A Life To Look Beyond Pristine Nature

Anthropogenic climate change in Attenborough's Netflix documentaries

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ABSTRACT

Documentaries represent a primary conduit through which people encounter information about climate change. A peculiar position is held by nature documentaries, which have been criticized for showing pristine nature without discussing the ongoing eco-climate crisis. This chapter examines as case studies Netflix docuseries *Our Planet* (2019) and film *David Attenborough: A Life on Our Planet* (2020), produced in partnership with WWF with the explicit aim of raising awareness of the effects of human action on the planet and of climate change. In light of a review of the issues facing climate change communication and the recommendations identified by scientific research to address them, this study explores how the interaction between specific imagery and language assigns meaning and helps to visualize causes, consequences and solutions to climate change within the two documentaries.

The framing and deductive content analysis show that both products leverage the credibility of Sir David Attenborough and impactful visuals to engage audiences. However, *Our Planet* omits to thematize climate change causes and solutions, while resulting in the alienation of human presence from its environment. Instead, by adopting diverse stylistic registers, the film succeeds in providing a more interconnected and comprehensive narrative of anthropogenic climate change, showing its social implications and existing mitigation strategies, thus emerging as a more accurate and powerful tool for fostering public awareness.

KEYWORDS

Climate change; nature documentaries; environmental communication; Attenborough; our planet.

Introduction

Climate change communication has been defined "the communication challenge of our century" (Priest 2016). Indeed, if science underpins our understanding of how climate change occurs and its implications for the habitability of the planet for living species, effective climate change governance requires societal engagement (Whitmarsh et al. 2013). As observed by Sakellari (2015: 829), "encouraging public engagement in response to climate change requires that we understand the multiple ways in which it is mediated". It is now a widely accepted scientific fact that the speed and intensity of global warming as it has been occurring since the mid-twentieth century are caused by huge amounts of greenhouse gas emissions due to human activity. The increase in Earth's temperature is accompanied by an intense reduction in biodiversity and alteration of marine, terrestrial, and river ecosystems (WMO 2024).

Despite its relevance and the scientific consensus around it (IPCC 2023), many individuals and interest groups continue to deny the existence or the anthropogenic causes of climate change. Moreover, even those who are concerned about the implications of global warming seem not to be doing enough to counter this drift. This is where the role of climate change communication comes into play. Climate change communication refers to all forms of communication that, through different media, channels, and genres are aimed at informing, educating, raising awareness, promoting better understanding, encouraging greater engagement or mobilizing diverse audiences in response to climate change.

As expressed by Lindenfeld and McGreavy (2014: 125), communication creates "a *discursive space* […] in which audiences seek information, have concerns, and potentially act in ways that collectively result in sustainable development".

After decades of "climate silence" (Rowson & Corner 2015), in which the topic remained absent from public and media discourse partly because

it was considered too technical and unnewsworthy, and partly because of concealment by the fossil fuel industry (Oreskes & Conway 2012), climate change has begun to increasingly populate news, entertainment and social media becoming a highly contentious political issue capable of polarizing audiences.

Between the 1980s and the 1990s, it was mainly scientists, corporations, and environmental groups that talked about climate change, first in specialized and restricted circuits, then in the mass media. In subsequent years, international institutions, governmental and nongovernmental organizations, actors, singers, artists, politicians, athletes, intellectuals, and activists became claims-makers on the climate issue (Boykoff 2011). As a consequence, the reporting of climate change changed over time, especially as the topic moved from the scientific domain to encompass also the political, social, legal, and economic realms.

As with other unobtrusive issues[1], the media represents a primary conduit through which people encounter information about climate change and thus plays an important role in shaping public perceptions and attitudes towards this issue (Dudo & Atkinson 2017; Schäfer & Schlichting 2014; Carvalho 2010). Although there is an abundance of research focusing on news coverage of climate change (Vu et al. 2019), there are far fewer studies exploring how this phenomenon has been portrayed in edutainment or entertainment media (Giaccardi et al. 2022).

Yet, according to data collected by Newman et al. (2022: 55), across global markets[2] "more people say they pay attention to documentaries (39%) than to major news organisations (33%) for information about this topic" and it is often precisely through film and documentaries – which are "inherently situated to tell stories that are visually arresting and emotionally provocative" (Dudo & Atkinson 2017: 3) – that people negotiate and feed their imaginary about complex phenomena.

Indeed, climate change documentaries are becoming "a popular tool to reach wide-ranging audiences in efforts to elevate concern, raise the prominence of the issue in the political dialogue, and stimulate action" (Bieniek-

[1] Unobtrusive issues – to use terminology from the agenda setting tradition – are those issues which are not a direct part of people's daily lives, or of their first-person contact, even if they are becoming more and more important for citizens (Dudo & Atkinson 2017).

[2] This research considers 46 international digital news markets that account for more than half of the world's population.

