

## *Blue Documentary as a Tool for Marine Life Conservation*

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### **Abstract**

Human activities, including over-exploitation, food consumption, tourism, and many other economic related activities are found to have significant impacts on the ocean. In Malaysia, it is considered as a major contributor to marine life extinction. Therefore, our responsibility is to ensure the continuity of a sustainable marine ecosystem while preventing any possible extinction for the future generations to enjoy. Scholars through previous research claim that lack of information has led to ignorance amongst the public about the importance of marine life. Therefore, a number of studies have been carried out to analyse a documentary's role in promoting species conservation awareness, which consequently leads to actions being taken. Following that, this study asserts that blue documentary (BD) plays a crucial role in providing information about environmental degradation, particularly marine life extinction. It also changes public's perception and stimulates conservation action. Following that, this study discusses and analyses the pedagogical functions of blue documentary that could foster positive relationships between human and non-human, and become a mechanism to grab people's attention while changing public's perception on the marine life. In addition, it can also be an additional learning source, a platform for knowledge dissemination on scientific discoveries, a vehicle for multiple parties' collaboration in highlighting the complex issue of the marine life, and device to push policy makers to sanction biodiversity conservation plans. It is therefore undeniable that knowing the truth about the condition of local marine life from a documentary can be a driving factor for viewer's pro-conservation actions.

Keywords: Blue Documentary, Marine Life Conservation, Pro-conservation behaviour, Environmental Awareness

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## **Introduction**

Broadcasting is a central means in interlinking the global communications industry, and a determinant in shaping a knowledgeable society (Meier 2003). As part of the broadcasting programs, documentary has yielded a rich literature in film studies for its educational function across all discipline; in social, political, economic, cultural, as well as the environmental perspectives (Hughes 2011; Druick 2007; Dong & Li 2005; Dingwall & Aldridge 2006). Since the Griersonian era, documentary has been known as one of the most popular, powerful, and influential social means in the Western countries (Warmington et al. 2011; Druick & Williams 2014) in imperializing propaganda, instilling awareness, as well as representing the reality of controversial events and contemporary social issues to the masses (Frank 2013; Matthew et al. 2013; Stoddard 2009; Bratic & Schirch 2007; Bradshaw et al. 2007; Vivanco 2002; Kolker 1999; Beck 1942).

Therefore, a number of studies has been carried out to analyse a documentary's role in providing information, promoting awareness of the environmental controversial events and changing people's perception for marine life conservation, which consequently leads to actions being taken (Fortner 1985; Hughes 2011; Janpol & Dilts 2016). At present, the controversial issues of marine endangered species are gaining greater attention in environmental studies particularly among environmentalists and activists (Kottak & Costa 1993; Jamie 2010; Castillo & Egea 2015), as they attempt to find ways to prevent these species from extinction. Since the 1980s, it has been argued (Marcus & Stoddard 2009; 2007) that, the increased number of documentary films being used as pedagogical tools by teachers validates their contribution in the learning process to educate, inform and promote environmental awareness, surpassing other communications medium such as newspapers or magazines. This is further strengthened by Marcus & Stoddard (2009), asserting that a documentary film is a powerful instrument to present and discuss controversial issues in the classrooms. Similarly, Holbert, Kwak & Shah (2003) also claimed that nature documentaries effectively promote green knowledge that lead to conservation actions by the citizens. Hence, it is important for the present study to look at the role of documentary film as a pedagogical tool for environmental education, in communicating and presenting the state of the marine life endangered species worldwide. Following that, it is therefore crucial to have a deeper insight on what a documentary film, particularly the blue documentary can do to change the perception, persuade, and raise public environmental awareness pertaining marine life conservation.

## **What constitute a Blue Documentary?**

There has been growing interest in documentary studies on environmental themes due to the severe problems of global warming, climate change, and species extinction. The emergence of the environmental movement began in the 1960s when the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), and the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) increased the public knowledge on the environmental issues, which in turn has driven the publics to take the necessary actions (Hughes, 2014, p. 25). However, prior to the initiation of activist movements

by the United Nations, the surface of the independent or activist filmmakers' formation or third cinema films in the colonial era were the actual beginning of a twisting and difficult road being traveled in the consumer societies by the mass organizations (Solanas & Getino, 1969). These documentary activists demanded to express themselves freely rather than being tied to political power; through which they discover their own language (eco-documentary).

