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People and Nature

DOI:
[10.1002/pan3.10052](https://doi.org/10.1002/pan3.10052)

Published: 01/12/2019

Peer reviewed version

[Cyswllt i'r cyhoeddiad / Link to publication](#)

Dyfyniad o'r fersiwn a gyhoeddwyd / Citation for published version (APA):
Jones, J. P. G., Thomas-Walters, L., Rust, N. A., & Verissimo, D. (2019). Nature documentaries and saving nature: reflections on the new Netflix series Our Planet. *People and Nature*, 1(4), 420-425. <https://doi.org/10.1002/pan3.10052>

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Nature documentaries and saving nature: reflections on the new Netflix series Our Planet

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1 **Abstract**

- 2 1) Netflix recently launched its high-profile nature documentary Our Planet. Voiced by
3 Sir David Attenborough in English (with Salma Hayek, Penelope Cruz and other
4 Hollywood actors voicing versions simultaneously released in ten other languages),
5 Netflix are making a clear play for core BBC territory. However, they claim that this is
6 a nature documentary with a difference as it puts the threats facing nature front and
7 center to the narrative.
- 8 2) We coded the scripts of Our Planet, and those of three recent Attenborough-voiced
9 BBC documentaries, to explore the extent to which threats (and conservation action
10 and success) are discussed. The only other series which comes close to the
11 frequency with which these issues are discussed is Blue Planet II, but Our Planet is
12 unique in weaving discussion of these issues throughout all episodes rather than
13 keeping them to a dedicated final episode. However, although Our Planet sounds
14 different to other documentaries, the visuals are very similar. Nature is still mostly
15 shown as pristine, and presence or impacts of people on the natural world very
16 seldom appear. We discuss the potential consequences of nature documentaries
17 erasing humans from the land/seascape.
- 18 3) We also discuss the mechanisms by which nature documentaries may have a
19 positive impact on conservation. Despite links between information provision and
20 behavior change being complex and uncertain, nature documentaries may, at least in
21 theory, elicit change in a number of ways. They may increase willingness amongst
22 viewers to make personal lifestyle changes, increase support for conservation
23 organisations, and generate positive public attitudes and subsequently social norms
24 towards an issue, making policy change more likely.
- 25 4) Netflix is certainly bringing biodiversity and the threats it faces into the mainstream,
26 but the mechanisms by which viewing these representations translates to concrete
27 behaviour change are poorly understood. Increasing interest in robust impact
28 evaluation, integrating qualitative and quantitative methods, means the time is right to
29 explore how both showing nature on screens and talking about the threats it faces,
30 affects people in ways which might, ultimately, contribute to saving it.

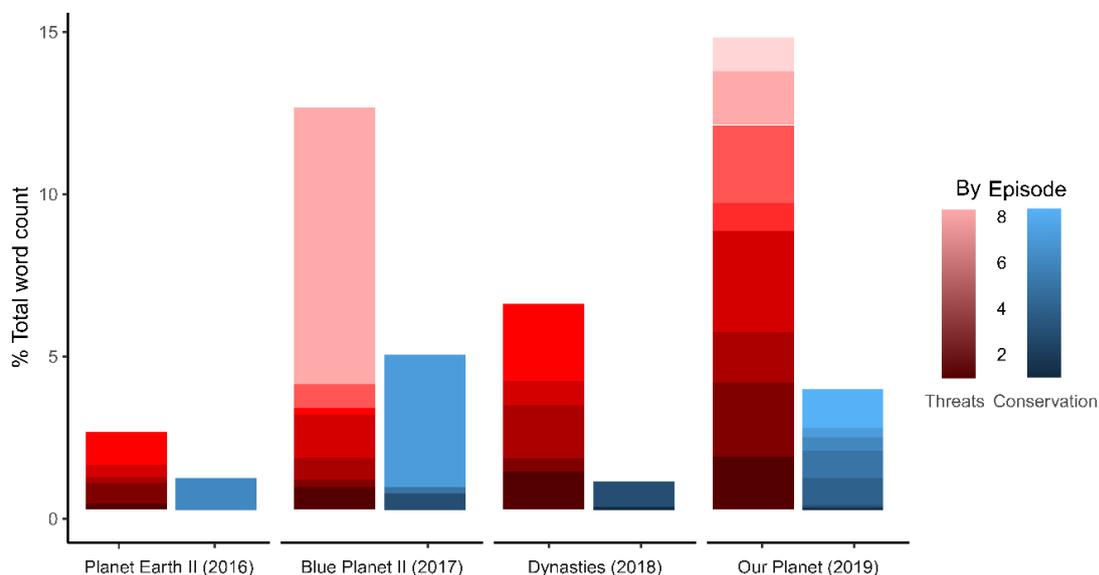
31

32 In April 2019, Netflix launched their big-budget nature documentary, Our Planet. Filmed over
33 four years with footage from 50 countries, the sumptuous production rivals any previous
34 series in this genre. While high-profile nature documentaries have been criticised for ignoring
35 the existential threats faced by so many wild species (Monbiot, 2018; Richards, 2013), Our
36 Planet explicitly aims to both explore the '*rich natural wonders, iconic species and wildlife*