Tobasco et al. 2018: 12). In fact, these products "can combine multiple communication strategies, including the use of opinion leaders, imagery, and scientific information and narrative to employ both cognitive and emotional appeal in the address of barriers to engagement" (Bieniek-Tobasco et al. 2018: 4).

Within the landscape of climate change documentaries, a peculiar position is held by nature (also called 'wildlife') documentaries. Conceived as "edutainment that conveys knowledge about nature in an aesthetically pleasurable and entertaining way" (Zemanek 2022: 140), nature documentaries became a popular TV format since the second half of the 20th Century and continue to enjoy great popularity among a broad audience also in streaming services. Today, seven of the top 30 TV shows of all types, ranked by IMDb users, are nature documentaries[3]. These seven documentaries are all narrated by Sir David Attenborough, the British naturalist, broadcaster and presenter born in 1926 who set the standard of this genre and later becoming United Nations Climate Ambassador at the Conferences of the Parties. Described as "the BBC's principal intermediary with the natural world – a trusted brand in his own right" (Richards 2013: 150), Attenborough, and other opinion leaders like him, have been suggested to have strong potential to promote messaging from nature documentaries (Kacprzyk et al. 2022; de Lange et al. 2019).

Most of Attenborough's documentaries contain important conservationist messages (Erdös 2019), and his call to action to combat plastic waste in *Planet Earth 2* (2016) has been related to the uplift of 55% in the searches for "plastic recycling" in the UK, to the extent of identifying a virtuous 'Attenborough effect' on consumers' choices and government initiatives aimed at contrasting the overuse of plastic (Spinozzi 2022; GWI 2019).

Nevertheless, it is on climate change and environmental crises that Attenborough has been most often subjected to criticism pointing out that his programmes tend to avoid showing evidence of ecological collapse "in favour of images of a pristine wilderness unaffected by humanity" (Bonner 2020: 9).

As observed by Soppe & Pershina (2020: 87), wildlife documentaries producers have increasingly been criticized "for not including enough authentic content discussing critical societal environmental issues including wildlife conservation and climate change". Nature documentaries have by

[3] Source: https://m.imdb.com/chart/toptv/ (last accessed: 26-06-24).

no means always explicitly promoted environmental protection or climate action (Zemanek 2022), indeed they are a particularly conservative genre. In fact, dwelling on environmental problems has long been envisioned as a commercial risk for producers (Aitchison et al. 2021). Things change, however, in 2019, when Netflix releases *Our Planet*, its first-ever nature documentary, an 8-episode series produced by Silverback Films in partnership with WWF (World Wide Fund for Nature), narrated by David Attenborough and supported by a huge range of digital content known as 'Our Planet Halo'[4].

Our Planet fits into so-called 'blue-chip' programs, which are high budget productions with identifiable features, such as high production value, wide variety of shooting location and footage filmed at different times that could be integrated seamlessly, a voice-over narration that ensures the benefit of being easy to redub into different languages, a cinematography that adopts long takes, zoom photography and non-diegetic musical score in order to merge and dramatize storytelling style with complex scientific substance (Huggan 2011; Richards 2013). In 2020, *Our Planet* is being followed by a film, *David Attenborough: A Life on Our Planet*, that re-mediates the series' footage, and a book, *A Life on Our Planet: My Witness Statement and a Vision for the Future*. The film recounts Sir David Attenborough's life while chronicling the evolutionary changes of planet Earth since he was born.

The series and the film intentionally depart from most nature documentaries in that they want to raise awareness of the effects of human action on the planet and of climate change.

The popularity of these Netflix productions[5] makes them particularly interesting for an analysis that is addressed in understanding which climate change narratives reach global TV (and streaming platforms) audiences and how they frame its causes, consequences and solutions, thus stimulating – though not causally or even linearly – possible changes in viewers' attitudes or behaviors. Indeed, linguistic and visual repertoires through which

[4] The series was produced by Alastair Fothergill and Keith Scholey, the directors who already partnered with David Attenborough in BBC documentary series *The Blue Planet* (2001), *Planet Earth* (2006), and *Frozen Planet* (2011).

[5] In March 2021, Netflix updated the viewing figures saying that *Our Planet* had reached 100,000,000 people over the lifetime so far of the series (Source: https://www.whats-on-netflix.com/news/every-viewing-statistic-netflix-has-released-so-far-october-2021/. Last accessed: 26-06-24).

climate change is narrated "are influential because they offer a range of resources from which people – consumers, journalists, politicians, and others – can construct their own arguments about climate change and which may lead to different 'logical' conclusions about the need for behavior change" (Nerlich et al. 2010: 103).