As a result, environmental documentaries (eco-documentary) or later known as the green documentary (Hughes, 2014, p. 8) secure an outstanding base in the 21st century; later eminent in environmental film festivals and environmental documentary production. According to Blewitt (2010), cited in Hughes (2014, p. 7), the effects of a severe discrepancy between the experience of the remote and its representation have become a significant field of research, circling around the issues of documentary representation. Thus, a documentary is significant in representing the truth, as one of the edges to preserve endangered species. As a mechanism to voice out the interests of others; independent organizations or activists have utilized the documentary as a tool to highlight species sustainability, in representing the nature who cannot speak for themselves.

The marine eco-system extinction has become a central issue in sustainability studies. Excessive human activities such as the illegal fishing industry and industrial practices have indirectly become the major causes of marine life extinction, more than what the natural disaster is capable of. The development of green documentary has increased citizens' awareness to preserve the environment. Ecological conservation via the mechanism of media such as television, documentaries film and the Internet demonstrated in many filmmaking; responded to the need to expose the threatened 'wildlife habitats and animal species' (Hughes, 2014, p. 25). However, from Hughes's definition, the 'wildlife habitats and animal species' here are focused on the land-living animals rather than the ocean life. Having said that, the researcher believes that eco-documentary is quite general and does not specifically represent the marine eco-system.

Therefore, filmmakers' needs specific term on its own to represent while emboldening the public awareness towards marine eco-systems. This has led to the coining of the term 'blue documentary'. This has been followed by a series of questions; what is a blue documentary? Where is the origin of the term? When has it been used? In order to respond to all those questions, we need to scrutiny the theory and previous research that lead to the coining of the terminology.

Primarily, a blue documentary explicitly focuses on ocean life or marine eco-system preservation; as the sustenance for the Blue Marine Foundation movement as well as to support Mission Blue's philosophy initiated by Dr. Sylvia Earl to preserve and protects the ocean.

*“Mission Blue is an initiative of the Sylvia Earle Alliance to ignite public support for the protection of Hope Spots- special places that are vital to the health of the ocean... through the creation of a global network of marine protected areas to safeguard 20% of the ocean by 2020.” — (Mission Blue, 2016)*

Therefore, the term ‘blue documentary’ will be used in this study on a more specific subject of the marine life, as well as forming a sub-genre of the environmental documentary. However, it is important to note that the term is exclusively for ocean conservation. Thus, the term blue documentary is coined by conservation organizations for new documentary studies. Following that, the significance of blue documentary as well as its purposes for marine life conservation will be discussed in this paper.

### **Functions of Blue Documentary for Marine Life Conservation**

Blue documentary can contribute to marine life sustainability by encouraging not only individuals, but also organizations as well as the community in educating and encouraging conservation actions. This is evident in the involvement of the different walks of life in sustaining marine life. The discussion in this paper revolves around the six functions of Blue Documentary for marine life conservation.

### **Encouraging positive relationships between human and animal**

Firstly, a blue documentary film encourages positive relationships between human and animal. Elkington & Maher 2015 believe that the audio-visual contents contained in a blue documentary are effective pedagogical medium in triggering audiences’ excitement, and act as a ‘bridging material’ between factual contents and the audiences. Visual aids are crucial for the audience’s reception and interpretation of conservation messages, and as a result, various perceptions may be formed. This can be shown through the film frames in a blue documentary in which it can alter the audiences’ pro-environmental attitudes to be more positive by increasing their knowledge towards preserving the marine life. For example, Hughes (2011) claimed that film frames can create a mutual cognitive environment, and it is an effective way to raise awareness on environmental issues. Based on the documentary analysis conducted by Hughes, the images of Stewart swimming with the shark portrays the shared environment between human and animals in the media, while rejecting the idea of shark as a dangerous species in many fiction films. This has become a strong factor for the development of positive relationships between human and animal. Hence, based on the Relevance, Communication and Cognition theory by Sperber and Wilson, the concept of mutual cognitive environment has been clearly presented in the ‘Sharkwater’ film frame, and the delineation of the space can be used to demonstrate this relationships between the objects represented within the frame (Hughes, 2011).

## **A mechanism to grab people's attention and change public's perception**

Meanwhile, the onscreen representations of endangered marine life species by highlighting animals suffering in a BD can be seen as another potential vehicle to drive marine life conservation. This strategy is a way to grab people's attention, and change people's perception of human immoralities towards marine species which subsequently will motivate viewers to take the necessary conservation actions (Fortner 1985; Holbert, Kwak & Shah 2003; Sisson & Kimport 2016; Janpol & Dilts 2016).