37 *spectacles and reveal the key issues that urgently threaten their existence* (Our Planet,
 38 2018). We consider how Our Planet differs from previous TV series and discuss why nature
 39 documentaries often seem to actively avoid showing anthropogenic impacts. We discuss the
 40 mechanisms by which nature documentaries might contribute positively to conservation and
 41 identify knowledge gaps in this area.

42 **How different is Our Planet?**

43 Our Planet talks about the threats to species and ecosystems more than the last three BBC-
 44 produced, high-budget nature documentaries (all, like Our Planet, narrated by Sir David
 45 Attenborough). Nearly 15% of the total word count of the Our Planet scripts focuses on what
 46 is not well with the natural world (Figure 1). While this is only slightly more than Blue Planet
 47 II, talk of anthropogenic influence is woven into every episode rather than being the subject
 48 of a dedicated final episode. Our Planet also regularly shares uplifting tales of species
 49 recoveries. Conservation successes (such as the impact of the international moratorium on
 50 whaling and the recovery of the Arabian oryx) are mentioned in every episode of Our Planet.
 51 While Blue Planet II devoted slightly more of their overall script length to such issues, again
 52 this was mostly concentrated in the final episode and not incorporated throughout the series
 53 (Figure 1).



54
 55 Figure 1: The frequency with which recent high-profile BBC nature documentaries and the
 56 Netflix Our Planet documentary mention threats to the natural world (red), and positive tales
 57 of species recoveries and successful conservation interventions (blue). Coded scripts and
 58 further detail are available in the supplementary material.

59 However, despite the more frequent discussion of threats and conservation effectiveness
60 embedded in *Our Planet*, visually it is remarkably similar to previous such series. As one
61 commentator noted “with the sound off, viewers could easily think they are watching *Planet*
62 *Earth*” (Young, 2019). While the script regularly talks about the threats facing the habitats
63 and species that are shown, visual depictions of these threats remain rare. There are
64 occasional moments which do effectively show viewers just how altered our world is; satellite
65 imagery is used to show the shockingly rapid loss of rainforest in Borneo for example, and
66 one striking sequence reveals how much of the prairies where rutting bison were filmed have
67 been converted to agriculture. Another hard-hitting scene that received much media
68 attention was that of the dying walrus, but it was only the spoken voiceover that
69 associated this tragedy with anthropogenic impacts. For the most part, habitats are depicted
70 as extensive and pristine and wildlife populations as abundant.

71 Interestingly, the makers of *Our Planet* did produce a hard-hitting and visually stunning eight-
72 minute film, also narrated by Sir David Attenborough, which is available on the
73 accompanying website (*How To Save Our Planet*, 2019). It was therefore a clear editorial
74 decision to keep the ‘feel’ of the main episodes similar to previous such documentaries,
75 rather than explicitly showing the extensive anthropogenic impact on our planet.

76 ***Why do nature documentaries avoid showing how people impact nature (and does***
77 ***this matter?)***

78 Those who make nature documentaries have, of course, long been aware that the nature
79 they film is often drastically threatened. There has been a view that showing the threats
80 would turn audiences off. As the well-known wildlife film maker Stephen Mills wrote back in
81 1997: “[this] *tragic loss of wilderness presents the wildlife film-maker with a fundamental*
82 *dilemma. So long as we maintain the myth of nature, our programmes find a wide and*
83 *appreciative audience. ...But as viewing figures adamantly prove, once we make a habit of*
84 *showing the bad news, our audience slinks away*” (Mills, 1997). The spectacular images
85 revealing the grandeur of nature in *Our Planet* may inspire and mobilise concern for the
86 remaining biodiversity found on Earth. While fear and guilt are often used to engage viewers,
87 the importance of hope should not be overlooked (Howell, 2011; Moser & Dilling, 2004).
88 However, one could argue that by using camera angles to avoid showing any sign of people,
89 nature film makers are being disingenuous, and even actively misleading audiences. The
90 viewer may be led to believe that things cannot be that bad for biodiversity as what they are
91 seeing on the screen shows nature, for the most part, doing fine.