Using the qualitative methodology of deductive content analysis, this study applies to the series and the film a checklist of recommendations that international scientific research has provided in recent years concerning how to communicate climate change for fostering public awareness and agency towards the ecological crisis. The objective of this analysis is to answer the following questions: What kind of narrative and visual representation of climate change do the documentaries *A Life on Our Planet* and *Our Planet* perform? Does the way climate change is framed take into account the recommendations that scientific literature has produced regarding accurate climate change communication?

After a review of the obstacles that climate change communication encounters and the recommendations identified to overcome them, and the elucidation of the methodology of the analysis, this chapter will explore whether and how well the film and the series seem to meet the guidelines on accurate climate change communication and the possible implications of this representation.

Communicating climate change: hurdles and opportunities

Hurdles

There are many and varied reasons why it is complicated to communicate climate change effectively, that is, to make it understandable, tangible, meaningful, and close to people's daily concerns.

Climate change has structural features that make it a particularly complex phenomenon to grasp (and consequently to communicate), to the point that it has been defined a "hyperobject", or an entity of such vast temporal and spatial dimensions that it defeats human cognitive categories (Morton 2013). Climate change, in short, is "too planetary to be local, too distant to be proximate, too technical to be cultural, too distressing to become a generative tool, too invisible to be tangible in daily life" (Van Aken 2020: 7).

The difficulty of visibilizing climate change thus calls into question first of all notions of space and time: climate change has a slow drift that is difficult to perceive in individual lifetimes. Moreover climate, unlike weather, cannot be seen or felt, it can only be calculated and extrapolated from statistics and models. This is the reason why sensory, and local, experience of climate change can be misleading.

In addition, there is temporal and geographical distance between the causes (greenhouse gas emissions) and effects of climate change, which means that the link between human actions and the reaction of the Earth system cannot immediately be grasped (Moser 2010). A third problem is that the quantitative data commonly used to detect and report climate change are not socializable for the general public and therefore cannot be connected with the dimensions of daily lives. They are, in fact, temperature increases "connected to quantifications that are too small (2 degrees), too large (1,800,000 tons of CO2) or too abstract (400 parts per million)" (VanAken 2020: 116).

Other psychological barriers, examined by Stoknes (2015), limit people's reaction in the face of climate change: the fact that it is narrated through catastrophic frames, as a disaster that can only be met with loss, sacrifice, and costs, increases feelings of fear and helplessness, and leads audiences to avoid the topic; cognitive dissonance is triggered when what one knows (e.g., that using fossil energy contributes to global warming) conflicts with what one does (turning on the heat, using the car, taking a plane, etc.), prompting people to underestimate or downplay what is at stake; in these cases, denial takes place as a self-defense mechanism (Norgaard 2011). Finally, audiences tend to seek out information that confirms their personal values and beliefs (a mechanism known as confirmation bias), rejecting or giving less weight to facts and information that disprove or challenge them (Priest 2016; Nerlich et al. 2010).

Moreover, providing more or better information is not effective for raising awareness and promoting active engagement. As a consequence, several communication approaches "often fail to meaningfully engage, as they do not consider the implicit values, emotions, and attitudes of individuals" (Nerlich et al. 2010: 100). Although common to all communicative processes, these obstacles in the specific case of climate change communication appear more significant, since climate change is a highly polarized issue. On the one hand, some research shows that individual positioning with respect to climate change is less influenced by knowledge of scientific evidence than

it is by personal values, beliefs and worldviews (Poortinga et al. 2011). On the other, political affiliation, taken individually, appears to be the strongest demographic predictor of how people relate to the issue (Borick & Rabe 2010; Carmichael & Brulle 2018).

Other hurdles in communicating climate change have to do with the difficulties that any communication process faces in attuning message selection and framing to a selected audience through a trusted messenger (Moser 2010).

Opportunities

Based on the assumption that there is no one-size-fits-all solution for all audiences, scientific research over the years has identified some possible strategies for bringing climate change closer to a broad audience. Obviously, a communication is not effective per se, but it can be effective with respect to the goals it sets out to achieve and within the limits that govern any communicative interaction. Moreover, no matter how well designed, any message is likely to be ignored or rejected if it does not come from a source deemed trustworthy, and it will be more readily received if it is able to converse with the cultural values, social norms, beliefs, and worldviews of a given audience (CRED 2009; Corner & Clarke 2016; Nerlich et al. 2010).

It is therefore necessary to know one's audience, identify a message that is meaningful to them, in line with their values, and entrust it to a person who can be considered an opinion leader for them or a close and credible source. The challenge "is not to overturn people's values, but to diversify the social and cultural meaning of energy and climate change, so that the issue is 'owned' by people with a diverse range of values" (Corner & Clarke 2016: 59).

