

# A Systematic Literature Review on the Thematic Presentation and Impact of Nature and Ecology Documentaries

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## Abstract

This systematic literature review examines 19 peer-reviewed studies of nature and ecological documentaries published between January 2016 and July 2026. Guided by the PRISMA framework, the review uses qualitative content analysis to synthesize research on documentary themes, representational strategies, audience responses, and broader social functions. Three recurring environmental themes were identified: wildlife conservation and biodiversity, ecological pollution and climate crisis, and relationships between humans and nature. The reviewed studies also examine emotional narratives, visual spectacle, audiovisual framing, and culturally situated representations. Audience research indicates that these strategies can influence immediate emotional interpretations, environmental attitudes, and behavioral intentions, although evidence of sustained behavioral change remains limited. Other studies address the contribution of documentaries to public discourse, institutional responses, and national image construction. The literature remains concentrated on internationally prominent Anglophone productions and Chinese state-supported documentaries, while connections among textual, audience, and institutional approaches remain limited. The review therefore highlights the need for more integrated, longitudinal, and cross-cultural research in environmental communication and documentary studies.

**Keywords:** Nature and Ecological Documentaries, Systematic Literature Review, Environmental Themes, Documentary Influence

## Introduction

As global ecological crises intensify and the need for environmental governance becomes more urgent, effective public communication of complex environmental issues has become increasingly important. Nature and ecological documentaries occupy a distinctive position in this process because they can translate abstract or distant environmental problems into visually accessible and narratively structured representations. Their combination of visual

representation, storytelling, and emotionally oriented communication can make environmental issues more accessible and socially salient to wider audiences. Documentaries such as *Our Planet* combine visual spectacle with calls for environmental protection and use storytelling to broaden the appeal of environmental messages (Jones et al., 2019). Other scholars have emphasized that environmental documentaries reflect the growing prominence of ecological discourse in contemporary media (Christensen et al., 2018). These characteristics make nature and ecological documentaries an important object of study within environmental communication, particularly for understanding how environmental issues are made visible, interpreted, and communicated through documentary media.

Existing research on nature and ecological documentaries is distributed across different disciplinary and methodological traditions. Some studies focus on environmental themes, visual representation, narrative strategies, and documentary discourse, while others examine audience responses, public discussion, institutional consequences, or national image construction (Li et al., 2021; Males & Van Aelst, 2021; Manitzas Hill et al., 2023; Wang et al., 2023). These studies have generated valuable findings, but they often address different dimensions of documentary communication separately. As a result, it remains difficult to obtain an integrated understanding of which environmental issues have received the greatest scholarly attention, which representational strategies have been most frequently examined, and what forms of audience and broader social influence have been examined and reported in existing research. A systematic synthesis is therefore needed to connect these strands of scholarship, clarify the current state of the field, and identify areas in which evidence remains limited or fragmented.

The distinction between nature documentaries and ecological documentaries is not always clear in either academic or industry usage. Nature documentaries generally focus on natural environments, ecological landscapes, and the habitats, behavior, and lives of nonhuman species (Freytag & Possler, 2024; Zhao & Mao, 2019), whereas ecological documentaries place greater emphasis on changes in animals, plants, and ecosystems under the influence of human activities (Mliless & Azzouzi, 2020; Wang et al., 2023). In practice, however, these categories increasingly overlap, as many productions combine representations of the natural world with explicit environmental concerns (Christensen et al., 2018). Because the same documentary may therefore be classified differently depending on the research focus, this review uses nature and ecological documentaries as an umbrella term for works that engage with natural environments, ecological issues, and human–nature relations.

By integrating research on documentary themes, representational strategies, audience responses, and broader social influence, this review brings previously separated areas of inquiry into a shared analytical framework. For scholars in environmental communication, documentary studies, and related fields, the review identifies the areas that have received the greatest research attention and reveals methodological and geographical gaps in the existing literature. For documentary filmmakers and communication practitioners, it provides a research-based account of the representational strategies examined in previous studies and the forms of audience response reported in relation to some of these strategies, while also highlighting the limited evidence for lasting behavioral influence. The findings are also relevant to educators, environmental organizations, and advocacy groups that use

documentary media in public communication, as the review clarifies both the potential and the limitations of documentaries as resources for communicating environmental issues.