Despite animals suffering, anthropomorphizing of animals is also significant way to capture viewers' attention. With regards to this, Evans (2015) claimed that nature documentaries have moved towards 'entertainment-focused programs that anthropomorphize animals to create an emotional connection with the viewer and it has become the norm in the last decade' (p. 266). In view of this fact, the anthropomorphism elements as 'a means of placing animals into an understandable human cultural and social context' in conservation documentary film is found to be effective in making the animal species more appealing and closer to the public (Adcroft 2010, p. 5), in triggering their empathy towards the current extinction issues and wanting to become part of the nature. In support of this, she argued that it is crucial in the filmmaking process to humanizing the non-human objects from the real nature into reel nature; as the anthropomorphically triggered empathy and raised awareness that influenced the growth and support for species conservation (p. 16). By bringing out recognizable and identifiable human characters within the animal's behavior; such as by highlighting the ideas of a happy family, an aggressive male and a maternal female for instance, as well as reinforcing the concepts of class and gender that exist in the dominant human culture; a deeper empathy towards the animal can be instilled amongst the viewers (King 1996, Bousé 2000, Pierson 2005, Porter 2006). This is exemplified in the anthropomorphic elements found in *The Blue Planet* (2001), *the March of the Penguins* (2005), *the Oceans* (2010), and *the Planet Earth Series* (2006), which have elicited empathy from the audiences and simultaneously allowed generations of audiences to form a good general understanding of the natural environment while increasing their willingness to associate themselves in the efforts towards a better nature (Adcroft 2010, p. 18).

## **An Additional Learning sources**

A blue documentary is also becoming a crucial instrument for additional resources of learning, and can substitute other forms of pedagogical tools to represent complex issues on a specific theme in science education. Ouimet & Kopnina (2015) asserted that human and non-human species relationships are 'too complicated to be generalized and in practice will likely need to be addressed on a case-by-case basis' (p. 325). In support of this, Doyle (2011) cited in McAuliffe et al. (2014), claimed that due to the fact that documentary allows the presentation of complex information in audio-visual form, it contributes to a greater edification, perhaps even creativity, in representing the information, data, and evidence of the current environmental controversial issues, as compared to mere images, written texts (textbooks), other

media medium and teachers, in raising public conservation awareness (Pereira & Carneiro 2014). For instance, the establishment of the Documentary Educational Resources (DER) in the year 1968, which is still in function until now, is very much attributed to the objective of making their films accessible as pedagogical tools for teachers in promoting ‘thought-provoking documentary film and media for learning about the people and cultures of the world’ (Macdonald 2013, p. 146). As cited by Shin & Cho (2015), Hartzler (2000) and Hinchliffe (2011) on the other hand argued that, through words, a learner’s experience could be completely different from what is intended by the instructor, while Andresen et al. (2000) asserted that learning is a holistic process in which a learner experiences an integrated meaning-making from learning materials.

To further strengthen this notion, Frank (2013) suggested that educators and philosophers of education should recognize the educational function of documentary film as a learning material in representing the unexperienced world that cannot be reached by people without having the required qualification and expertise. Hence, it can be concluded that the small screen production of blue documentary can visualize the unreachable species of the marine life in the deep ocean, surrounded by countless phytoplankton as shown in many blockbuster conservation documentary films (Sharkwater, Mision Blue, An Inconvenient Truth), while allowing viewers to learn about other species, which can be considered as a privilege, as they cannot experience it in real life. They can contentedly watch these species in their personal space (living room, classrooms), or in open spaces (cinema, film festival), while gaining new knowledge about the unreachable species. Thus, the complex issues are presented through the audio-visual filmmaking process, with well-equipped broadcasting technology (underwater camera), enabling the viewers to embark on a visual tourism of the habitat beyond geographical boundaries without imposing environmental impacts caused by the travel industry or displacing animals into different habitats as what is done by zoos and aquarium industry (Mills 2010).

