

## Eco-Documentaries in Encouraging Marine Life Conservation Awareness among Malaysian Youth

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### ABSTRACT

In Malaysia, the topic about marine species conservation is scarce, combined together with a limited media coverage of this species has resulted in low awareness among the public. A minimum use of platforms by local media in informing the public about this alarming crisis has been a main problem. This study explores the function of the eco-documentary in encouraging marine life conservation awareness. It examines two eco-documentaries, produced by an international and a Malaysian production, in which both contents represent the issue of marine life extinction. Six focus group discussions were executed among three geographical areas (coastal area, rural area, and urban area) in order to determine Malaysian youth educational changes in conservation. This study found a change of information in relation to marine life pro-conservation and demonstrated positive perceptions and/or awareness in preserving life under water. This study further identifies that rhetorical emphasis on the issue's local context fosters a heightened sense of accountability to protect the environment and reduce consumption of endangered marine species. It further cultivates a sense of responsibility to safeguard the nation's iconic marine turtle species. In conclusion, this finding established the eco-documentary as another provider of additional information, knowledge about threats, exposed the effects of human activities, the existence of marine protected areas (MPAs), and the richness of marine life and its species. It is important for eco-documentary to be included in the curriculum materials in changing and instilling positive perceptions of environmental sustainability among youth.

**Keywords:** *Communication, eco-documentary, conservation awareness, educational change, underwater sustainability.*

### INTRODUCTION

Marine resources constitute a fundamental component of Malaysia's environmental sustainability, economic development, food security, and the livelihoods of its population. With a population exceeding 34 million (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2026) and a coastline stretching approximately 4,675 kilometres (Lee et al., 2022), Malaysia's coastal regions have become important sites for a wide range of socio-economic activities that contribute to national development. These activities include urbanization, agriculture, fisheries, aquaculture, the oil and gas industry, transportation and communication, tourism, recreation, and other related sectors (Abdullah et al., 2015).

These coastal and marine ecosystems play a vital role in supporting marine biodiversity while simultaneously sustaining coastal livelihoods, particularly among fishing communities. The fisheries sector continues to serve as a significant pillar of the national food system. Recent national statistics indicate that Malaysia recorded approximately 1.79 million

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metric tonnes of fish landings in 2023, highlighting the continued importance of marine resources in maintaining domestic seafood supply and achieving national self-sufficiency levels exceeding 90 percent for major fish species (Department of Fisheries Malaysia, 2025).

The ecological importance of these marine environments is particularly significant, as coral reef ecosystems alone support approximately one quarter of global marine biodiversity (Hughes et al., 2021). Despite their significance, Malaysia's marine ecosystems are increasingly threatened by both anthropogenic and environmental pressures. For instance, coral reef degradation has emerged as one of the most pressing environmental concerns. Recent national reef assessments indicate that Malaysia has lost nearly 20 percent of its coral reefs since 2022, equivalent to an area of approximately 47,250 football fields, while the national average live coral cover declined to 39.94 percent in 2025 (Reef Check Malaysia, 2025). This decline has been attributed to a combination of stressors, including climate-induced coral bleaching events, coastal development, pollution, destructive fishing practices, and unsustainable tourism activities. Furthermore, Kamal et al. (2022, p. 33) reported that 48 species of fish in Sarawak are currently vulnerable to extinction, highlighting the need for continuous monitoring and the implementation of appropriate conservation measures by relevant authorities. Degraded reefs reduce fish nursery habitats, disrupt marine food chains, and threaten endangered species such as sea turtles, dugongs, and seahorses. The deterioration of marine ecosystems also jeopardizes the coastal protection functions provided by coral reefs and mangroves, thereby increasing the vulnerability of coastal communities to erosion and climate-related hazards.

Consequently, since the early 2000s, marine conservation has emerged as a critical policy priority in Malaysia, supported by initiatives such as marine protected areas, artificial reef deployment, and habitat restoration programmes implemented by Department of Fisheries Malaysia and various environmental organisations. Addressing marine environmental challenges also requires strong public awareness and environmental literacy. Environmental communication plays a pivotal role in shaping public understanding of ecological issues and promoting pro-environmental behaviour. Media platforms, particularly audio-visual media, have become increasingly influential in conveying environmental knowledge to broad audiences. Research indicates that visual media can significantly enhance environmental literacy, emotional engagement, and pro-environmental attitudes, particularly among youth who increasingly access information through digital and audio-visual platforms (Fauville et al., 2021; Ardoin et al., 2020).