To systematically examine the presentation and reported influence of environmental themes in nature and ecological documentaries, this study adopts a systematic literature review approach. This approach enables findings from different disciplinary and methodological traditions to be systematically compared and synthesized (Mohamed Shaffril et al., 2021; Paul & Criado, 2020). The review addresses two questions: (1) What environmental issues are examined in research on nature and ecological documentaries, and what strategies are used to present them? (2) How do existing studies evaluate the audience, discursive, and institutional influences of such documentaries?

### **Methodology**

The methodological framework for this research review follows the PRISMA protocol, which outlines a structured process for identifying, selecting and analyzing relevant literature. In accordance with this methodology, major academic databases such as Scopus and Web of Science were selected for this review with rigorously set inclusion and exclusion criteria. The whole process was divided into identification, screening and eligibility assessment, followed by systematic data extraction and thematic synthesis.

#### *PRISMA*

This review followed the PRISMA framework to document the identification, screening, eligibility assessment, and inclusion of relevant studies. Originally developed for systematic reviews in health research, PRISMA has also been applied in other disciplines to improve the transparency and reproducibility of literature selection. It provides structured guidance for reporting search sources, eligibility criteria, screening decisions, reasons for exclusion, and the final number of included studies (Sarkis-Onofre et al., 2021). In this review, the PRISMA framework was used to organize and report the study selection process, while qualitative content analysis was used to synthesize the findings of the included studies.

#### *Resources*

Systematic literature search is the core of the whole research process, which provides evidence to support data analysis through reliable literature sources (Rethlefsen et al., 2021). Web of Science and Scopus are two major database sources, the former is a comprehensive academic database covering a wide range of disciplines and a large number of scholarly journals, and provides citation analysis tools to track and analyze article citations. Scopus is regarded as one of the largest academic databases in the world, with a single citation index based on a rigorous content selection process, covering high quality journals and conference papers in a wide range of subject areas (Singh et al., 2021).

Outside of these two core databases, this study further conducted manual supplemental searches on academic platforms such as Science Direct, Taylor Francis, Springer Link, and Sage Journals. Such searches ensured comprehensive literature coverage, capturing marginal topics that were missed, as well as obtaining cross-validation to make the literature more adequate and comprehensive.

*Eligibility and Exclusion Criteria*

Studies were eligible when they presented original research on nature, wildlife, ecological, environmental, or other documentaries with a clear environmental focus. Eligible studies were required to examine at least one of the following areas: environmental themes, audiovisual or narrative representation, audience reception, production practices, media discourse, or broader social and institutional influence. Original research was defined as research based on primary textual, visual, narrative, discourse, audience, production, or institutional analysis.

Peer-reviewed journal articles and full-length peer-reviewed conference papers were included. Review articles, monographs, book chapters, editorials, commentaries, conference abstracts, and non-peer-reviewed publications were excluded. Studies focusing exclusively on fictional films were also excluded. Studies comparing documentaries with fictional films were eligible only when the documentary-related data and findings could be identified and extracted separately.

The review included English-language studies published between January 2016 and July 2026. Studies were not excluded solely because of their disciplinary classification. Studies from medical, clinical, engineering, or environmental science fields were excluded only when they did not analyze documentary content, communication, reception, production, or social influence. The eligibility and exclusion criteria are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1

*The inclusion and exclusion criteria*

| Criterion          | Eligibility                                                                             | Exclusion                                                                                                                 |
|--------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Publication period | January 2016 to July 2026                                                               | Published before January 2016 or after July 2026                                                                          |
| Document type      | Original peer-reviewed journal articles and full-length peer-reviewed conference papers | Review articles, books, book chapters, editorials, commentaries, conference abstracts, and non-peer-reviewed publications |
| Language           | English                                                                                 | Non-English                                                                                                               |
| Subject area       | Social sciences, humanities, environmental sciences, and related fields                 | Medical, clinical, engineering, or environmental science studies without a documentary or communication focus             |

**Systematic Review Process**

The systematic review process was divided into four phases. In the first phase, the search terms were identified according to the main research questions. The main concepts were nature and ecological documentaries and environmental issues. To improve the coverage of the search, related terms and synonyms were identified through previous studies, relevant thesauruses, and consultation with experts in the field. The final search strings used for Scopus and Web of Science are presented in Table 2. Based on the database and manual searches, a total of 418 records were identified.