In order for the message to reach people who have different degrees of expertise and knowledge, but especially for it to bind and take root in their concrete experience, it is necessary not to use specialized or sectorial language but to translate scientific data and statistics through metaphors and analogies with elements and situations from everyday experience. This communication should therefore be conveyed in narrative form: telling a story is the most effective way to engage people not only on a rational level but also on an emotional one (Jones & Song 2014; Corner & Clarke 2016; Corner et al. 2018). Some research emphasizes the importance of not adopting alarmist frames or language, which can generate feelings of anxiety and helplessness (Nerlich et al. 2010), but to adopt positive frames, which con-

vey a sense that we can do something about climate change and reinforce a sense of individual and collective solidarity and self-efficacy (Stoknes 2015). This means, for example, talking about the opportunities for greater health, social and technological innovation that acting in favor of the environment would enable, rather than talking about the sacrifices or costs of doing so, thereby also explaining the co-benefits of climate action.

Since the language and images used in climate change narratives have, until now, conveyed the idea that it poses a future threat (Clarke et al. 2020), the distant problem "must be brought home; the invisible causes and impacts must be made visible; the inconceivable solutions must be illustrated; perceived and real barriers to action must be shown as something 'people like me' have overcome" (Moser 2010: 40). This all ties in with the need to tell new, vivid, concrete, and personal stories that are able to surprise and excite. In these stories, it is therefore necessary to talk about the causes, consequences and solutions of the climate crisis, connect the local to the global, and to name and assign responsibilities. These stories will be all the more effective the more they are accompanied, or expressed, by images to visualize causes, consequences and solutions to climate change.

Research conducted in this area, aimed at identifying which images are most likely to spur people to action, emphasize the importance of showing identifiable subjects (humans or animals) with whom the viewer can preferably make eye contact rather than portraying masses of people or landscapes, with the risk that the viewer will fail to take part in that scenario or, worse, that an aestheticization of the catastrophe will result. The actions and the role the protagonists play in them should be depicted at scale[6]. Images depicting the impacts of the climate crisis prove to be the most emotionally powerful, but they should be accompanied by images showing concrete actions that can be practiced, or that have already been implemented, to mitigate-or adapt to-the effects of the crisis.

Local (and localized) images of the effects of climate change have been shown to reduce viewers' psychological distance from the issue; at the same time, they can cause viewers to lose sight of the globally interconnected aspects and therefore should always be accompanied by other images or texts that bridge the two levels (Corner et al. 2015). Suggestions just reviewed are intended as cross-cutting 'best practices' for a climate change narrative that

[6] For example, in an effort to make carbon emissions visible, it is recommended to show industries or a busy highway, not a single driver behind the wheel.

obviously cannot fail to confront the limitations dictated by the genre within which they will be dropped, the specific objective of the communication in question, the needs of the market and the target audience.

Methodology

This study adopts qualitative (and mostly interpretive) techniques to the aim of discussing how the series *Our Planet*[7] and the film *A Life on Our Planet* use language and images to narrate climate change. The objective is to explore how the interaction between specific imagery and language assigns meaning and helps to visualize causes, consequences and solutions to climate change (Koteyko & Atanasova 2016; DiFrancesco & Young 2011). The analysis thus aims to answer to the following questions:

- RQ1: What kind of narrative and visual representation of climate change do the documentaries *A Life on Our Planet* and *Our Planet* perform?
- RQ2: Does the way climate change is framed take into account the recommendations that scientific literature has produced regarding accurate climate change communication?

Methods from both framing analysis and discourse analysis are used to address RQ1.

Message framing "uses words, images and phrases to relay information […] and may provide problem definition, attribute responsibility and provide solutions" (Léon et al. 2018: 108). Frame allows for the selection and presentation of a particular set of attributes to the audiences (Hart 2010).

The current analysis explores media frames in a deductive way, that is by searching for the presence or absence of thematic and generic frames in both audiovisual texts considered and assigning them to an a priori frame definition and frame set (Guenther et al. 2023).

To the aim of answering RQ2, a deductive content analysis is conducted by applying to the series and the film a newly-made checklist of recommendations collected throughout scientific literature regarding effective climate change communication, which points out recurring suggestions provided by: CRED 2009; Clarke et al. 2020; Corner & Clarke 2016; Corner et al. 2018; Corner et al. 2015; Nerlich et al. 2010; Stoknes 2015.

[7] Only the 8 episodes that make up the series' first season are considered in this analysis.

The check-list takes into consideration the following recommendations:

- Select a credible messenger for your audience;
- Select a claim appropriate for your audience;
- Connect your message to your audience's cultural values and beliefs;
- Promote a 'system' perspective;
- Partner with organizations in the field;
- Don't present data or numbers, tell a story (tell new stories);
- Show (visual), don't tell;
- Show real people, use real images, personal stories and testimony;
- Show climate change causes (and solutions) at scale;
- Show local impacts at scale, striking a balance between the local and the global;
- Tell your audience what specific actions they can take;
- Be careful with protest imagery;
- Use positive framings;

For the sake of space and affinity of discourse, the analysis in the next section will hold together the exploration of RQ1 and RQ2 and provide an overall discussion.