### **A Knowledge Dissemination Platform**

The easy access to blue documentaries allows them to be the platform for knowledge dissemination to the audiences all over the globe. Marcus and Stoddard (2007) claimed that the global accessibility through various websites for film viewing facilities enables viewers to watch these documentaries without any restriction, while the advanced broadcasting technology used in wildlife documentary film with great aesthetical, societal and educational values, encourages viewer’s participation in global environmental movements (Mills 2010). As Mills studied the BBC wildlife documentary series, the Nature’s Great Events (2009), he contended that wildlife documentaries’ role is vital in informing and engaging citizens in environmental debates, and it fits the global agenda of many conservationist objectives particularly concerning the present-day environmental issues of marine pollution and habitat extinction. Apart from that, the establishment of the Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) as a tool for marine protection is seen as crucial. On the other hand, Watson et al. (2015) rejected the passive educational approach (signages, leaflets) which is adopted as part of the Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) enforcement acts, as it has been proven

to be ineffective in ensuring that the rules are adhered to as well as to stimulate changes in the stakeholder's behaviour (Watson et al. 2015). Due to those circumstances, it was suggested that the alternative approach for enforcement is through the Community Based Natural Resource Management, as this approach is common in reefs conservation. It was found that in order to educate the people (stakeholders, spectators, management bodies) on marine conservation, a reliable educational platform is needed so that the information can reach a greater target audience. Therefore, in order to comprehend and strengthen the MPAs enforcement, it is crucial to circulate the information to the public and spectators so that they gradually understand conservation policies (Watson et al. 2015). Hence, it is essential to recognize the importance of blue documentary transmission in distributing its environmental messages to the masses, an effort which has been made in developed countries for ages. Generally, the function of blue documentary as a means of promoting environmental protection and initiating actions to preserve marine life, has been highly acknowledged in the West, and is evident in the increasing number of blue documentaries production as well as the various environmental film festivals in the world (Prnjat 2016).

### **A Platform for Collaborations**

Apart from that, the collaborations between different parties in blue documentary filmmaking, which usually involve filmmakers, oceanologists, environmentalists, conservationists, activists and non-profit organizations, can be a way to avoid future damage to endangered marine species. As has been asserted in a number of studies, a documentary is considered as a capable product in representing different opinions, while retaining 'a sense of unity' among the people, and is an effective medium to transmit information on marine life to the community and raise conservation awareness among the spectators (Levinson et al. 2016). In support of that, Morara & Peterlicean (2012) stated that the degradation of biodiversity requires environmental education in order to raise public awareness, and by making documentaries to represent marine contemporary issues to the society particularly the youth, future damages to the environment can be avoided.

Hence, Sherrow (2010) proposed five principle opportunities in preserving endangered marine species, namely; (i) recognizing and encouraging conservation project and conservation education into research, (ii) encouraging the publications of conservation education into mainstream journal, (iii) having dedicated experts or scientist to become conservation educators or conservationist, (iv) developing partnership collaborations across typical boundaries, and (v) collaborating across studies, discipline and continent to share the possible actions needed. It can be concluded that these five strategies can be achieved through documentary production in order to encourage conservation education by avoiding a single party's opinion.

In support of that, it has been proven a collaboration of interdisciplinary fields of expertise in the Sharkwater (2006) can balance the two different entities between the scientists, oceanologists or conservationists with the filmmakers or industry players' perspectives in representing the marine content of conserving sharks species. Thus, in

order to represent the relationship between sharks, the ecosystems, people, institutions, and art; across and below the blue expanses of the planet, Rob Stewart, the director of the 'Sharkwater' collaborated with the conservationists by joining the crew of the Sea Shepherd Conservation Society's boat, the Ocean Warrior, to investigate the shark poaching as he tries to find out why people are killing these creatures (Shewry 2013, p. 49).

On the other hand, in a content analysis study conducted by Evans (2015) based on the 55 episodes of the Shark Week program by the Discovery Channel, which were aired between 2001 and 2012, it was found that after partnering with scientists and a marine conservation foundation, more science frames have been incorporated into this program with some alterations of its narrative elements. This initiative was taken following the Discovery Channel being criticized for the unrealistic narratives in their program. According to Eilperin (2012) as cited in Evans (2015), it was asserted that:

*"In 2010, in the wake of criticism from conservationists and scientists that Shark Week presented an unrealistic narrative about sharks that could damage efforts to save sharks from extinction; the Discovery Channel partnered with conservation organizations and announced that it would revamp some of its programming to reflect a more accurate portrayal of sharks". — (Eilperin 2012 cited in Evans 2015, p. 267)*

Hence, it is clear that human and nature are pre-requisites of each other and the collaboration between different interest groups in representing marine life conservation is vital in blue documentaries narratives, to avoid fabricated information from being delivered to the spectators.