Table 2

*Search Strings Used in the Systematic Review Process*

| Databases      | Search String                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           |
|----------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| scopus         | TITLE-ABS-KEY ( ( "nature documentary" OR "wildlife documentary" OR "natural history film" OR "animal documentary" OR "eco-documentary" OR "ecological documentary" OR "environmental documentary" OR "green documentary" OR "climate documentary" OR "environmental film" ) AND ( environment OR environmental OR ecology OR ecological OR conservation OR biodiversity OR ecosystem OR ecosystems OR pollution OR pollutant OR sustainability OR sustainable OR "climate change" OR "environmental destruction" ) )                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   |
| Web of Science | TS= ( ( "nature documentary" OR "nature documentaries" OR "wildlife documentary" OR "wildlife documentaries" OR "natural history film" OR "natural history films" OR "animal documentary" OR "animal documentaries" OR "eco-documentary" OR "eco-documentaries" OR "ecological documentary" OR "ecological documentaries" OR "environmental documentary" OR "environmental documentaries" OR "green documentary" OR "green documentaries" OR "climate documentary" OR "climate documentaries" OR "environmental film" OR "environmental films" ) AND ( environment OR environmental OR ecology OR ecological OR conservation OR biodiversity OR ecosystem OR ecosystems OR pollution OR pollutant OR pollutants OR sustainability OR sustainable OR "climate change" OR "environmental destruction" ) ) |

The second phase was the preliminary screening of the 418 records identified through the database and manual searches. A total of 203 records were excluded according to the predetermined eligibility and exclusion criteria, including the publication period, language, documentary focus, and relevance to the research questions. The titles and abstracts were examined to determine their relevance to the review. This process left 215 records. After 34 duplicate records were removed, 181 reports remained for full-text assessment.

The third phase involved a detailed full-text assessment of the remaining 181 reports. Full-text assessment enabled the researchers to verify eligibility beyond the information available in the database records (Mohamed Shaffril et al., 2021). A total of 162 reports were excluded because they focused exclusively on fictional films, did not examine nature or ecological documentaries, lacked original analysis, or addressed environmental issues without analyzing documentary content, communication, reception, production, or social influence. Conference abstracts and non-peer-reviewed publications were also excluded, while full-length peer-reviewed conference papers were retained when they met the same eligibility criteria applied to journal articles.

In the fourth phase, 19 studies that met all the eligibility criteria were included in the qualitative synthesis. The complete study selection process is presented in Figure 1.

*Data Extraction and Analysis*

The 19 included studies were assessed and analyzed in relation to the research questions. For each study, the abstract was reviewed first, followed by a detailed examination of the full text. Data were extracted on the documentary or documentary corpus, geographical context, theoretical framework, research design, analytical method, environmental focus,

representational strategies, and reported audience or social influence. Qualitative content analysis was then used to identify recurring findings and organize related codes into themes and sub-themes. To improve consistency and reduce potential errors, the data extraction and thematic classification were completed and cross-checked by two researchers familiar with the field.