Among various communication approaches, eco-documentaries have emerged as influential educational tools capable of translating complex ecological issues into accessible and emotionally engaging narratives. They employ visual storytelling, scientific evidence, and real-world case studies to highlight environmental problems, biodiversity loss, and conservation efforts. Research in environmental communication indicates that exposure to visual environmental media can improve environmental literacy, enhance knowledge retention, and strengthen public support for conservation initiatives (Howell, 2022; Fauville et al., 2021). Consequently, eco-documentaries function not only as informative media but also as persuasive tools that mobilize public engagement and encourage collective action toward environmental conservation. Through compelling imagery and narrative framing, such documentaries can deepen public understanding of marine ecosystems, particularly among youth who increasingly rely on audio-visual media for information.

Nevertheless, little is known about the role of the media as a platform for disseminating information on conservation, particularly regarding marine life. Therefore, the

main purpose of this study is to develop an understanding of the role of eco-documentary films as agents in promoting awareness of marine life conservation among Malaysians.

#### LITERATURE REVIEW

Various initiatives and research studies across continents have been conducted by marine experts in an effort to preserve marine life. Knowledge about the declining state of the oceans has been communicated to the public (Prnjat, 2016; Mat et al., 2021; Abdullah et al., 2024). For example, in Western countries, whether documentaries are produced by large corporations with high budgets or by independent filmmakers such as activists or NGOs on smaller budgets, both types of productions are capable of instilling conservation awareness among viewers. The extent of this conservation awareness can translate into further conservation actions, such as making donations, becoming an activist, or volunteering for marine sustainability initiatives (Mat et al., 2021; Arendt & Matthes, 2016; Hofman & Hughes, 2018; Janpol & Dilts, 2016). Recent scholarship demonstrates that exposure to environmental media continues to play a significant role in shaping pro-conservation behaviour among audiences, encouraging practices such as environmentally responsible consumption, energy conservation, and sustainable lifestyle choices (Chen et al., 2024; Zhao et al., 2022; Liu & Li, 2021). Empirical evidence indicates that media engagement enhances environmental knowledge and fosters attitudes that translate into concrete pro-environmental actions. This viewpoint aligns with Abdul Latif and Abu Hassan (2020, p. 125), who emphasized that an astute filmmaker functions as a public intellectual whose vision and direction are essential for promoting advocacy through filmic education in the cinematic public sphere.

Meanwhile, recent studies affirm that documentary films remain a uniquely engaging medium due to their compelling audio-visual and narrative elements, which enable complex environmental issues to be communicated effectively to diverse and global audiences (Irwanto, 2025; Briandana et al., 2024). These multimodal characteristics enhance audience engagement by combining visual imagery, sound, and storytelling, thereby making abstract environmental concerns more accessible and emotionally resonant. Previous studies have also reported that people gain awareness of environmental problems through documentary viewing experiences (Mat et al., 2021; Arendt & Matthes, 2016; Elkington & Maher, 2015). Similarly, research indicates that documentary films can stimulate pro-conservation awareness among viewers (Mat et al., 2021; Janpol & Dilts, 2016; Levinson et al., 2016). A notable example of this phenomenon is *An Inconvenient Truth* (AIT) (2006), which generated worldwide interest in environmental issues while motivating both political decision-makers and the general public to address the urgency of global warming in Taiwan (Lin, 2013). Lin also found that viewers perceived the effects of AIT to be stronger due to several factors, including the desirability of the message, perceived message quality and sensation value, sensation-seeking tendencies, and self-perceived environmental knowledge.

Hence, this study argues that eco-documentary films and programs possess powerful elements and functions that encourage marine life conservation movements through awareness, education, and the shaping of public perceptions. Increasing attention has been given to the effectiveness of audio-visual content in conveying conservation messages, as the combination of images, sound, and storytelling communicates environmental issues more clearly, engagingly, and accessibly to a broad audience. Elkington and Maher (2015) claimed that audio-visual content is effective in eliciting audience engagement and serves as “bridging material” between factual content and viewers in an educational setting. Moreover, Mat et

al. (2021) stated that documentaries can positively influence people's perceptions and attitudes toward marine life conservation. A study of the BBC nature documentary series *The Blue Planet* (2001) indicate that, following the broadcast of *Blue Planet II*, mentions of plastic pollution by media and political actors, as well as online search activity, increased significantly and were sustained over time, underscoring the capacity of documentaries to elevate environmental issues onto public, media, and policy agendas (Males & Van Aelst, 2020).

Meanwhile, Yeh et al. (2022, p. 123) asserted that "visual communication was identified as the most effective type of information to present environmental issues in cyberspace." Audio-visual aids are therefore crucial for audiences' reception and interpretation of conservation messages, as they shape people's perceptions and trigger responses to social change. In addition, Abdullah et al. (2024) claimed that eye-catching content, such as audio-visual media, is among the most important media strategies for promoting marine conservation awareness, as it helps ensure that the content effectively captures audience attention. Consequently, eco-documentary films and programs can be considered platforms for knowledge dissemination on conservation in the public sphere.