### **A Mechanism to place pressure on policy makers**

Finally, as an effective educational tool in raising public awareness and changing people's attitudes towards environmental issues (Holbert, Kwak & Shah 2003; Janpol & Dilts 2016), a blue documentary may also exert the pressure for policy makers to revise their rules and regulations in accordance to appropriate environmental circumstances. Whiteman (2004) has conducted a case study on the political impact of documentary films by activists, and it was found that documentary films may to a certain extent be the cause of a change to the government policy based on the issues raised. For example, documentary videos, namely the Living Conditions in Public Housing (1993) by Maxcine Mitchell; From the Ground Up (1992) by Rob Danielson; and The Uprising of 34' (1995), have been the driving factors for roundtable discussions to take place at various legislative level for the reversal of government policies on housing, mining suspension, and building magnificent statues. Even though these documentaries were not specifically related to the marine environment, however, it shows that with a relatively minimum cost, documentary filmmaking can become the tool and a success reason for activist groups to achieve their production objectives in influencing important political decisions based on three factors; namely the producers and production organizations, the selection of medium to present the documentary by the activist group, and the distribution strategies.



On the other hand, blue documentary film can put pressure on policy makers and political power by presenting to them the devastating impacts of marine life exploitation. Shrew asserted that the documentary, *Sharkwater* (2006) frames the hidden economy activities of the shark finning industry by revealing the qualities of illegality, secrecy, corruption, violence, and moral unacceptability of the capitalist economy and corrupt state governance, that lies behind the plight of sharks (p. 49). Shewry mentioned that:

*“In Costa Rica, while under house arrest for an incident in which they clashed with an illegal long-lining boat in Guatemalan waters, the film crew escapes to investigate the private docks of the “Taiwanese shark fin mafia”. Stewart later frames this incident by saying that they “uncovered” the shark fin industry. He also illuminates the corruption that underpins shark fishing, exploring how this industry overlaps with the Costa Rican judicial system and with the politics of Taiwanese aid to Costa Rica. Finally, he shows the violence of illicit fishing: a hook hacked out of a turtle’s mouth; a whale dragged on board a boat; a dead baby shark held in someone’s hands; a fin slashed off a living shark”. — (Shewry 2013, p. 49)*

The ‘*Sharkwater*’ used narrative elements to put pressure on the policy makers, by exposing the urgency of the responsible parties to take action on the marine species exploitation for the sake of economic gain. Through his documentary, Stewart has also made public the malpractice of the government institution by closing an eye to illegal marine life exploitation, even though there are existing infrastructures like marine sanctuaries to protect the oceans (Shewry 2013). This can be seen in one of the dialogues in *Sharkwater*: “I don’t know of any governments or institutions that are doing anything to... solve any of these problems” (p. 51). This shows that the narrative strategy is used to alert the government institutions as the responsible agency on this marine species exploitation, while at the same time directly putting pressure on the policy makers to amend their institutions’ practices.

## **Conclusion**

As a conclusion, the capability of a blue documentary that has been discussed is seen as an important mechanism for the film industry, particularly in Malaysia, to uncover the reality of the endangered marine species by disseminating the knowledge of the scientific data that has been discovered by many expertise (academics, scientists, oceanologist, conservations) to decrease environmental impacts, and while at the same time, protect marine life. This is highlighted by Muhammad & Fatimah (2015) who claimed that the Malaysian government encounters difficulties in accomplishing the national objectives of ‘vision 2020 as a developed nation’, due to marine park communities failing to meet the obligated education level (p. 143), as compared to the people in the mainland.

Despite its crucial function in promoting environmental protection and initiating actions to preserve marine life (Prnjat 2016), these initiatives are not being taken seriously in Malaysia, albeit most parties are aware of the importance of the marine

eco-system sustenance, in ensuring the continuation of human life. Across the board, it can be said that the Malaysian government and most of its citizen are not motivated to take preservation action in response to the environmental degradation, due to lack of knowledge and information about the issues (Lee 2010), particularly on marine life. These practices become less visible to the Malaysian audience because of the limited research carried out, and exposure on how to educate the Malaysian masses, particularly those living near the marine life protection areas (Lee 2010; Muhammad & Fatimah 2015). Hence, in the context of this paper, it is suggested that future research on local produced documentary about marine local species for local target audience is significant, and can contribute to a new study on the educational implications for political and social context of a nation in raising marine conservation awareness.

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