

Documentary Film as A Tool For Environmental Advocacy In Indonesia: A Literature Review.

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Abstract

Documentary films have increasingly become a medium for environmental advocacy worldwide. In Indonesia, where environmental issues such as deforestation, biodiversity loss, and human-wildlife conflict are pressing concerns, documentary films serve as powerful tools for raising awareness and influencing public discourse. However, scholarly research on how Indonesian documentaries contribute to environmental advocacy remains limited. This literature review examines existing studies on Indonesian environmental documentaries, identifying key themes, challenges, and gaps in research. It explores how these films shape public perception, engage policymakers, and impact grassroots activism. The study highlights the role of digital streaming platforms in expanding the reach of environmental documentaries, particularly in engaging younger audiences. By analyzing previous research and identifying areas for further investigation, this review provides insights into the potential of documentary films as catalysts for environmental change in Indonesia.

Background

Indonesia is one of the most biodiverse countries in the world, yet it faces severe environmental challenges, including deforestation, biodiversity loss, and human-wildlife conflicts (Luqman, 2022). Large-scale palm oil plantations, mining activities, and urban expansion have led to ecological degradation, impacting both wildlife and local communities (Heryanto, 2023). In response, documentary films have emerged as a powerful medium for raising public awareness and driving advocacy efforts (Jurriëns, 2024).

Documentary films play a critical role in shaping public discourse by visually capturing environmental destruction, amplifying the voices of affected communities, and exposing the structural forces behind ecological crises (Briandana et al., 2024). Notable Indonesian documentaries such as *Sexy Killers* (Laksono & Suparta, 2019), *Pulau Plastik* (Visinema Pictures et al., 2021), and *Kala Benoa* (Laksono, 2015) have sparked discussions on environmental degradation and corporate accountability (Heryanto, 2023). Despite their increasing popularity, scholarly research on the impact of environmental documentaries in Indonesia remains limited (Jurriëns, 2024).

Most existing studies focus on thematic content rather than the influence of these films on public perception, policymaking, and activism (Luqman, 2022). The rise of digital streaming platforms like YouTube and Netflix has significantly altered the distribution and reach of documentary films, yet little research has examined how these platforms shape audience engagement with environmental issues (Green et al., 2024). While global literature highlights the role of documentaries in influencing environmental policy, similar research within the Indonesian context is scarce (Jurriëns, 2024).

Given these gaps, this study analyzes the role of documentary films in advocating for environmental issues in Indonesia, focusing on deforestation, biodiversity loss, and human-wildlife conflict (Luqman, 2022). It evaluates the effectiveness of environmental documentaries in shaping public perception and influencing policy discussions. Additionally, the study identifies gaps in existing research regarding audience reception, filmmaker perspectives, and the impact of digital streaming platforms on documentary distribution (Green et al., 2024). By doing so, the research provides recommendations for future studies on the intersection of documentary filmmaking and environmental advocacy in Indonesia.

Environmental degradation and climate change have become pressing global issues, with media playing a crucial role in shaping public awareness and discourse (Jurriëns, 2024). Documentary films, as a form of visual storytelling, have been increasingly utilized to highlight environmental challenges and mobilize public action (Briandana et al., 2024). In Indonesia, films such as *Sexy Killers* and *Pulau Plastik* expose corporate and governmental roles in environmental destruction, igniting discussions on sustainable practices and policy reforms (Heryanto, 2023).

This study seeks to understand how environmental documentaries function as advocacy tools in Indonesia. By examining their narrative structures, audience reception, and policy impacts, it provides insights into their role in fostering environmental consciousness. Furthermore, it explores how filmmakers navigate political and economic challenges while attempting to drive social change through documentary storytelling (Green et al., 2024).

Methodology

This research employs a qualitative approach, combining a literature review with film analysis to explore the role of environmental documentaries in advocacy efforts in Indonesia. The literature review examines academic papers, journal articles, and books on environmental communication, documentary filmmaking, and media advocacy to establish a theoretical foundation for understanding how documentaries influence public discourse and policy decisions (Briandana et al., 2024; Agustina et al., 2020). This review also contextualizes the role of digital streaming platforms in expanding the reach of environmental documentaries, particularly in Indonesia, where access to independent media has grown through online platforms.