What's in and what's missing about climate change in Attenborough's Netflix documentaries

A view from (outside) our planet

Although they exploit – at least in part – the same footage, and have a very similar title, as well as being part of the same campaign launched with the WWF, *Our Planet* and *A Life on Our Planet* offer a rather different narrative of climate change and the impact of human action on planet Earth.

As told in the teaser preceding the opening credits, *Our Planet* "will celebrate the natural wonders that remains and reveal what we must preserve to ensure people and nature thrive" (1.01; 00:01:12), whereas *A Life on Our Planet* is described by Attenborough, at the beginning of the film, as "my witness statement and my vision for the future, the story of how we came to make this our greatest mistake, and how, if we act now, we can yet put it right" (00:04:50).

On the one hand, the story of the decline of natural wonders and the exhortation to preserve them; on the other hand, the story of humans' 'great-

est mistake' and the suggestion of its possible solutions, filtered through a more personal narrative.

As the titles of the two documentaries may suggest, the series adheres more closely to the canons of the nature documentaries' genre. In fact, it looks at wildlife species from a panoramic position, through which the narrator abstracts himself (and all humanity) from the environment he describes, adopting a viewer-position high above the Earth.

Our Planet's first episode opens with a panoramic view of the Earth from the Moon, reminiscent of famous photographs later titled "Earthrise" or "Blue Marble" taken by the astronauts of different NASA missions. According to Bruno Latour's interpretation, images like this require viewers to mentally position themselves "as if you were considering it *from out in space*" (Latour 2020: 12). The globe thus would be a figure of distance and of the domination of the human over the Planet rather than a figure of the relationships that tie them to each other.

The semantic shift from *Planet Earth* (2006), Attenborough's previous series, to *Our Planet* (2019) would like to mitigate this distance by including human beings among the species inhabiting the planet. Instead, as the opening sentence itself states, people and nature are properly distinguished. This is a hallmark of this genre, whitch "has historically imagined nature and humanity as distinct realms and has perpetuated an artificial separation, even when it argues for human impact" (Hilderbrand 2020: 212).

In contrast, the inclusion of human beings in the Earth's ecosystem is more fully realized in *A Life on Our Planet* (2020), in which the narrator, and other human beings, finally appear to populate landscapes otherwise devoid (deprived of visibility) of human presence.

The film opens (and closes) on Earth, or, as Latour (2018) would say, "down to Earth": in Prypjat (Ukraine), a place where human beings have left an indelible trace. The opening scenes are shot in an abandoned building in the "post-apocalyptic town" annihilated by Chernobyl nuclear explosion. In less than a minute from the beginning, we see a human being walking through it: David Attenborough. We see at once the difference with the series: period footage appears depicting everyday life in Pripyat before it was abandoned in April 1986, and human presence, in addition to Attenborough's one, is one of the protagonists of the story.

It is precisely the storytelling of a human story – Attenborough's professional one and, at the same time, that of the evolution of the human species

on the planet – that makes the film closer than the series to recommendations on climate change communication.

What profoundly distinguishes the two products from the perspective of the climate change narrative are three main elements: 1) the way in which human presence is placed at the center of the narrative and related to the transformations of the environment; 2) the visibility that is given to the causes of climate change; and 3) the type of frames and the message that is delivered to the audience about the implications of climate change and mitigation strategies (or solutions). These messages are softer in the case of the series, more 'direct' in the case of the film, which moreover adopts more varied frames than the series and thus seems to appeal to a more heterogeneous audience, or one that is already sensitive to the issue.

Our Planet: A history of non-human decline and resilience… out of sight

The opening episode of the series, "Our Planet", provides a glimpse of different landscapes and habitats that will be further explored in subsequent episodes, titled accordingly: "Frozen Worlds", "Jungles", "Coastal Seas", "Deserts to Grasslands", "High Seas", "Fresh Water", and "Forests".

The episodes have a recurring structure: narrated by an omniscient voice over in an expository mode (Nichols 2001), each episode recounts the transformations of different habitats and their animal populations as a consequence of biodiversity loss (and of climate change). Aerial images serve as a connecting element between stories from different continents and different ecosystems.

The first episode figures as a sort of prologue and introduces the two frames through which all episodes frame climate change: the thematic frame of 'environmental consequences' (Bolsen & Shapiro 2017) – also envisioned as a frame of 'destruction of nature' (Guenther et al. 2023) -, and the generic frame of 'loss', which concerns the "natural wonders" we risk losing, due to the impacts of human action on planet's different habitats.

The second is about the proposed solution: habitats' preservation, aided by the resilience of which nature is capable. This is the frame of 'external efficacy' (Bolsen & Shapiro 2017) attributed to nature, which can alone make the positive difference, and sometimes attributed to a generic 'we' without further specification about the means to do so.