To further support this notion, recent scholarship has increasingly recognised the pedagogical value of eco-documentary films as effective educational tools, enabling learners to access and critically engage with environmental realities that would otherwise remain distant or inaccessible without specialised knowledge or direct experience (Hajj-Hassan et al., 2024; Liu, 2018). In addition, Mossner (2020, p. 19) stated that "scholars, activists, and artists alike have made the argument that storytelling is an important tool in communicating the threat of large-scale biodiversity loss." Thus, the importance of eco-documentaries as a means of disseminating environmental messages about marine life conservation to the public has been acknowledged in Western countries, as evidenced by the increasing number of environmental documentaries and film festivals worldwide (Prnjat, 2016).

Meanwhile, in Malaysia, environmental and species degradation particularly marine life extinction is considered a controversial issue, as natural resources are vital for the government in boosting the country's economic performance. As Kaur (2021) observed, one of the most persistent challenges faced by the Malaysian government in managing marine resources remains conservation, particularly in the context of increasing anthropogenic pressures, coastal development, and climate-related impacts. Similarly, Mohamad Saifudin et al. (2016, p. 13) claim that "not every environmental topic can be freely discussed or written about in public." Consequently, the low number of eco-documentaries produced by local creators, including FINAS, alongside the high rate of imported documentaries, has raised questions regarding government policy in supporting marine life conservation. This is evident in the practices of local broadcasting stations: (1) the government TV station TV1, which broadcasts environmental documentary programs such as *Simfoni Alam*, but only a few episodes address environmental degradation; (2) the private TV station TV3, which airs documentary programs such as *Majalah 3*, but covers environmental issues only alternately with other topics within each episode; and (3) ASTRO, which broadcasts Western documentary programs via various imported satellite channels, including *National Geographic* and *Nat Geo Wild*.

In addition, eco-documentaries are not considered profitable commodities by key industry players and have received limited support in terms of marketing, funding, and skills from various stakeholders, including government agencies. Ling and Ali (2022) asserted that documentary filmmaking remains structurally constrained by limited funding, weak distribution platforms, regulatory restrictions, and low commercial appeal, resulting in a

relatively small market despite its potential to address critical social, environmental, and political issues. In contrast, Abdullah et al. (2024) claimed that audio-visual information constitutes a significant media strategy for promoting marine conservation awareness in Malaysia.

All of this suggests that the role of eco-documentary films and programs in informing the public about marine life extinction is not fully recognized in Malaysia. For this reason, we argue that the general public's limited knowledge of the issue is one explanation for the lack of action to prevent the destruction of marine life. This study is significant in examining eco-documentaries as an educational medium for enhancing awareness of endangered marine species among Malaysian youth. It contributes to the literature by bridging marine conservation research with environmental communication studies, highlighting how audio-visual media can influence environmental literacy, attitudes, and conservation engagement in the digital media era.

#### METHODOLOGY

A qualitative approach using focus-group discussions was employed to address the two research objectives of this study. Focus-group discussions are particularly valuable in analysing and identifying changes in informants' education, awareness, or perceptions. A focus group allows qualitative researchers to examine informants' actual attitudes toward the issue under investigation. Many scholars rely on focus groups as a tool to probe participants' responses, interpretations, and personal experiences and is widely used in conservation research (Nyumba et al., 2018).

In addition, the strength of a focus group lies in the interaction among informants, which is not observed in individual interviews (Alam et al., 2025; Mytton et al., 2016). Also, Alam et al. (2025) noted that focus-group participants can respond to, elaborate on, and critically engage with one another's perspectives, interpretations, and understandings of the topic or issue under consideration, as well as to the interviewer, resulting in a richer set of data. For example, discussions following the viewing of eco-documentary films and programs can provide a platform for participants to share their experiences and generate rich data on the factors contributing to changes in their perceptions, knowledge, or attitudes, something that is often lacking in individual interviews. Hence, in examining viewers' educational changes regarding marine life conservation, this method has enabled the collection of a rich dataset and facilitated the analysis and discussion of changes in informants' awareness following their documentary viewing experiences.

As this study investigated viewers' responses to eco-documentaries presenting both local and foreign content on marine life extinction, it was important to select participants who met similar criteria. The two documentaries were chosen because they addressed the issue of marine life extinction in two distinct geographical settings, without including inland or other wildlife species, making them particularly suitable for generating credible research outcomes aligned with the objectives of this study. Certain aspects of these documentaries were especially effective in changing perceptions, as they combined compelling visual imagery, emotionally engaging narratives, and clear factual information. Together, these elements helped audiences better understand environmental issues while fostering a stronger emotional connection to marine conservation.

According to Alam et al., (2025, p. 51-52) a focus group can be characterized as follows: (i) a collection of human participants, (ii) research focus around which the discussion revolves,

(iii) collective interaction among the participants, (iv) a moderator who is an expert and has knowledge, skills, and experience in facilitating a group discussion, ensuring the generation of high-quality data, and (v) the generated collective insights or shared understanding of the phenomenon under investigation.

