cogitatio

ARTICLE

Representation and Power in Ocean Conservation Documentaries: A Decolonial Analysis

Steven Manaʻoakamai Johnson [1] and **Angelo O. Villagomez** [2]

[1] Ashley School of Global Development and the Environment, Cornell University, USA
[2] Center for American Progress, USA

Correspondence: Steven Manaʻoakamai Johnson (steven.johnson@cornell.edu)

Abstract

Popular ocean documentaries play a crucial role in shaping public understanding of the ocean polycrisis. This article offers a critical review of popular ocean documentaries, examining their portrayal of the complex ocean polycrisis—encompassing climate change, biodiversity loss, and unfettered capitalism. While these films achieve widespread viewership and raise awareness of critical environmental issues, this analysis argues that they frequently operate through a colonial lens, concurrently marginalizing the crucial perspectives and experiences of communities most proximate to these crises. By often prioritizing Western scientific narratives, individualistic solutions, and visually arresting but potentially decontextualized imagery, these documentaries risk obscuring the systemic impacts of historical and ongoing colonialism and neocolonialism on ocean ecosystems and the livelihoods of Indigenous communities, small-scale fishers, and other coastal populations. This article analyzes the films' narrative structures, visual rhetoric, and the selection (or omission) of expert voices to demonstrate how they implicitly and explicitly frame the ocean crisis and its potential solutions. We identify persistent colonial patterns across the corpus and, drawing on these findings, propose five principles for decolonial ocean documentary filmmaking—centering frontline voices, upholding historical accountability, practicing epistemic justice, maintaining structural analysis, and prioritizing relational storytelling over spectacle—demonstrating that more just and inclusive ocean narratives are not only necessary but achievable.

Keywords

decolonizing methodology; documentary; ocean imaginaries; ocean justice

1. Introduction

The ocean polycrisis is a convergence of climate change, biodiversity collapse, pollution, overfishing, and socioeconomic inequality (Halpern et al., 2025). The dimensionality and scale of these interconnected crises exceed what traditional science alone can address, requiring engagement across multiple domains of knowledge production and dissemination (Bennett et al., 2023; Lawrence et al., 2024). Indeed, a reassessment of the dimensions of ocean literacy—knowledge, communication, behavior, awareness, attitudes, activism, emotional connection, access and experience, adaptive capacity, and trust and transparency—is needed to identify pathways outside of traditional scientific research to address these challenges holistically (McKinley et al., 2022; Spalding et al., 2023).

These literacies—oceanic and elsewhere—are actively formulated and reconfigured by society into cultural artifacts with varying degrees of access. Popular culture (pop culture) is a subset of these artifacts that has long been debated and eludes a simple definition. Parker offers both a summary of this debate and two helpful definitions, the second of which states that "popular culture consists of products that require little cultural capital, either to produce or else to consume" (Parker, 2011). Pop culture, with its ease of access, is a critical arena for contesting what is and what ought to be, facilitating reflections on the past, making sense of the present, and contemplating and creating the future. Importantly, pop culture is engaged with much more readily than science. Jasanoff presents the concept of "sociotechnical imaginaries"—collectively held visions of desirable futures animated by shared understandings of social life attainable through scientific and technological advance—as a productive framework for understanding how cultural productions shape policy possibilities and public engagement (Jasanoff, 2015). This has led to the development of fields such as culturomics—the quantitative analysis of culture through large-scale digital datasets—that demonstrate how cultural artifacts both reflect and shape societal priorities (Michel et al., 2011). Studies examining environmental discourse in books, films, and media reveal how cultural representations influence public environmental consciousness and political will for conservation action (Ladle et al., 2016; Leiserowitz, 2004; Troumbis & Iosifidis, 2020).

Understanding how ocean documentaries influence these sociotechnical imaginaries requires analytical frameworks attuned to the relationship between power and knowledge production. We adopt a decolonial lens for this analysis because modern ocean conservation exists within colonial constructs—materially, through the historical and ongoing dispossession of Indigenous peoples from marine territories and the overly economic framing of ocean resources; and epistemologically, through the systematic privileging of Western scientific knowledge over Indigenous and local ecological knowledge systems (Banivanua Mar, 2016; DeLoughrey, 2019). Decolonial theory illuminates how cultural productions such as documentary films both reflect and actively reproduce these colonial relations, shaping which voices are centered in ocean narratives, which knowledge is validated as authoritative, and which futures are made imaginable (Smith, 2022; Tuck & Yang, 2012). This framework is particularly suited to analyzing popular ocean documentaries because these films claim to reveal objective truth about marine crises while simultaneously making choices—about geography, protagonists, experts, and solutions—that position certain actors and knowledge systems as legitimate while marginalizing others. By examining these representational patterns through a decolonial lens, we can identify how even well-intentioned conservation media may perpetuate colonial ways of seeing that undermine the possibility for ocean justice.