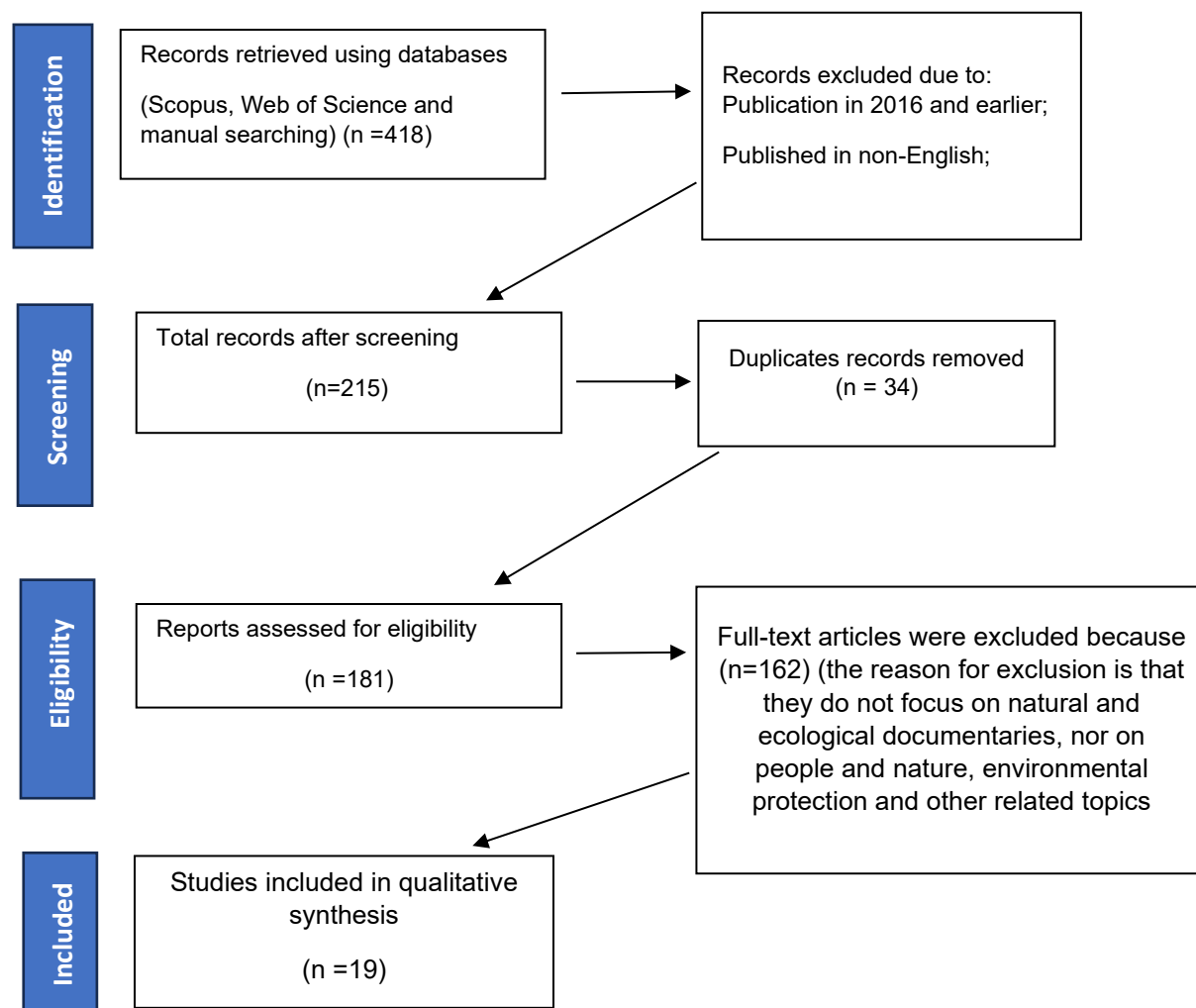


Figure 1. Flow diagram of the searching process

## Result

This section synthesizes the reviewed studies in three areas. The first concerns the methodological and theoretical approaches used in the literature. The second examines the environmental themes and representational patterns identified in nature and ecological documentaries. The third considers the audience, discursive, and institutional influences discussed in the reviewed studies.

### *Methodological and Theoretical Approaches in the Reviewed Literature*

The reviewed studies employed a range of qualitative and quantitative methods. Qualitative approaches included visual and aesthetic analysis (Mikkola, 2019), rhetorical and discourse analysis (Sperb, 2016; Wang et al., 2023), and discursive-material analysis (Carpentier et al., 2021). Li et al. (2021) used computer-assisted qualitative analysis to compare the images of China presented in two documentary series. Vaughan (2025) combined narrative, formal, and

industry analysis, while von Mossner (2021) examined the narrative strategies of radical environmental activism documentaries. Audience-oriented studies used experimental or evaluative designs to examine emotional interpretation, environmental attitudes, and behavioral intentions (Banchero et al., 2021; Freytag & Possler, 2024; Manitzas Hill et al., 2023).

The reviewed literature also drew on several theoretical and analytical perspectives. Agenda-setting, media psychology, and anthropomorphism were used to examine documentary communication and audience responses (Freytag & Possler, 2024; Males & Van Aelst, 2021; Manitzas Hill et al., 2023). Li et al. (2021) developed a projected destination-country image framework, while Mikkola (2019) examined the more-than-human gaze in *Earthflight*. Carpentier et al. (2021) combined discourse theory with new materialist perspectives, and Vaughan (2025) drew on intersectional environmental justice and race and gender studies.

Qualitative textual, visual, and discourse analyses constituted a substantial part of the reviewed literature, while a smaller group of studies used experimental or evaluative methods to examine audience responses. These approaches addressed different dimensions of documentary communication, but few studies connected detailed analysis of documentary form with direct evidence of audience reception or institutional influence.