In addition to the literature review, a film analysis was conducted on key Indonesian environmental documentaries, including *Sexy Killers* (Laksono & Suparta, 2019), *Asimetris* (Laksono & Suparta, 2018), and *Pulau Plastik* (Visinema Pictures et al., 2021). These films were examined for their narrative structures, thematic focus, and rhetorical strategies to assess how they frame environmental issues and mobilize public engagement. The analysis also considers the interplay between visual storytelling, audience reception, and the effectiveness of these films in shaping environmental advocacy and policy debates.

Findings and Discussion

1. Documentary Films as Environmental Advocacy Tools

Documentary films have historically served as powerful advocacy tools, particularly in environmental education and activism. Global television networks such as National Geographic, BBC Earth, Discovery Channel, and Animal Planet have played a crucial role in

shaping public awareness of environmental issues (Cox, 2021). Classic documentaries like *Planet Earth* (BBC, 2006) and *Our Planet* (Netflix, 2019) highlight the fragility of ecosystems and the impact of human activities on biodiversity. These productions use breathtaking cinematography and scientific narration to engage audiences worldwide (Attenborough, 2019).

In Indonesia, documentary films have been increasingly utilized to spotlight environmental concerns, such as deforestation, wildlife poaching, and plastic pollution (Jurriëns, 2024). Local investigative programs like *Mata Najwa* (Metro TV) and *Ekspos* (TVRI) have occasionally covered environmental issues, but their reach and influence remain limited compared to global productions (Agustina et al., 2020). According to Jurriëns (2024), participatory documentary filmmaking in Indonesia, such as Dandhy Laksono's *Sexy Killers* (2019), has been instrumental in exposing corporate and political ties to environmental destruction.

2. Themes and Narratives in Environmental Documentaries

Environmental documentaries, whether global or local, often follow distinct thematic patterns. Western-produced documentaries tend to focus on conservation and climate change from a scientific perspective, such as *The Blue Planet* (BBC, 2001) and *Before the Flood* (National Geographic, 2016) (Peters & Hamilton, 2018). Meanwhile, Indonesian environmental documentaries frequently highlight socio-political struggles, including the displacement of indigenous communities and the exploitation of natural resources (Luqman, 2021).

NGOs such as WWF, Conservation International, and Greenpeace have also contributed to environmental documentary production (Greenpeace Southeast Asia, 2022). For instance, WWF's *River of Gold* (2016) sheds light on illegal gold mining and deforestation in the Amazon, a theme highly relevant to Indonesia's own struggles with extractive industries. Similarly, *March of the Penguins* (2005), which won the Academy Award for Best Documentary, successfully used storytelling to evoke emotional connections between audiences and wildlife conservation, demonstrating the effectiveness of narrative-driven environmental advocacy (Jacquet, 2005).

In Indonesia, NGO-backed films such as *Pulau Plastik* (2021) highlight the problem of plastic pollution, while *Kala Benoa* (2015) focuses on grassroots resistance against reclamation projects (Heryanto, 2023). However, research analyzing the comparative effectiveness of NGO-backed advocacy documentaries versus commercial nature documentaries remains limited (Briandana et al., 2024).

3. Audience Reception and Impact of Environmental Documentaries

Several studies have explored the influence of environmental documentaries on public perception and behavior change. A study on *The Cove* (Psihoyos, 2009), which exposed dolphin hunting in Japan, demonstrated that documentary films could provoke international outrage and policy changes (Boudot, 2017). Similarly, *An Inconvenient Truth* (Guggenheim, 2006) was credited with increasing public concern about climate change (Cox, 2021).

In the Indonesian context, however, research on audience reception remains scarce. Luqman (2021) found that while climate crisis documentaries in Indonesia were seen as informative, they did not necessarily translate into direct behavioral change. The rise of digital streaming platforms such as Netflix and YouTube has further transformed how audiences engage with environmental films (Jurriëns, 2024). *Sexy Killers* (2019), for example, gained massive traction online, leading to widespread discussion but limited direct policy action (Heryanto, 2023). The long-term impact of Indonesian environmental documentaries on activism and policy change remains an area that requires further research (Green et al., 2024).