In addition, Mytton et al. (2016) claimed that, when recruiting focus-group participants, it is logical to allocate individuals with similar interests to different groups in order to obtain a variety of viewpoints. The combination of individuals meeting certain criteria in a focus group can result in a wide range of opinions and worldviews (Alam et al., 2025).

Hence, to determine whether educational changes in marine life conservation have been instilled and to identify similarities in participants' awareness after viewing eco-documentaries, different groups of Malaysians from three geographical locations were recruited for this study. This diversity of participants enhances the representativeness of the findings, allowing the study to examine how environmental communication, particularly through eco-documentaries or media-based conservation initiatives, resonates with audiences who possess varying degrees of proximity to and engagement with marine ecosystems. Consequently, the inclusion of coastal, rural, and urban populations enables the research to generate more nuanced and generalizable insights, thereby contributing to a deeper understanding of the role of media in shaping public awareness of conservation. Participants' varied viewpoints provide significant data and help achieve the objectives of this research, which include the discovery of:

- 1) The role of eco-documentaries in raising awareness of marine life preservation; and
- 2) The similarities in viewers' responses to eco-documentaries with regard to their educational perspectives on marine life conservation.

A qualitative researcher must, therefore, consider several procedures prior to conducting focus-group discussions to ensure that the data obtained on the topic under investigation are rich and comprehensive. According to Davis, C. S. (2017), there are seven steps in a focus-group discussion, each of which is crucial for producing a trustworthy research outcome, as shown below:

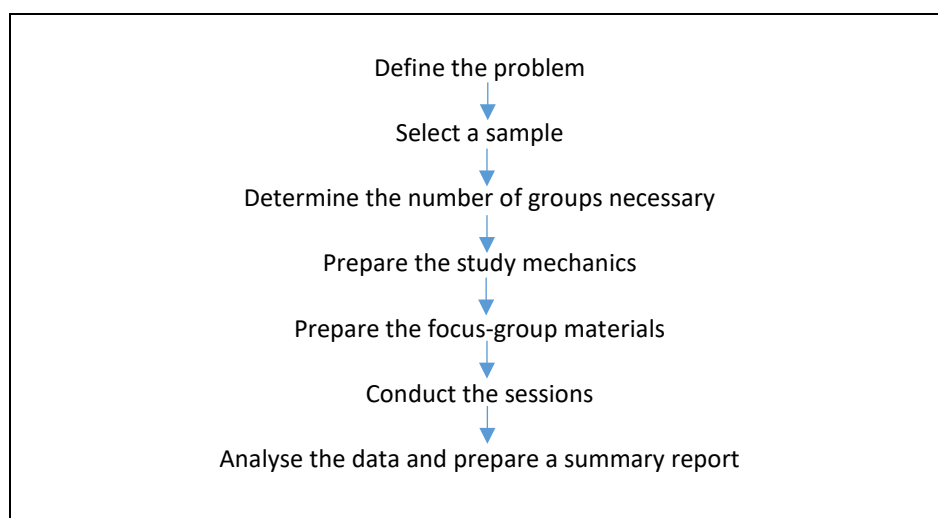


Figure 1: Steps for focus-group

Firstly, a focus-group discussion is conducted based on the research problem and gap identified in the study field. Mytton et al. (2016) stated that any research project begins with

the definition of the problems or issues to be addressed in a focus-group discussion. In this study, a problem was identified due to a gap in the research field, as well as our curiosity about the current phenomenon of endangered marine species and the relatively low level of conservation awareness among Malaysians.

Secondly, focus groups involve small samples, and the researcher must ensure that participants are grouped according to their interests, the purpose of the focus group, and the objectives of the study (Alam et al., 2025). Accordingly, we applied several criteria based on purposive sampling when selecting informants for the focus-group discussions. These criteria included Malaysians residing in the Klang Valley (to represent the urban population), Felda Kemelah (to represent the rural population), and Kuala Besut (to represent the coastal population); youth aged 21–30 years (BERNAMA, 2023); participants of any ethnicity or marital status; and voluntary participation in the study. The selection criteria are methodologically justified as they enable the study to capture diverse perspectives across key socio-geographical contexts in Malaysia. Participants from Klang Valley, Felda Kemelah, and Kuala Besut represent urban, rural, and coastal populations respectively, allowing for contextual comparison of experiences and viewpoints. The focus on youth aged 21–30 years is appropriate, as this group is highly engaged with media and plays a significant role in shaping contemporary discourse. Including participants regardless of ethnicity or marital status ensures inclusivity within Malaysia’s multicultural setting, while voluntary participation upholds ethical standards and enhances data credibility.