### **Classification of environmental themes in nature and ecological documentaries**

#### *Wildlife Conservation and Biodiversity Framing*

Wildlife conservation is one of the core issues in nature and ecological documentaries. The reviewed literature shows that conservation themes are often communicated through emotionally resonant narratives and visually prominent animal species.

A recurring concern in the literature is the relative visibility of species and conservation messages. Nolan et al. (2022) found that natural history films generated substantially greater online engagement with depicted species than with conservation themes. In the case of *Blue Planet II*, increases in Wikipedia page views were more frequent and larger for species than for conservation topics, indicating that animal portrayals attracted more immediate online attention than the film's conservation messages.

In addition to the visibility of species, the literature has explored the symbolic and cultural roles assigned to wildlife. Hiltunen et al. (2020) show that the Finnish documentary *Tale of a Forest* constructs the forest through culturally familiar species, myths, and folklore. This representation connects wildlife with Finnish cultural identity while presenting the forest as both an ecological environment and a culturally imagined space. In the Chinese context, Wang et al. (2023) show that eco-documentaries combine representations of flagship species with conservation discourse and national development narratives.

Mikkola's (2019) analysis of *Earthflight* examines a transhuman gaze created through bird-mounted cameras and aerial filming. These techniques position birds as active participants in the production of spatial perspective rather than as passive objects of an exclusively human gaze, thereby offering viewers a nonhuman perspective on the natural environment.

The reviewed studies establish wildlife conservation as a prominent theme while also drawing attention to the visibility of conservation messages, the cultural meanings attached to wildlife, and the visual perspectives through which animals are presented.

#### *Ecological Pollution and Climate Crisis*

Ecological pollution is a recurring theme in both ecological and nature documentaries, particularly in relation to marine plastic waste, air pollution, and climate change. The reviewed literature indicates that these issues are often presented through visually striking and emotionally oriented strategies, although their representation varies across documentary and geographical contexts.

In high-profile natural history documentaries such as *Blue Planet II*, pollution is situated within a broader natural history narrative. Males and Van Aelst (2021) examine whether the programme's presentation of plastic pollution was followed by changes in public, media, and political attention. Their findings indicate an increase in media and political attention, although the evidence does not establish that the documentary alone produced these changes. The study therefore illustrates the visibility that a widely distributed natural history documentary can bring to an environmental issue while also demonstrating the difficulty of isolating documentary influence from the broader media context.

Studies of locally situated pollution documentaries provide a different perspective. Mlilel and Azzouzi (2020) examine how *The Blue Lagoon* presents industrial waste and illegal fishing as threats to a Moroccan lagoon. Hanief et al. (2026) show that the Indonesian documentary *Ekspedisi 3 Sungai Episode Juara Sampah Saset* frames river pollution as both a local ecological crisis and a matter of corporate accountability by connecting community experiences with brand audit evidence on single-use plastic waste.

Research on climate change documentaries has similarly examined the narrative translation of complex scientific information. Focusing on *An Inconvenient Truth*, Ryan et al. (2023) analyze the combination of scientific evidence, personal anecdotes, images of natural disasters, and data visualization. They argue that the film organizes climate change through a crisis-and-hope narrative structure that makes scientific information more accessible and encourages a more optimistic interpretation of climate action. This combination of scientific explanation and personalized storytelling illustrates a central strategy through which climate documentaries present an abstract global crisis as a socially and emotionally meaningful issue.

Across these studies, pollution and climate crises are presented through different scales of environmental communication. High-profile productions often rely on emotionally powerful images and global narratives, while locally situated documentaries connect environmental degradation with community experience, industrial practices, and corporate responsibility. Climate documentaries further combine scientific evidence with personalized narrative structures. These differences suggest that the representation of environmental crises depends on both the geographical context and the documentary form through which the issue is communicated.

### **The Relationship between Humans and Nature**

Research on nature and ecological documentaries has examined different representations of relationships between humans and nature. Environmental documentaries may present humans as contributors to ecological destruction or as actors attempting to address environmental problems through scientific, technological, and conservation interventions (Ryan et al., 2023). Crisis-oriented documentaries frequently use images of environmental damage to communicate urgency. However, an emphasis on catastrophe may privilege crisis-oriented interpretations while leaving limited space for alternative understandings of human–nature relations.

