

Knowing your ants from your anteaters: Are wildlife documentaries showing us the 'real' natural world?

March 15 2023



Credit: Pixabay/CC0 Public Domain

Wildlife documentaries miss an opportunity to highlight the diversity of nature by focusing too much on mammals and birds, according to a new

study.

In a new study published in *People and Nature*, researchers from the University of Cambridge have shown that while the production of wildlife documentaries has exploded over recent decades, they portray a biased view of the [natural world](#) around us.

Our natural world is under threat, from habitat and biodiversity loss, to high extinction rates. At the same time, there is a growing disconnect between people and nature, with children's opportunities to experience the natural world diminishing.

Now more than ever the public are experiencing nature through technology, from documentaries to [social media](#), which play a key role in shaping [public attitudes](#) and awareness as well as being an effective tool for social change.

However, nature documentaries have been accused of presenting a pristine view of the natural world while excluding the impacts of humans.

Lead author Kate Howlett, a Ph.D. student in the Department of Zoology at the University of Cambridge, and fellow researchers analyzed an online film database and collated a list of nature documentaries produced between 1918 and June 2021. A list of 945 documentaries was compiled and split into seven time periods, from each of which 15 random documentaries were chosen.

For each documentary, the researchers recorded every habitat, organism, and species featured and whether there was a conservation message mentioned.

Overall, the researchers found that wildlife documentaries provided a

diverse picture of the natural world with an increasing focus on conversation. However, they overrepresented [vertebrate species](#), potentially pushing public attention towards this group of animals and away from others.

Documentaries were seemingly biased towards vertebrates, which had 81% of mentions, with birds and mammals collectively making up more than half of mentions, while invertebrates only had 18% of mentions. This is despite vertebrates representing only 3.4% of known species compared to 75% for invertebrates. Plants had a consistently low representation across time periods.

Representations of insects, fish and reptiles showed large variations across the decades while representations of mammals and bird remained consistently high.

"There's almost certainly a reason why we see more mammals and birds—if you want people to be engaged, you need animals that people are familiar with and already care about or they are not going to watch," says Howlett.

"But this then risks leaving people with the impression that all of nature is fine. There is a balance to be had."

A range of habitats were mentioned, with the most common being tropical forest and the least common being the deep ocean, and this did not change significantly over the time periods studied.

Moreover, conservation was mentioned in 16% of documentaries in total, but in almost half of documentaries in the current decade. No documentary before the 1980s contained a conversation message.

Increase in public awareness of conversation issues in the 21st century is

clear, with mentions reaching 47% in the 2020s.

Anthropogenic impacts—the human impact on nature—were mentioned in 22% of documentaries, but never before the 1970s, with overexploitation of animal populations coming top of the mentions.

"We've not had to think about how people are experiencing nature before because it has just been in everyone's lives", says Howlett. "It wasn't a problem before but now more and more people live in towns, cities and urban spaces."

Findings from the paper are consistent with recent studies that suggest conservation science has itself been focused more on vertebrates over the last three decades.

The researchers argue that [documentary](#) film makers should look to increase the range of species and habitats featured, which could potentially increase awareness of the importance of the range of ecosystems and support for their conservation, as well as an appreciation for nature.

"Film makers have scope to focus on urban wildlife and engage the public by showing them wildlife in their [local area](#) and potentially inspiring people to engage more actively with local biodiversity," says Howlett.

"It is quite frightening to realize how inaccurate our own perception of the world is, and it is important that viewers are given an appropriate balance between education and entertainment as well as hope and solutions to conservation problems."

More information: Kate Howlett et al, Wildlife documentaries present a diverse, but biased, portrayal of the natural world, *People and*

Nature (2023). [DOI: 10.1002/pan3.10431](https://doi.org/10.1002/pan3.10431)

Provided by University of Cambridge

Citation: Knowing your ants from your anteaters: Are wildlife documentaries showing us the 'real' natural world? (2023, March 15) retrieved 23 June 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2023-03-ants-anteaters-wildlife-documentaries-real.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.