunned by the community. It is the focus of the series only because of the entertainment value their ignorance and bad behavior provides. If we as a people are not taken seriously, then the problems we face cannot possibly be taken seriously.

It astounds me that National Geographic’s standards have fallen so low, have succumbed to the overall downward drift of our country’s academic standards. Our real story is a fascinating one; indeed, NG produced an entire beautifully illustrated book about it edited by Bart McDowell in 1970 entitled Gypsies, Wanderers of the World. What has happened since?

Both the United Nations and the Council of Europe list the situation of Roma as the most serious transnationally in terms of human rights abuse. I have included a number of references to this below.

Roma remain to date the most persecuted people of Europe. Almost everywhere, their fundamental human rights are threatened. Racist violence targeting Roma is widespread in the last years. Discrimination against Roma in employment, education, healthcare, administrative and other services is observed in most societies, and hate speech deepens the anti-Romani stereotypes typical of European public opinion. (European Roma Rights Centre, 2001: 5).

Romanies in Europe were ‘at the bottom of every socio-economic indicator: the poorest, the most unemployed, the least educated, the shortest-lived, the most welfare dependent, the most imprisoned and the most segregated. (The Economist, 2005).

Roma are the most prominent poverty risk group in many of the countries of central and Eastern Europe. They are poorer than other groups, more likely to fall into poverty, and more likely to remain poor. In some cases poverty rates for Roma are more than ten times that of non-Roma. A recent survey found that nearly 80 per cent of Roma in Romania and Bulgaria were living on less than $4.30 per day … even in Hungary, one of the most prosperous accession countries, 40 per cent of Roma live below the poverty line. (World Bank Report, 2006).
In September 2001, the council of Europe ‘issued a blistering condemnation of Europe’s treatment of the Roma Gypsy community, saying they are subject to racism, discrimination and violence … the United Nations says they pose Europe’s most serious human rights problem. (BBC, 2001)

On 1 February 2008, the Associated Press issued a statement released by the European union beginning, ‘the Roma, also known as Gypsies, remain frequent targets of racist attacks, abuse and police harassment.’

If American Gypsies is aired, even though it concerns the life of just one family, it will undoubtedly give a false impression of the Roma as a society. Considering the racial issues faced by the Roma, especially in recent years, this show, already in violation of civil rights laws, would only foster further problems for the Romani people. Furthermore, it can not be ignored that National Geographic Magazine has previously published illuminating and educational editorial content on the Roma and that the intent of American Gypsies is counter to the positive spirit of curiosity already firmly established by the magazine, thus causing this program to be in conflict with the interests of both the National Geographic Society and the Romani people. Allowing the world to see this footage can be nothing if not detrimental for both parties involved, and we hope with the utmost respect that the board might be able to see this and seriously consider the multiple negative outcomes airing of this program would create.

Sincerely,

Ian Hancock

Kore Yoors

The International Romani Archives and Documentation Center consists of over 25,000 books, articles, manuscripts, prints, posters, audio and videotaped materials and framed and other artifacts. Donations are welcomed and are tax-exempt.