At the beginning of "Our planet", as we watch footage of seas full of

colorful fish, of tigers, whales, and a polar bear walking with a baby bear on an expanse of ice under a thick snowfall, we hear:

> When human beings built their first settlements some 10.000 years ago, the world around them, on the land and in the sea, was full of life (00:01:40). For generations, this stable Eden nurtured our growing civilizations. But now, in the space of just one human lifetime, all that has changed. In the last fifty years, wildlife populations have, on average, declined by 60%. For the first time in human history, the stability of nature can no longer be taken for granted (00:02:50)
> [Images of iceberg breaking and melting]
> But the natural world is resilient. Great richness still remains. And with our help, the planet can recover (00:02:53).

The keywords in this narrative (recurring in later episodes) are: decline (or loss), stability, resilience, and recover.

In all episodes, around the 40th minute out of 50, we listen to an invocation referring to the loss or depletion of the specific habitat due to human action and a rather generic call for the need to restore a balance with nature:

> These [caribous] migrations are a shadow of what they once were. The herd has lost nearly 70% of its numbers in the last 20 years. Their world and all of our planet is now changing fast (1.01; 00:37:35).
> Though they may seem remote to many of us, the stability of these icy wastes is crucial for all life on the planet. But in just 70 years, things have changed at a frightening pace. The polar regions are warming faster than any other part of the planet… and the sea ice is disappearing[8] (1.01; 00:38:00).
> A third of Madagascar's fossas have disappeared in the last 20 years, a result of the continued destruction of their forest by people. Since these pictures were recorded[9], this forest, and the unique life it once contained,

[8] It is interesting to compare how the melting of the ice is rendered by a much more understandable and direct image in the film *A Life on Our Planet*, told as testimony by Attenborough: "In my time, I've experienced the warming of Arctic summers. We have arrived at locations expecting to find expanses of sea ice and found none. We've managed to travel by boat to islands that were impossible to get to historically because they were permanently locked in the ice. By the time *Frozen Planet* aired in 2011, the reasons for these changes was well established. The ocean has long since become unable to absorb all the excess heat caused by our activities. As a result, the average global temperature today is one degree Celsius warmer than it was when I was born" (00:43:30).

[9] Actually, the viewer doesn't know when these images were shot and sees only a satellite

> have disappeared altogether. Only three percent of Madagascar's dry forest remains. Worldwide we have now destroyed over half of the forests that once flourished on our planet. Not only are we losing the animals that once lived in them, we are also changing the climate of the entire globe.
> [The view becomes increasingly aerial, distant]
> But our planet's forests, if given the chance, are almost unbelievably resilient
> [We see a thick green forest] (1.08, 00:40:00).

As can be guessed from these brief excerpts, the emphasis is on the speed of change and the extreme reduction in biodiversity of different habitats. However, this narrative shows us the loss of biodiversity and the transformation of habitats mainly through satellite images in which the viewer is hardly able to grasp the transformation. Moreover, once the theme of nature's resilience is introduced, the image of a flourishing and lush nature is soon restored at a visual level.

Beyond the generic call to preserve the nature that still remains, and the attribution of its loss to a generic 'we' that does not allow for precise responsibility, the reference to possible concrete solutions occurs, in each episode, in conjunction with the end credits. Through a call to action that invites viewers to consult the campaign's website to discover possible mitigation actions, the series introduces the frame of 'self-efficacy' (Bolsen & Shapiro 2017), i.e. those individual actions that can make a positive difference[10]: "Please visit ourplanet.com to find out how are planet can thrive again" (1.01; 00:48:13); "To discover what we need to do now to restore our forests, please visit ourplanet.com" (1.08; 00:47:22).

The last episode of the first season ends with a kind of cross-over with the movie *A Life on Our Planet* showing us the abandoned buildings of a ghost town: Chernobyl. The finale on the one hand points out that "a future with more forests is key to the resilience of our planet" (1.08; 00:46:20), on the other attributes the "remarkable recovery" of the natural area around Chernobyl to the forests' extraordinary resilience (1.08; 00:45:50) still exempting human policies and practices from really taking charge of the prob-

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view of the forest surrounded by red lands, with accelerated graphics in which the land takes up more and more space on the forest.

[10] Within the website, in the section "What can I do?", proposed solutions are: 'Change what I eat'; 'Change what I buy'; 'Change to clean energy'; 'Csk the businesses I buy from to change' (https://wwf.panda.org/projects/our_planet_netflix_wwf_nature_documentary/what_can_i_do/?. Last accessed: 26-06-24).

lem. The series primarily operates to show us what we risk losing, therefore invites us to restore stability to our planet by restoring its biodiversity. Despite the series emphasizes human responsibility towards the planet, the major critical elements of *Our planet* lie in the fact that nature is still mostly shown as pristine, and the presence or impacts of human beings on the natural world very seldom appear, although they are repeatedly mentioned (Jones et al. 2019). Humanity is an abstract off-screen presence, as its material traces.