Carpentier et al. (2021) provide a more relational analysis through their study of *Kiruna: A Brand New World*. The documentary presents conflicts among the soil, the city, and the mining industry while making visible the anthropocentric, dualist, and promethean discourses associated with mining and economic progress. At the same time, it exposes the limits of these dominant discourses by representing counterhegemonic perspectives and attributing material agency to the soil. The film therefore presents the human–nature relationship as a conflict among competing meanings rather than as a simple division between environmental destruction and technological rescue.

Existing studies also show that human–nature relations are frequently presented through personal experiences, moral choices, and the consequences of environmental change for particular communities. These narrative strategies make broad ecological issues accessible through individual or locally situated experiences. However, the reviewed literature provides comparatively limited discussion of non-Western ecological knowledge and alternative cultural understandings of relationships between humans and the natural environment.

The literature therefore indicates that nature and ecological documentaries do not merely record interactions between humans and nature. They also organize these relationships through particular narrative positions and environmental discourses. While some documentaries reproduce anthropocentric assumptions, others make visible competing ecological perspectives and recognize nature as an active participant in environmental change.

### **Social Functions and Impacts of Documentaries**

#### *Audience-level effects: emotion, engagement and behavior change*

Audience-oriented studies examine the emotional, perceptual, and behavioral responses associated with nature and ecological documentaries. These studies generally use experimental or evaluative designs to investigate immediate audience responses rather than long-term behavioral change.

Freytag and Possler (2024) found that documentaries combining visually impressive nature with information about environmental threats produced stronger meaningful entertainment experiences than documentaries focusing only on natural beauty. Their effects on pro-environmental intentions were positive but weak and inconsistent across the three experiments. Banchemo et al. (2021) similarly found positive changes in awareness and attitudes after university students viewed part of a climate change documentary about Alaska.

Manitzas Hill et al. (2023) found that background music and information about the setting influenced viewers' interpretations of a killer whale's emotional state. These interpretations were indirectly related to donation behavior through participants' assessments of the animal's welfare. The study indicates that music and narrative context can shape the meanings assigned to animal imagery and related behavioral responses.

These studies provide evidence that narrative and audiovisual choices can influence immediate emotional interpretations, environmental attitudes, and behavioral intentions. However, evidence of sustained behavioral change remains limited.

#### *Public Discourse and Institutional Influences*

Nature and ecological documentaries may contribute to public discussion and institutional practices, although such outcomes rarely result from documentary exposure alone. Males and Van Aelst (2021) found that media and political attention to plastic pollution increased following the broadcast of *Blue Planet II*, but the programme was released when the issue was already receiving broader public attention.

Jones et al. (2019) found that *Our Planet* gives conservation greater narrative prominence by incorporating environmental threats and conservation actions throughout the series. However, the authors also note that the connection between documentary viewing and concrete behavioral change remains poorly understood.

Boissat et al. (2021) found that *Blackfish* contributed to negative publicity surrounding SeaWorld, changing perceptions of cetacean captivity, financial difficulties, and the termination of its captive orca breeding programme. The documentary acted as a catalyst within a broader context of animal welfare activism, media coverage, and changing public attitudes. Sperb (2016) offers a more critical interpretation, suggesting that SeaWorld's responses may also be understood as attempts to repair its public image.

#### *National Image and Soft Power Projection*

Studies of Chinese nature and ecological documentaries examine the representation of ecological modernization, cultural heritage, technological development, and environmental responsibility in relation to international communication and national image building (Li et al., 2021; Li & Weng, 2022; Wang et al., 2023).

Wang et al. (2023) found that state-sanctioned eco-documentaries construct a positive image of Green China by emphasizing Chinese landscapes, environmentally responsible social actors, and the well-being of nonhuman life. These representations connect traditional culture, green technologies, and environmental governance with an ecologically responsible national image.

Li et al. (2021) identified differences between the destination-country images presented in *Wild China* and *Aerial China*, with the latter giving greater prominence to modernization, regional development, and national vitality. Li and Weng (2022) similarly found that China's image in Discovery Channel documentaries evolved from that of an ancient and mysterious

country to that of a modern and socially responsible nation characterized by coordinated development in technology, nature, and culture.

## Discussion

### *The Current State of Nature and Ecology Documentary Scholarship*

Research published between 2016 and 2026 has examined nature and ecological documentaries from thematic, representational, audience, and institutional perspectives. These studies provide valuable insights into the communication of environmental issues. However, the reviewed literature also shows a concentration on a limited number of internationally visible documentaries and established analytical approaches.