Thirdly, six focus-group discussions were conducted, consisting of (i) a group shown a documentary with foreign content (*Mission Blue*), produced by Netflix in 2014, and (ii) a group shown a documentary produced locally (*Lestari Ujana Marin*). The six focus groups were chosen to capture diverse perspectives from urban, rural, and coastal populations. Urban participants, familiar with global media, provide insight into responses to the foreign documentary *Mission Blue*, while rural participants, with limited exposure to international content, reflect the relevance of the locally produced *Lestari Ujana Marin*. Coastal participants, whose livelihoods are closely tied to the sea, offer practical perspectives on marine conservation. Having two groups per documentary type allows for balanced comparisons between reactions to international and local productions. Davis (2017) argues that focus groups should be conducted with as many groups as possible to identify and compare similarities or differences until data saturation is reached, meaning that no new findings or elements emerge during the discussions. Group interaction enables participants to exchange ideas, reflect on shared and differing viewpoints, and build upon one another’s experiences, thereby facilitating a deeper exploration of perceptions and attitudes toward marine conservation issues.

Table 1: Informant Identification

Population	Area and eco-documentary viewed	Tagging
Population A	Coastal population who watched the foreign eco-documentary, <i>Mission Blue</i> (MB)	A1 to A6
Population B	Coastal population who watched the local eco-documentary, <i>Lestari Ujana Marin</i> (LUM)	B1 to B6
Population C	Rural population who watched the foreign eco-documentary, <i>Mission Blue</i> (MB)	C1 to C6
Population D	Rural population who watched the local eco-documentary, <i>Lestari Ujana Marin</i> (LUM)	D1 to D6

Population E	Urban population who watched the foreign eco-documentary, <i>Mission Blue</i> (MB)	E1 to E6
Population F	Urban population who watched the local eco-documentary, <i>Lestari Ujana Marin</i> (LUM)	F1 to F6

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Next, several types of mechanics were used, including eco-documentary films and programs (*Mission Blue* and *Lestari Ujana Marin*), the participants, the facilities at the documentary screening locations, the focus-group discussions, and the recording tools (camera, audio recorders, video recorders, computer, and projector). As Davis (2017) highlighted, the technical aspects of a focus group are crucial and include recruiting participants, reserving appropriate facilities, and selecting suitable recording tools (video or audio recorders).

Apart from the focus-group mechanics, the study materials are also critical for conducting an effective discussion. Many scholars claim that a key factor in a successful focus group is the competence and skills of the leader, moderator, or researcher (Mytton et al., 2016; Alam et al., 2025). In this study, we assumed the role of moderator and led the discussion in an unstructured manner centered on the topic under investigation. This approach required careful practical considerations. The focus-group discussions lasted between one and three hours. As previous scholars have suggested (Alam et al., 2025; Mytton et al., 2016), effective focus-group discussions generally last between one and three hours, depending on the group size; longer sessions may result in participants losing focus or becoming fatigued. A set of guiding questions was prepared to facilitate discussion and encourage participant engagement.

In addition, the focus-group sessions were conducted in a conducive and comfortable environment to avoid any emotional or physical disturbances. Study sites were equipped with appropriate facilities, including lavatories and prayer rooms. According to Davis (2017), focus-group discussions are typically conducted in well-equipped rooms, such as conference rooms or hotels. In this study, each session lasted between one and three hours, preceded by an eco-documentary screening, with participants voluntarily contributing approximately six hours of their time.

Finally, the discussions were recorded and documented using both video and audio recorders for each round of data collection. Measures were taken to ensure participants' privacy and confidentiality by securely storing all recordings, restricting access to the research team, and anonymizing identifying information during transcription and analysis. The data were then summarized and transcribed. The transcribed documents were reported and analyzed to produce novel research outcomes by categorizing the information under main themes and sub-themes through a procedure known as thematic analysis. Braun and Clarke (2021) propose six practical steps for thematic analysis, which can be applied simultaneously when dealing with large datasets. Accordingly, this study employed the framework, consisting of: becoming familiar with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and writing up/reporting.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study found that eco-documentaries are associated with increased knowledge about marine life conservation. According to Illeris (2018), learning can be conceptualized as behavioural change; in other words, when individuals acquire new knowledge, their behaviour regarding the issue may change. We argue that knowledge gained about marine life extinction can foster a positive relationship between increased pro-conservation

awareness and the mediated communication of an eco-documentary. For instance, the eco-documentaries enhanced informants' knowledge, which in turn translated into a tendency to change their attitudes toward the issue. This finding aligns with previous research linking eco-documentaries to pro-conservation awareness (Chen et al., 2024; Zhao et al., 2022; Mat et al., 2021; Liu & Li, 2021; Hofman & Hughes, 2018; Arendt & Matthes, 2016; Janpol & Dilts, 2016; Robé et al., 2016; Elkington & Maher, 2015). However, it is important to note that responses among different populations in Malaysia varied with respect to both local and foreign eco-documentaries, particularly in terms of the extent of educational change.