As observed by Svane-Mikkelsen "Quite literally, wildlife documentary rarely includes any depiction of people and their creations, cities, building or the like. Nature and culture are seen as two mutually exclusive worlds" (2018: 234). However, wildlife does not exist in total separation of human activity and life zones thus wildlife documentaries risk reinforcing the alienation of humanity from nature (Huggan 2014). Instead, "Nature stories can support individual responsibility and action by including human agency and local knowledge, giving detailed accounts of situated problems and solutions, allowing complexity in presentations of concrete cases of sustainable practices and experience" (Svane-Mikkelsen 2018: 237).

Contradicting the indexical nature of nature documentaries, movie images and voice-over narration diverge when spectacular pictures of biodiversity are verbally commented on with a narrative of decline (Zemanek 2022). Visual depictions of threats to the planet remain rare or not at scale. Moreover, the series presents nature as outside historical time.

The proposed solutions in order to mitigate these impacts are too vague and viewers are encouraged to pledge online to find materials explicitly focused on how individuals can make a difference, for example by eating less meat, switching to renewable energy, or supporting environmental organizations.

A Life on Our Planet: The collapse of natural and human histories in Attenborough's lifetime

The film, which repurposes and, in some cases, re-mediates the same footage as *Our Planet*, along with stock footage from previous series narrated by Attenborough, chronicles Attenborough's career as it relates to the transformation of the planet.

This documentary, according to the climate change communication's checklist provided within this chapter, appears to be much more accurate than the series in framing climate change.

First, the account of the transformations of the planet over the past 100 years is, through the explorations of Attenborough himself, related to the evolution of human action and technology *within* the planet. In fact, *A Life on Our Planet* incorporates human story into the Earth's evolutionary history. This allows the transformations of different habitats to be read in the light of precise historical moments and social processes. In a word, the film does what the series avoids doing: it relates nature to culture, wildlife species to the human species, and chronicles their encounters and clashes.

At minute 00:06:30, we see a screen of white-on-black text appearing for the first time, showing some indicators about the state of the planet: "1937. World population: 2.3 billion. Carbon in atmosphere: 280 parts per million. Remaining wilderness: 66%". These data are updated as the narrative progresses over the following decades.

Attenborough witnesses these transformations firsthand and does so by retracing his explorations and looking back, along with the viewer, at footage from his previous series: "The natural world is fading. The evidence is all around. It's happened in my lifetime. I've seen it with my own eyes" (00:04:30).

The loss of biodiversity is shown here with clearer, closer and more understandable images than in the series, and with an indexical narrative.

Attenborough recounts the habitats he explored on *Life on Earth* (1979) and *The Blue Planet* (2001) series by looking retrospectively at the process of extinction of certain species that was taking place in front of his eyes. The transformation of marine habitats is particularly engaging for the viewer, who follows its decline step by step through the increasingly desolate gaze and voice of the narrator. At 00:39:40, within a few dozen seconds, we witness images of the coral reef, first colored, then bleached, then completely destroyed on the sea floor:

> In 1998, *Blue Planet* film crew stumbled on an event little known at the time. Coral reefs were turning white. The white color is caused by corals expelling algae that lives symbiotically within their body. When you first see it, you think perhaps that it's beautiful, and suddenly you realize it's tragic. Because what you're looking at is skeletons. Skeletons of dead creatures.
> The white corals are ultimately smothered by seaweed. And the reef turns from wonderland… to wasteland. At first, the cause of the bleaching was a mystery. But scientists started to discover that in many cases where bleaching occurred, the ocean was warming. For some time, climate scientists had warned that the planet would get warmer as we burned fossil fuels and

> released carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gasses into the atmosphere (00:40:50).

The film, which also adopts a more direct and dramatic register than the series from the beginning, goes so far as to point out the causes of climate change and show them through images of power plants emitting greenhouse gases:

> A marked change in atmospheric carbon has always been incompatible with a stable earth. It was a feature of all five mass extinctions. In previous events, it had taken volcanic activity up to one million years to dredge up enough carbon from within the earth to trigger a catastrophe. By burning millions of years' worth of living organisms all at once as coal and oil, we had managed to do so in less than 200 (00:41:10).