Wildlife conservation remains a prominent concern, particularly in studies of emotionally engaging animal representation. Existing research examines the use of culturally familiar species, visually prominent animals, and nonhuman perspectives in communicating biodiversity and conservation issues (Hiltunen et al., 2020; Mikkola, 2019; Nolan et al., 2022). Nolan et al. (2022), for example, found that natural history films generated greater online engagement with depicted species than with conservation themes. Within the reviewed sample, plants, invertebrates, and less visually prominent species receive comparatively limited attention. This pattern suggests a need for research on a broader range of species and ecological relationships.

Emotional and narrative strategies constitute another important area of research. Textual studies examine the use of personal narratives, affective contrast, crisis imagery, and visually compelling representations to make environmental issues accessible. Audience-oriented studies investigate more specific responses, such as emotional interpretations of animal behavior and concern for animal welfare (Manitzas Hill et al., 2023). Research on *Blackfish* further demonstrates that emotional narratives can operate alongside activism, media coverage, and changing public attitudes (Boissat et al., 2021). However, the audience studies included in the review generally focus on immediate or short-term responses. The relationship between documentary exposure and longer-term audience engagement remains less developed.

Studies in the Chinese context examine the connection between environmental representation and national image construction. Research on Chinese state-supported documentaries identifies the use of landscape aesthetics, traditional cultural values, technological achievement, and environmental governance to construct an ecologically responsible national image (Li et al., 2021; Wang et al., 2023). Li and Weng (2022), by contrast, examine the changing representation of China in Discovery Channel documentaries. Their findings show that China's projected destination-country image developed from that of an ancient and mysterious country to that of a modern and socially responsible nation. Within the reviewed sample, independent, grassroots, and oppositional environmental documentaries in China receive comparatively limited attention.

Several studies also consider the discursive and institutional influence of environmental documentaries. Research on *Blackfish* indicates that the film contributed to changes in public perceptions of cetacean captivity and acted as a catalyst within an existing network of animal welfare activism, media coverage, and institutional pressure (Boissat et al., 2021). Similarly,

Males and Van Aelst (2021) examine the relationship between *Blue Planet II* and increased media and political attention to plastic pollution. These studies demonstrate the potential relevance of documentaries to public and institutional discourse. However, they also caution against attributing corporate or political outcomes to documentary exposure alone.

The reviewed literature therefore shows a concentration on widely distributed and publicly visible productions. Recent studies of pollution narratives in Morocco and Indonesia have broadened the geographical range of the field, while Vaughan's (2025) analysis has introduced questions of race, gender, and technological authority into eco-documentary research (Hanief et al., 2026; Mliless & Azzouzi, 2020; Vaughan, 2025). Nevertheless, internationally prominent Anglophone productions and Chinese state-supported documentaries remain central to the reviewed scholarship. This concentration may leave independent, local, and less widely distributed productions underexamined. Future research should therefore consider the extent to which case selection, disciplinary preferences, and media visibility shape the environmental narratives that receive academic attention.

#### *Fragmentation and Disciplinary Isolation*

The reviewed studies draw on several disciplinary and methodological traditions, but connections among these approaches remain limited. Textual, audience, and institutional studies often examine different aspects of documentary communication without bringing them into a shared analytical framework. This separation makes it difficult to develop a more integrated understanding of the relationships among documentary representation, audience interpretation, and broader social influence.

Audience-oriented studies commonly use experiments or surveys to examine emotional responses, perceptions of animals, and behavioral intentions. For example, Manitzas Hill et al. (2023) experimentally examined the influence of background music on viewers' emotional interpretations of orcas. By contrast, textual and critical studies rely more often on narrative, discourse, and multimodal analysis to examine environmental ideology, national image, and representational form (Li & Weng, 2022; Ryan et al., 2023; Wang et al., 2023). Institutional studies consider documentaries in relation to corporate responses, activism, and media discourse (Boissat et al., 2021; Sperb, 2016). Each approach provides a distinct perspective, but few studies combine textual analysis with empirical research on audience reception or institutional response.

This methodological separation is particularly evident in the limited connection between the formal features of documentaries and their reception. Studies frequently identify anthropomorphism, emotional imagery, personal narratives, and ecological framing as important representational strategies. However, research rarely traces the relationship between these specific features, audience interpretations, and subsequent social or institutional responses. As a result, the available literature provides stronger evidence for the presence of particular representational strategies than for their longer-term effects.

