

Study suggests watching nature documentaries on TV is good for the planet

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A new paper in *Annals of Botany* indicates that watching nature documentaries makes people more interested in plants, potentially provoking an involvement in botany and ecology.

Some 40% of plant species are under threat of extinction. Plants that are not directly useful to humans are particularly vulnerable. People often do not recognize how important many plants are due to a [cognitive bias](#) sometimes called "plant blindness" or "plant awareness disparity." While humans are generally concerned with [endangered animals](#), threats to plants are harder to recognize and address. In the United States, for example, plants receive less than 4% of federal funding for [endangered species](#), despite comprising 57% of the endangered species list.

Researchers here noted that in the past, several natural history productions, including "Planet Earth II," "Blue Planet II," "Seven Worlds," and "One Planet" made viewers much more aware of the animals on the shows. While scientists cannot draw a clear link between such TV shows and conservation efforts, nature documentaries provide a direct way to reach mass audiences and engage them.

Here, the researchers investigated whether nature documentaries can promote plant awareness, which may ultimately increase audience engagement with plant conservation programs. They focused on "Green Planet," a 2022 BBC documentary narrated by Sir David Attenborough. The show, watched by nearly 5 million people in the United Kingdom, featured a diversity of plant species, highlighting vegetation from [tropical rainforests](#), aquatic environments, seasonal lands, deserts, and urban spaces. The program also addressed [environmental concerns](#) directly, examining the dangers of invasive monocultures and deforestation.

The researchers measured whether "Green Planet" drove interest in the plants by exploring people's online behavior around the time of the broadcast. First, they noted the species that appeared on the show and the time each one appeared on-screen. Then they extracted Google Trends and Wikipedia page hits for those same species before and after the episodes of the documentary aired.

The researchers here found a substantial effect of "Green Planet" on viewers' awareness and interest in the portrayed plant species. Some 28.1% of search terms representing plants mentioned in the BBC documentary had peak popularity in the UK, measured using Google Trends, the week after the broadcast of the relevant episode. Wikipedia data showed this as well. Almost a third (31.3%) of the Wikipedia pages related to plants mentioned in "Green Planet" showed increased visits the week after the broadcast. The investigators also note that people were more likely to do online searches for plants that enjoyed more screen time on "Green Planet."

"I think that increasing public awareness of plants is essential and fascinating," said the paper's lead author, Joanna Kacprzyk. "In this study, we show that nature documentaries can increase plant awareness among the audience. Our results also suggest that the viewers found certain [plant species](#) particularly captivating. These plants could be used for promoting plant [conservation efforts](#) and counteracting the alarming loss of plant biodiversity."

More information: Making a greener planet: nature documentaries promote plant awareness, *Annals of Botany* (2023). [DOI: 10.1093/aob/mcac149](#) , [academic.oup.com/aob/article-1.../10.1093/aob/mcac149](#)

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