After showing data updated to 2020[11], the film adopts an apocalyptic register to describe what future scenarios science predicts for the coming decades, until 2100. We see images of a forest on fire, a polar bear swimming in an ice-free ocean, hippos and elephants dying en masse, and we hear that together with ocean acidification, also the global food production will traverse a crisis (2080), and large parts of the planet will be uninhabitable by 2100 due to overheating by +4 degrees. These scenarios are interrupted at minute 00:53:00 when we see Attenborough at the 2018 UN Climate Change Conference speaking to a large audience of ambassadors, journalists, and politicians. It is a hint that international politics is identified as the venue where the course just described can be reversed. After reiterating that "rewilding the world" is the way forward, the film delves into solutions that are already adopted and adoptable today to counter the drift of climate change, weaving together technological and social solutions: "By working hard to raise people out of poverty, giving all access to healthcare, and enabling girls in particular to stay in school as long as possible" (00:59:22); "Sunlight, wind, water and geothermal energy" (1:00:40); "When it comes to the land, we must radically reduce the area we use to farm, so that we can make space for returning wilderness. And the quickest and most effective way to do that is for us to change our diet" (01:11:15).

[11] World population: 7.8 billion. Carbon in atmosphere: 415 parts per million. Remaining wilderness: 35%.

Conclusions

Reviewing the checklist on accurate climate change communication, we can observe some elements that positively distinguish both the series and the film taken as case studies. Both products feature a partnership with WWF and adopt a credible messenger in reference to both the audiovisual genre and the subject matter, Attenborough being not only a narrator but also a climate ambassador for the United Nations and one of the figures deemed most trustworthy in the UK[12], the first market for these two products. In addition, both the series and the film narrate climate change more through stories than data, and give to the visuals a central role in engaging the viewer. The most problematic aspects of *Our Planet* (2019) concern the way it talks about the impact of humans on the planet without showing either humans or legible images of impacts on biodiversity. The series thus conveys the idea that "wild places are 'for' nature, and any people there are interlopers" (Jones et al. 2019: 422). Wonderful images of pristine nature depotentiate the accompanying narrative of decline and leave the viewer with the idea of having witnessed, once again, the "spectacle of nature" (Spinozzi 2022). The causes of climate change are not mentioned or visualized in the series, and solutions are deferred to a website, relying on nature's resilience to hope for course correction.

While the wonder generated by these images may engage the viewer emotionally, the fact that the habitats portrayed do not appear to be inhabited by humans – and in any case concern areas of the Earth with which the viewer can hardly relate by direct experience – does not help to reduce the psychological distance that makes the impacts of climate change still perceived as distant in time and space. In short, criticism mainly regards the lack of two frames: the responsibility attribution frame and the solutions frame. Unlike the series, *A Life on Our Planet* (2020) traces the causes of climate change to carbon dioxide emissions and the use of fossil fuels, highlighting well the anthropogenic nature of global warming and its social as well as environmental impacts. Moreover, the film also makes more references than the series to mitigation strategies already in place at a local level around the world. In some ways, *A Life on Our Planet* seems to respond to criticisms that could have been made of *Our Planet*. It tells a human story, both Attenborough's story as a wildlife explorer and as a witness of the so-called 'great accelera-

[12] Source: https://climateoutreach.org/britain-talks-climate/previous-research/trust/ (Last accessed: 26-06-24).

tion'[13] and connects the history of human societies with those of the environment of which they are a part. In addition, references to process indicators about carbon dioxide emissions, remaining wilderness and world population, allow us to temporally situate the extent of these transformations and to translate these data through Attenborough's direct experience.

Our Planet adopts more generic and moderate messages in order to raise awareness of biodiversity loss, appealing to the values of conservation, balance, stability, natural heritage, integrity and prosperity, which are the values of a center-right audience (at least in the UK) (Shaw & Corner 2017). It is therefore cautious in targeting its potential audiences and also dares very little in innovating the wildlife documentary genre and introducing call-to-actions or attributing political responsibilities. Instead, *A Life on Our Planet* appears to be addressed to an already sensitized audience. In addition to more detailed scientific explanations of the links between causes, impacts and solutions to climate change, this film offers more direct messages with more dramatic overtones. In fact, it multiplies its own messages, its own registers, its own stylistic and narrative solutions, which is a suggestion that indeed scientific literature offers so that different audiences can appropriate the same film in different ways, each through hooks of its own.

A riskier commercial choice, but one that certainly renews the approach of Attenborough's documentaries and which could more effectively foster public engagement toward climate change issues.

[13] 'The great acceleration' refers to skyrocketing consumption of energy, water and soil, human population, industrialization, and many other processes that have been matched by an accumulation, in just a few decades, of three-quarters of all carbon dioxide in the atmosphere (McNeill & Engelke 2015).

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FILMS

David Attenborough: A Life on Our Planet (2020)

TV SERIES

Frozen Planet (2011-2012)
Life on Earth (1979)
Our Planet (2019)
Planet Earth (2006)
Planet Earth 2 (2016)
The Blue Planet (2001)

A LIFE TO LOOK BEYOND PRISTINE NATURE.
ANTHROPOGENIC CLIMATE CHANGE IN
ATTENBOROUGH'S NETFLIX DOCUMENTARIES

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