Following this, and based on the informants' feedback, several new findings emerged regarding the educational changes resulting from the eco-documentary viewing experience. The eco-documentaries were perceived as providing: (i) additional information about marine life, (ii) knowledge about threats to marine life, (iii) the effects of human activities on marine life, (iv) information about the existence of marine protected areas, and (v) insights into the richness of marine life and its species.

*i. As a Provider of Additional Information about Marine Life*

We found that the informants had limited knowledge about marine life extinction, with all 36 reporting that, prior to viewing the eco-documentaries, they had no prior exposure to this issue. This finding was anticipated, as discussed in the literature review, because the Malaysian documentary industry faces several challenges, including limited support from the government and commercial entities in terms of marketing, funding, and skills for producing environmental communication documentaries (Mohamad Saifudin, 2016; Nagulendran et al., 2016). These challenges are reflected in the general public's limited awareness of marine life degradation, as evidenced by this finding.

Eco-documentaries were found to expose participants to this issue and increase their awareness, a result consistent with previous research on eco-cinema as an educational tool for addressing environmental problems (Mat et al., 2021; Robé et al., 2016). The additional information about marine life can thus be regarded as a positive outcome of participants' eco-documentary viewing experiences. Eco-documentaries achieve these effects largely because their visual representations of diverse marine species allow audiences to observe environmental issues more directly, thereby enhancing understanding and fostering stronger emotional engagement with conservation messages. As reported by populations B, D, and F:

Before this, I didn't even know what marine life is but, after watching this, I know that it includes coral reefs, fish... in terms of the forms, there are 44 different types of coral that vary in their shape. (Informant B4)

Before this I did not know that coral is sensitive... It's really soft and vivid in the ocean like other plants. I also did not know that we can plant corals. (Informant D3)

I have gained a lot of knowledge from this documentary, such as how to protect and what we can do to save our marine life. Actually, we can re-plant the coral reefs. (Informant F1)

The foreign eco-documentaries also provided additional information about ocean calamities, such as shark finning, overfishing, rotten rubbish and plastic bags, and successfully

added to the informants' existing knowledge about marine life and its ecosystem, as five out of six informants from populations A, C and E who watched the MB claimed:

I never knew that, on the sea floor, there was so much rubbish that came from the land. The most unexpected things were the tire and the plastic chair.

(Informant A1)

I didn't know that over-fishing and shark-finning could cause the extinction of marine life. (Informant C6)

This documentary gives us a lot of information... new things that have opened our minds to it, such as the rubbish in the ocean, and the shark-fin activity.

(Informant E6)

It is important to note that the local and foreign eco-documentaries provided different information to the viewers. Local eco-documentary exposed the participants to new information about re-planting the coral reefs as well as the various species of marine life, while the foreign eco-documentary offered information on ocean pollution and shark-finning.

#### *ii. Knowledge about Threats to Marine Life*

The analysis shows that the eco-documentaries provided information about threats to marine life. Through the screenings, participants discovered that waste from the agricultural industry, plastics, overfishing, tourism, rising temperatures, overconsumption, and fish bombing are among the factors contributing to marine life extinction. This finding supports Hofman and Hughes' (2018, p. 531) study, which reported that documentary viewing can "enhance viewers' knowledge of threats to ocean environments... as well as perceived levels of conservation learning." In the present study, however, responses varied regarding the specific factors that enhanced informants' knowledge about threats to marine life. Eco-documentaries generate significant impacts because their storytelling portrayals of threats to marine ecosystems enable audiences to visualize environmental challenges more clearly, thereby deepening understanding and strengthening emotional connections to conservation efforts. As reported by populations B, D, and F, who watched the local eco-documentary:

I think the threats to marine life can be attributed to three factors. One is pollution from plastic garbage. The second is the bombing or over-fishing... I mean excessive fishing. Third is tourism, due to the divers swimming so close to and touching the coral reefs, which can harm them. (Informant B6)

Even throwing away one piece of plastic will have an impact on the ocean. (Informant D4)

Never expected that a fish bomb could destroy all life in the ocean. From the surface, it seems okay, right? But, in the ocean it is really bad. (Informant F5)

Similarly, the foreign eco-documentary also provided information on the threats to marine life, as populations A, C, and E revealed that:

I learned something by watching this video, about the agricultural industry, the garbage in the river; all of these informed me about the real causes of

marine life extinction. This did not only come from the beach, but also from our own houses through the plastic that we use every day. (Informant A5)

The rural population can relate better to the agricultural industry, which relies heavily on the use of fertilizers, as their daily income is very much dependent on it:

Another effect is from the agricultural industry... At the beginning of the documentary, there was the farming industry, right? So, farming requires fertilizer. The fertilizer is absorbed into the ground. Then it will flow into the sea. It is similar to us, because we... villagers always use fertilizer in farming, especially for the palm trees. Before, I didn't know about this. (Informant C4)