4. Digital Distribution and the Role of Streaming Platforms

Traditional television documentaries from National Geographic, BBC Earth, and Discovery Channel historically reached audiences through scheduled broadcasts, shaping global environmental awareness for decades (Attenborough, 2019). However, the digital era has shifted documentary consumption towards on-demand platforms such as YouTube, Netflix, and Disney+ (Nash, 2014). Studies show that online streaming services allow environmental documentaries to reach wider, younger, and more diverse audiences, but they also introduce challenges such as algorithm-driven visibility and selective audience engagement (Jurriëns, 2024).

The Indonesian documentary scene has increasingly embraced digital platforms. *Pulau Plastik* (2021) was released on YouTube to maximize accessibility, while Netflix Indonesia has acquired several environmental films, broadening their reach (Briandana et al., 2024). However, unlike international productions, Indonesian documentaries struggle with funding, promotion, and global recognition, limiting their effectiveness in influencing environmental policy (Agustina et al., 2020).

5. Gaps in Existing Research

While there is extensive literature on the role of documentary films in environmental education and advocacy, several research gaps remain, particularly in the Indonesian context:

1. **Comparative Effectiveness:** There is limited research comparing the impact of global nature documentaries (e.g., BBC Earth, National Geographic) versus Indonesian-produced environmental films in shaping public perceptions and influencing policy (Peters & Hamilton, 2018).
2. **Long-Term Behavioral Impact:** Most studies focus on immediate audience reactions to documentaries rather than long-term behavioral changes in environmental practices (Cox, 2021).
3. **Digital Platform Influence:** The role of YouTube, Netflix, and social media algorithms in amplifying or restricting the reach of environmental documentaries in Indonesia is underexplored (Jurriëns, 2024).
4. **Policy Influence:** While some global documentaries (*The Cove*, *An Inconvenient Truth*) have led to policy changes, research on the extent to which Indonesian documentaries influence environmental policies is still lacking (Heryanto, 2023).

Addressing these gaps requires interdisciplinary research that combines media studies, environmental policy analysis, and audience reception studies. Future research should examine

how Indonesian environmental documentaries can leverage digital platforms more effectively and whether different storytelling approaches influence policy changes and public engagement differently. Understanding these dynamics will be crucial in advancing documentary filmmaking as a tool for environmental advocacy in Indonesia.

Conclusion

Documentary films have emerged as powerful tools for environmental advocacy, shaping public awareness and influencing discussions on ecological and social issues. Global productions from BBC Earth, National Geographic, Discovery Channel, and Animal Planet have historically used high-quality cinematography and scientific storytelling to educate audiences about climate change, biodiversity loss, and conservation. Meanwhile, Indonesian environmental documentaries, such as *Sexy Killers* (2019) and *Pulau Plastik* (2021), have taken a more investigative and activist-driven approach, exposing corporate and political ties to environmental degradation.

The rise of digital streaming platforms like YouTube and Netflix has significantly expanded the reach of advocacy documentaries. Viral films such as *Kony 2012* and *Planet of the Humans* have demonstrated how online distribution can mobilize global audiences and spark policy debates. In Indonesia, YouTube-based environmental documentaries have gained significant traction, yet their ability to translate awareness into concrete policy change remains inconsistent. While some advocacy films have led to public discussions and activism, government responses have often been limited.

This research highlights several key gaps in the study of environmental documentaries:

1. **Comparative Impact:** More research is needed to understand the effectiveness of Western-produced documentaries versus Indonesian advocacy films in shaping public perception and policy action.
2. **Behavioral Change vs. Awareness:** While many studies focus on short-term audience reactions, there is limited data on long-term behavioral shifts influenced by these films.
3. **Digital Influence:** The role of YouTube algorithms and Netflix's recommendation systems in shaping documentary visibility and audience engagement remains underexplored.
4. **Policy Influence in Indonesia:** Unlike some Western cases where advocacy documentaries have influenced government decisions, Indonesian environmental films face systemic challenges in driving policy change.

As environmental challenges in Indonesia continue to intensify—ranging from deforestation and habitat destruction to plastic pollution and climate change—documentary films will remain crucial for mobilizing public awareness and advocacy efforts. However, to maximize their impact, a multi-faceted approach is necessary, combining filmmaking, digital strategy, community engagement, and policy advocacy.

Future research should explore how documentary storytelling can be optimized for different audiences and platforms to ensure that environmental advocacy efforts lead not only to awareness but also to tangible action and policy change. By addressing these gaps, documentary films can play an even greater role in shaping a sustainable future for Indonesia and the world.

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