92 There is also the risk that by erasing evidence of people from the land/seascapes shown,
93 wildlife documentaries further embed the idea that wild places are ‘for’ nature, and any

94 people there are interlopers (Sandbrook & Adams, 2013). This is potentially troubling, as in
95 many parts of the world the biggest challenge conservation faces is balancing the legitimate
96 need of local people to use natural ecosystems with the need to protect those ecosystems
97 from overexploitation. The inextricable link between threats to the natural world and the high
98 consumption of western lifestyles would also be more difficult to ignore if the presence, or
99 even dominance, of commercial agriculture, mining and transport infrastructure were more
100 visible in the landscapes, reducing the space for the awe-inspiring wild spectacles shown.

101 ***How might nature documentaries make a positive contribution to conservation***
102 ***efforts?***

103 While one might expect a public service broadcaster such as the BBC to invest in a
104 documentary for the public good (their mission is to “inform, educate and entertain”; BBC,
105 n.d.), Netflix are driven by a much more commercial imperative. However, there could be a
106 moral obligation for nature documentaries to contribute to conserving the wildlife they show.
107 In 2011, Jepson and colleagues argued that nature film makers should pay into a fund to
108 contribute to conservation (Jepson, Jennings, Jones, & Hodgetts, 2011); conceptualising this
109 as a sort of payment for ecosystem services, designed to create incentives for conservation.
110 Wunder & Sheil (2013) pointed out that such a process would likely act more like a tax on
111 nature films and ultimately reduce consumption. Their paper strongly assumes a positive,
112 but unproven, impact of nature documentaries. While requiring nature documentaries to
113 contribute directly to conservation through levying a tax seems unlikely to be helpful, it is
114 certainly legitimate to question whether nature documentaries can indeed make a positive
115 contribution to conservation through less direct means.

116 Nature documentaries often have a wide reach. Planet Earth II was watched by many
117 millions when it first came out and is now available to stream on Netflix. A producer of Our
118 Planet has stated they hope to reach a billion people (Singh, 2019); the episodes are
119 available simultaneously in 150 countries in 10 languages. How might large viewing figures
120 translate into a positive impact for conservation?

121 It is well understood by behavioural scientists that the links between information being
122 provided (such as through a documentary) and changes in behaviour are, at best, complex
123 and uncertain (Braun, Cottrell, & Dierkes, 2018; Kollmuss & Agyeman, 2002). However,
124 nature documentaries may elicit change in a number of ways. For example, they’ve been
125 shown to increase environmental sensitivity towards the species they portray, which is
126 associated with responsible environmental citizenship (Barbas, Paraskevopoulos, & Stamou,
127 2009). Several studies have gone a step further and attempted to examine the effects of
128 documentaries with targeted conservation messages on viewers’ behaviour, by using self-

129 reports of behaviour change/intentions to change (Beattie, Sale, & McGuire, 2011; Hofman &
130 Hughes, 2018; Howell, 2011; Lin, 2013). While they generally report positive effects, the
131 reliability and validity of these measures are questionable and observations of actual
132 behaviour change (though tricky to track) would strengthen the evidence base (Steg & Vlek,
133 2009).

134 Documentaries also have the potential to increase support for conservation or conservation
135 organisations through an increase in volunteering, wildlife tourism, or direct donations. They
136 may also generate positive public attitudes and subsequently social norms towards an issue,
137 making policy change more likely. The final episode of the 2017 documentary Blue Planet II
138 has been widely credited with influencing UK policy change on marine plastics (the so-called
139 “Blue Planet effect”; Schnurr et al., 2018). However, the extent to which the documentary,
140 and the resulting public outcry, directly influenced policy change is not well understood.

141 Our Planet has gone further than previous documentaries to try to encourage viewers into
142 specific actions. At the end of each episode viewers are encouraged to look at online
143 materials (www.ourplanet.com) which are explicitly focused on threats to the natural world
144 and how individuals can make a difference, for example by eating less meat, switching to
145 renewable energy, or supporting environmental organisation. Viewers are encouraged to
146 pledge online to make a change. How effective might Our Planet as a whole (both the
147 episodes and associated materials) be in causing the sort of changes we highlight, and how
148 can we know?