We always thought that it was because of cars, because of factories... So, we have pollution, we have haze, but then we didn't know that actually it is just the surface... underwater, there's a lot of plastic. Before this, we were not really exposed to this kind of documentary. (Informant E3)

### *iii. The Effects of Human Activities on Marine Life*

This study also found that the eco-documentaries provided the viewers with information about the negative effects of human activities on marine life. Though human activities through threats to marine life have been mentioned previously, we believe that it is important to establish a specific theme for this issue due to the fact that all 36 of our informants pointed out that they were surprised to find out that human activities are the biggest threat to marine life; at the same time, they were able to relate the activities shown to those in their daily lives. They also revealed that the eco-documentaries made them realize that it is over-fishing, tourism, industrial waste, nuclear tests and many other human activities that threaten marine life species and their environment. This finding confirms that environmental literacy is associated with pro-conservation behavior such as 3Rs (reuse, reduce and recycle) (Law et al., 2023; Kamal et al., 2021).

All 12 informants from the coastal population indicated that human activities have seriously contributed to marine life extinction, and that they were deeply moved by the marine life suffering caused by the trawlers shown in MB, while bombing activities, and tourist harmed other marine life, including coral reefs as shown in LUM:

Over-fishing is also terrible. They use trawlers to catch the fish and that's why many fish are becoming extinct. Worse, they use a vacuum to suck all the fish into their boat. (Informant A6)

... maybe people who were carrying out bombing activities, snorkelling and diving in the ocean did not realize that the activity would affect the coral reefs. Maybe they thought that the activity would only affect the ocean surface but, in actual fact, it also affects marine life down at the bottom of the ocean. (Informant B2)

The rural population in its entirety also discussed this issue from a changed perspective, talking about how human activities can negatively affect marine life.

I also think that our activities can cause pollution... because when we use pesticides, they will be absorbed into the ground. So, they will affect marine life. (Informant C6)

I didn't know that our farming activities could harm the coral reefs until I saw the fertilizer bag in the ocean which was similar to what I have used. (Informant D5)

The 12 viewers from the urban population also expressed similar viewpoints, an indication of the effective rhetoric of animal suffering that exposed our informants to the negative impact of the tuna-fishing industry as well as to that of bombing on marine life:

I had no idea that the tuna industry could also affect marine life. That is new for me. A new perspective from watching... about our consumption. (Informant E5)

Bombing activities are seriously disastrous and can kill not only fish but also other marine life. (Informant F5)

#### *iv. The Existence of Marine Protected Areas (MPAs)*

The eco-documentaries also exposed the viewers to the existence of marine protected areas. Prior to this, the majority (30 out of 36) of the informants possessed but limited knowledge about established marine protected areas, particularly about Marine Parks in Malaysia. However, this changed after their watching experiences. As mentioned earlier, the public's lack of knowledge of marine life and its environment in Malaysia was apparent. We found that the eco-documentaries provided the viewers with information on the existence of marine protected areas, though a small number of the informants did have some prior knowledge of them. This finding supports the idea of Mat et al., (2021), who indicated that blue documentary (defined as a subgenre of eco-documentary that focus specifically on marine ecosystems) is significant in conveying the importance of marine life and its environment to the people.

Four out of six informants across all populations revealed similar viewpoints; they were not aware of the existence of marine protected areas, both at the international and the national levels. We believe that these changes stem from the expert knowledge shown in the eco-documentaries as Sylvia (MB) and Nasrulhakim (LUM) conveyed information on the prohibited activities that cannot be carried out within the protected areas. As those from populations A, C and E, who watched the foreign eco-documentary, claimed:

Before this I didn't know about this place... illegal to do any actions that could harm marine life. But now, I think it's a protected area to preserve marine life. (Informant A2)

I know that Sylvia wanted to establish more Hope Spots... It's like a reserve or a sea area protected from any human activities... like a forest reserve. So, people can't catch fish in the Hope Spot area. (Informant C3)

A new thing that I learned from this documentary is that there are a lot of Hope Spots... this is a kind of area to protect marine life. (Informant E4)

Meanwhile, the local eco-documentary had the advantage in disseminating information on marine protected areas because it was not only through the expert knowledge, but also through the locality of the issue and the image of a yellow buoy as the marking point for local marine protected areas, the Marine Park, which supported the argument made by the main characters. As populations B, D and F, who watched the local eco-documentary, stated:

I didn't know that we have a Marine Park. But Mr Nasrul said that, if it is a yellow buoy, the area cannot be trespassed by a boat because it is a restricted area to protect coral reefs. For example, in the video they said that one of the marine parks is located on Sipadan Island. (Informant B2)

From the documentary, I noticed that there's a yellow ball on the ocean surface. It means that it's a sensitive area and ships are not allowed to enter that area. So, fishing activities are prohibited because they can destroy the coral reefs and other species. But, I didn't know its function before this. Now, I know. (Informant D5)