Geographical coverage also remains uneven. Although recent studies have examined locally situated pollution narratives in Morocco and Indonesia, the reviewed literature remains concentrated on Anglophone Western productions such as *Blackfish* and *Blue Planet II*, as well

as Chinese state-supported documentaries (Hanief et al., 2026; Mliless & Azzouzi, 2020). Comparative and transnational studies remain limited. This concentration restricts understanding of documentary communication across different media systems, political contexts, cultural traditions, and environmental conditions.

Future research could address these limitations by combining textual analysis with audience reception, production research, and institutional analysis. Comparative studies across different cultural and media contexts would also clarify the relationship among documentary form, audience interpretation, and broader social influence. These limitations inform the directions for future research and practice outlined in the following section.

### **Implications for Future Research and Practice**

This review identifies several directions for future research and practice in environmental media and communication. Nature and ecological documentaries participate in the public communication of environmental issues, but their meanings and potential influence depend on the media, cultural, and institutional contexts in which they circulate. Future scholarship should therefore examine documentary representation alongside audience reception, production practices, and institutional responses.

One priority is methodological integration. Future studies could combine textual, narrative, or multimodal analysis with audience interviews, surveys, experiments, and production research. Such designs would provide a clearer account of the relationship between specific representational features, including emotional contrast, anthropomorphism, visual spectacle, and ecological framing, and their interpretation by different audiences. Institutional and policy research could further examine the conditions under which documentary communication contributes to public advocacy, corporate response, or political attention.

The geographical and cultural scope of research also requires expansion. Although recent studies have examined locally situated cases in Morocco and Indonesia, the literature remains concentrated on Anglophone Western productions and Chinese state-supported documentaries. Comparative research across cultural and political contexts could provide a broader understanding of documentary communication in different media systems. Greater attention should also be given to Indigenous knowledge, grassroots media practices, community-based production, and locally situated environmental experiences that may challenge dominant approaches to conservation and development.

Longitudinal and ethnographic audience research would help address the current emphasis on immediate or self-reported responses. Future studies could examine the interpretation of documentaries over time and in specific educational, activist, and community settings. Research should also consider the circulation of documentary content across streaming services and social media platforms, including its adaptation by educators, environmental organizations, and advocacy groups. This would clarify the relationship between documentary viewing, subsequent discussion, and longer-term environmental engagement.

Research on other environmental screen genres may also provide useful comparative perspectives. Schneider-Mayerson et al. (2025), for example, used quantitative content analysis to examine the frequency and narrative prominence of environmental problems

across a large sample of fictional films. Although fictional films fall outside the scope of the present review, the study offers a related perspective on the analysis of environmental representation across screen media.

Expanding the geographic and cultural scope of inquiry is also essential. Research remains limited on documentaries produced in or addressing underrepresented regions, particularly the Global South. Comparative analyses across cultural and political settings can help decenter prevailing narratives focused on Western and Chinese state-backed productions. This effort should also include greater attention to Indigenous epistemologies, grassroots media practices, and community-driven storytelling that challenge dominant paradigms of conservation and development.

A further need is for longitudinal and ethnographic audience research that moves beyond short-term, self-reported reactions. Such approaches can offer richer insights into how documentaries shape environmental values and behaviors over time and across diverse media environments. This includes studying how documentaries are shared on various platforms, repurposed by educators or advocates, and interpreted within specific social and political contexts.

Existing research emphasizes that although emotional narratives and prominent images play a vital role in increasing audience interest and engagement, over-reliance on such strategies may lead to the loss of diverse ecological discourse. The academic community calls on practitioners to systematically reflect on the consequences of presentation methods and expand diverse paths of ecological expression through interdisciplinary collaboration.

The findings also have implications for documentary practice. Emotional narratives and visually prominent species can make environmental issues accessible, but repeated reliance on these strategies may narrow the range of ecological experiences and perspectives represented. Filmmakers could incorporate a wider range of species, communities, cultural knowledge, and environmental conflicts while remaining attentive to the structural causes of ecological degradation. Dialogue among researchers, filmmakers, educators, environmental organizations, and affected communities could support more contextually informed forms of environmental storytelling and more careful evaluation of their public significance.

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