149 ***How could the impact of nature documentaries be studied?***

150 Although there is growing awareness of the need for robust impact evaluation in
151 conservation (Baylis et al., 2016), one significant challenge for evaluating the impact of
152 nature documentaries is that those who choose to watch such films will tend to have pre-
153 existing interest in the topics presented (Holbert, Kwak, & Shah, 2003). This makes
154 comparing knowledge, attitudes or behaviours of those who watch such documentaries with
155 those who do not an invalid approach for exploring the potential impact of the documentary
156 (Veríssimo, Schmid, Kimario, & Eves, 2018). Experimental approaches can be used to
157 explore the impact of exposure on relatively easily measured outcomes such as ‘nature
158 connectedness’ or donations to conservation (Arendt & Matthes, 2016; Barbas et al., 2009),
159 or behaviour in a lab game immediately following exposure (Zelenski, Dopko, & Capaldi,
160 2015). More such studies would be useful to explore, for example, the impact of positive or
161 negative framing of conservation issues (a hot topic in conservation science currently; Kidd,
162 Bekessy, & Garrard, 2019; McAfee, Doubleday, Geiger, & Connell, 2019). Another
163 interesting angle would be further exploration of the extent to which outcomes are affected

164 when conservation documentaries focus on an identifiable victim, as opposed to reporting
165 threats statistically (Thomas-Walters & Raihani, 2017). Equally, it would be useful to
166 understand how specifically targeting certain emotions (such as amazement or fear) can
167 influence both cognitive and behavioural change.

168 However, such experiments are by necessity a simplification of the real world, where viewing
169 a nature documentary is only part of the wider experience. Nature documentaries are often
170 associated with advertising, press coverage and discussion, which can affect the public
171 discourse. Searching “Our Planet documentary” in Google News for instance returns
172 ~13’000’000 articles. It was also advertised at the US Super-Bowl final and entire London
173 tube trains have been wrapped in Our Planet advertising; this is likely to prompt conversation
174 between peers about biodiversity. In addition, materials and strategies designed to support
175 motivated viewers after watching a documentary, such as the Our Planet website, are an
176 important component of lasting behaviour change and the effects of these need to be
177 accounted for (Hofman & Hughes, 2018). Quasi-experimental approaches (such as Before-
178 After Control-Intervention, e.g. Veríssimo et al., 2018) may be more appropriate to capture
179 the impact of nature documentaries as experienced by the target population. Still, all
180 quantitative methods of evaluation are inevitably limited to simple indicators, such as self-
181 reported knowledge, attitude or behaviour, and over relatively short timeframes.

182 Qualitative evaluation methods (White, 2009), such as General Elimination Theory or Most
183 Significant Change, will therefore be crucial to understanding the broader impacts of nature
184 documentaries, exploring the causal mechanisms that lead to change, and to capture a wide
185 array or outcomes even outside of the initial stated project aim. Qualitative methods have
186 historically been little used by conservation scientists (Bennett et al., 2016), but there is a
187 growing literature that showcases how these methods can produce evaluation insights that
188 would be out of reach of more quantitative methods (e.g. Salazar, Mills, & Veríssimo, 2018;
189 Wilder & Walpole, 2008; Moon et al., 2019; Moon et al., 2016). Combining qualitative with
190 quantitative measurements, such as in the evaluation of the fictionalised climate disaster film
191 *The Day After Tomorrow*, can yield insights that are both nuanced and generalisable (Lowe
192 et al., 2006).

193 Some of the broader impacts of nature documentaries would be very difficult to assess
194 quantitatively, yet they have perhaps the largest potential to catalyse change. Many people
195 working in conservation report that watching documentaries (especially those of David
196 Attenborough) as a child was a key source of inspiration for their career choice (e.g.,
197 Fishwick, 2016). In a world where outdoor nature experiences are becoming rarer (Pergams
198 & Zaradic, 2006; Soga & Gaston, 2016), this mechanism may arguably become increasingly

199 important to engage the next generation of people willing to commit their professional lives to
200 tackling biodiversity loss.

201 **Conclusions**

202 By bringing the threats facing nature into the mainstream (however tentatively)
203 documentaries such as Our Planet help biodiversity and the pressure it faces gain a little
204 more space in the minds of the citizens worldwide. This seems inherently valuable in an era
205 where there are ever more demands on our attention. It is hard to avoid the impression that
206 a billion people watching the spectacle of a pod of spinner dolphins, or marvelling at the
207 shuffle dance of the manakins, would translate (however indirectly) into an increased chance
208 that these wonders could remain in the wild, as well as on a Netflix playlist. Conservation
209 documentaries have repeatedly been shown to positively affect our attitudes to wildlife, but
210 we still lack a more nuanced understanding of how artistic and narrative decisions influence
211 behaviour change. There is growing awareness of the need for robust impact evaluation in
212 conservation. We therefore recommend that those developing conservation interventions
213 and nature documentaries work with researchers for co-creation of impact evaluation, and
214 ultimately for this research to inform subsequent conservation interventions. There is also an
215 excellent growth in interdisciplinary working and methods, as illustrated for example by this
216 new journal *People and Nature* (Gaston et al., 2019). The time is therefore right to tackle the
217 questions around the extent to which representations of nature on screens affects people in
218 ways which might, ultimately, contribute to conserving that nature.

219

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