The Bakungan Island that they mentioned in the video, I have never heard of. So, basically there are a lot of places that are being protected... Like a ball in the ocean is a sign that the place is protected. (Informant F4)

We would suggest, therefore, that the eco-documentaries were effective in providing information to the public on marine protected areas (MPAs), through the introduction of the Hope Spot (global MPAs), and the Marine Park (national MPAs). In addition, LUM provided additional information on allocated areas with an image marked with a yellow buoy as a signifier of this area as a demarcation for the invaders. This evidence shows that an eco-documentary can be an effective medium in delivering not only information about global MPAs but also other related information involving this protected area, particularly on national MPAs. This finding supports the notion of Rose (2016, p. 22) that:

The image may have its own visual effects; these effects, through the ways of seeing mobilised by the image, are crucial in the production and reproduction of visions of social difference; but these effects always intersect with the social context of viewing, with how the image is circulated, and with the visualities spectators bring to their viewing.

v. *The Richness of Marine Life and Its Species*

The eco-documentaries have provided viewers, especially those from the coastal and rural populations, with knowledge about the diversity of marine life species. As evidence, all 12 informants from the coastal and the rural populations who watched the foreign eco-documentary claimed that they were mesmerized by the richness of marine life and the novelty of the image shown, which gave them more information about these species:

Honestly, watching this helped me to know what's inside the ocean. The deeper the sea, the more and more species that we never knew existed are available, including the various species of fish... marine life that can actually reflect beautiful light from their bodies, and other strange sea plants. (Informant A3)

One of the scenes helped me to realize that we have many species of marine life, especially fish. There are fish that produce and reflect light in the ocean... Like a fun fair in the ocean. (Informant C6)

Furthermore, this finding is also related to the locality of the issue, whereby LUM made the viewers realize that Malaysia has one of the richest marine biodiversity in the world, which increased their patriotism. All the 12 informants from the coastal and rural populations who watched the local eco-documentary testified:

I know that our country is one of the most attractive countries in terms of its biodiversity, especially on Sipadan Island. In this documentary, it was said that it is actually one of the best in the world, and this can be seen in the various species shown, especially the coral reefs and many fish. (Informant B4)

It is news to me that our country is among those with the richest marine biodiversity, especially for coral reefs. They found many types of mushrooms in the ocean... There are also mushrooms. (Informant D1)

From the findings, it is evident that the locality of the issue has not only provided information on the richness of the country's marine life, but has also become a reason for increased patriotism in terms of responsibility to protect the country's iconic species among the public, something which has never been discussed before. The aesthetic values portrayed in eco-documentaries contribute to increased patriotism by highlighting the natural beauty and ecological richness of a nation's marine environments, which can evoke pride and a sense of national ownership among viewers. Through visually compelling scenes of coral reefs, coastal landscapes, and diverse marine species, audiences are reminded of the uniqueness of their country's natural heritage. Several informants in the study indicated that such portrayals strengthened their emotional attachment to the nation and encouraged a greater sense of responsibility toward protecting marine resources.

Watching the documentary made me realize how beautiful and valuable our marine ecosystems are, and it made me feel proud that these natural treasures belong to our country. (Informant B1)

The scenes of marine life and coastal areas made me appreciate our environment more and feel that it is our duty as Malaysians to protect it. (Informant D3)

Seeing our coral reefs and rare fish on screen made me realize how special our oceans are, and it motivated me to care more about protecting them for our nation. (Informant F4)

These reflections demonstrate that the aesthetic presentation of marine environments not only enhances environmental awareness but also fosters patriotic sentiments by linking conservation values with national identity and pride. As highlighted by Kaur (2021), one of the biggest challenges for the Malaysian government in managing the country's marine resources is conservation; our hope is that these findings help the Malaysian government to overcome the issue.

#### CONCLUSION

This study has shown that the eco-documentaries viewers experienced positive educational change about marine life because they were provided with new knowledge; we have also demonstrated the importance of the eco-documentaries that conveys information about the various species of marine life. The conservation of marine life is essential for preserving biodiversity, sustaining ecosystem functions, and supporting human livelihoods, while eco-documentaries serve a pivotal role by enhancing public awareness, facilitating environmental education, and promoting active engagement in conservation initiatives. It is also significant to point out that the locality in the issue represented and aesthetic values have increased patriotism among the viewers due to the realisation that Malaysia has one of the largest marine eco-systems in the world, and indicating a need to have local eco-documentaries to encourage greater awareness towards marine life conservation. Meanwhile, the aesthetic values of the richness of marine life in the foreign eco-documentaries encourage the informants of this study to protect the life below water. Thus, we suggest that further study can be carried out through eco-documentary screenings led by responsible parties, such as government agencies working on the Marine Park or other non-governmental organizations, enabling them to assess mass conservation activities among the general public.

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