In the oceanic context, these imaginaries profoundly influence how societies conceptualize human–ocean relationships, marine governance, and conservation priorities (Ntona & Schröder, 2020; Ratté, 2019; Steinberg & Peters, 2015). Despite—or rather because of—its enormity, most people have loose relationships with the ocean and often experience it primarily through pop culture artifacts. From Greek mythology to iconic films such as *Jaws*, *Free Willy*, and *Finding Nemo*, the ocean has always played a central role in the human imagination (Beaulieu, 2016; Militz & Foale, 2017). The ocean prominently features in numerous fictional works, but is also the focus of many of today's most critically acclaimed and commercially successful nature documentaries—films that reach audiences in the tens of millions. Documentary film has emerged as a powerful medium for environmental communication, capable of combining aesthetic appeal, scientific authority, and emotional engagement (Brereton, 2022; Rust et al., 2015).

Ocean documentaries have emerged as particularly influential within environmental media. The genre evolved through distinct eras: J. E. Williamson's 1914 invention of the underwater filming technology and Jean Painleve's scientific films established norms and conventions for the genre (Bellows et al., 2001; Cohen, 2022), Jacques-Yves Cousteau's *The Silent World* (1956) and the BBC Natural History Unit (established 1953) created the mass-audience ocean documentary template used today (Duncan, 2018). Tensions between communicating science and creating spectacle have long been present, including those between conservation and exploitative goals (Crylen, 2018). Scholarship on mid-century ocean films identifies a paradox at their heart: They emerge during a period when Western nations regarded the oceans as objects of exploitation and domestication for "its ideal inhabitants: the white American Family" (Starosielski, 2012). Oceanographic expedition films from 1950–1970 exhibited "the continuity and discontinuity of colonial ideologies" in their representation of tropical marine spaces (Torma et al., 2012).

At the onset of the new millennium, the BBC Natural History Unit's Blue Planet series (2001) set a new standard for ocean documentaries. By implementing new filming techniques and providing groundbreaking footage of species and ecosystems, *Blue Planet* received wide acclaim, both critically and commercially, with an estimated 12 million viewers at its initial UK release. Its success set the stage for numerous imitators, including Disney's *Oceans* (2009) and its eventual sequel, *Blue Planet II* (2017). Notably, *Blue Planet II* incorporated more explicit conservation messaging, reflecting a broader shift towards activist environmentalism in nature documentaries (Hynes et al., 2021).

Coinciding with changes in the substance of ocean documentaries was a transformation in how viewers accessed these films. The 2010s saw the rise of streaming platforms as major distributors and producers of television and movie content, with investors pouring unprecedented sums into financing new content (Lotz, 2022). This shift expanded the potential audience for ocean documentaries, as it has become easier for viewers to subscribe to one or two services with on-demand viewing for their entertainment needs, rather than the older cable television models with static programming or reliance on box-office sales.

The success of these films has highlighted an opportunity to use documentaries as a mirror for what we see in society, including the identification of biases in the stories told and in who is cast as heroes and villains, saints and sinners, saviors and saboteurs. Critical scholars have identified how nature documentaries frequently reproduce colonial ways of seeing, positioning Western observers as objective witnesses to pristine nature while erasing Indigenous presence and knowledge (Chris, 2006; Mitman, 2012). This "Edenic" framing of nature as empty wilderness awaiting Western discovery and protection has deep colonial roots

and contemporary consequences for conservation, often displacing coastal communities in the name of preservation (Brockington & Igoe, 2006). Literature, film, and other cultural artifacts have helped entrench these frames in society's imagination, as in Conrad's portrayal of Africa as an "other world" (Achebe, 2014). In cases where people are integral to the Western imagination of a place, they are often in roles that supplicate to the needs of Western leisure (Mamiya, 1992). Similarly, the "white savior" narrative—wherein white protagonists become the primary agents of change in contexts of suffering, typically in the Global South—has been extensively critiqued. Studies such as Armitage (2003) highlight the early use of white savior tropes in advertising, while more recent works (McMain & Torres, 2023; Wang & Li, 2025) examine their persistence and adaptation in contemporary film and television.

In sum, media representations do not simply reflect reality but actively constitute environmental subjects and objects, shaping who can speak for nature and whose relationship with the environment is deemed legitimate or worthy of attention (Kimmerer, 2017). In this article, we analyze a selection of the most popular ocean documentaries available on streaming platforms. In the most successful of these movies, we strive to understand how ocean futures are shaped by the stories we tell in the present. Drawing on decolonial theory (Smith, 2022; Tuck & Yang, 2012), we investigate the narrative structures, visual rhetoric, and knowledge hierarchies that shape these influential cultural texts. From these findings, we derive a set of principles for decolonial ocean documentary—centering frontline voices, upholding historical accountability, practicing epistemic justice, maintaining structural analysis, and prioritizing relational storytelling—as a constructive pathway toward more just ocean futures.

2. Methods

2.1. Film Selection

Our analysis focuses on feature-length ocean documentaries that achieved significant commercial success, critical acclaim, and cultural influence. We sought consensus on budget, popularity, acclaim, and controversy. For each film, where available, we documented production budgets and viewership statistics from the Internet Movie Database (IMDb) and Rotten Tomatoes, using both the "tomatometer" (RTT) and "popcornmeter" (RTP), which measure critics and verified audience scores, respectively, to contextualize their reach and influence. Given limitations in data on views on digital streaming platforms, we were unable to quantify the exact number of views. We excluded serialized documentaries (such as the *Blue Planet* series) and heavily biographical features, such as *Mission Blue* about Dr. Sylvia Earle. However, we do include features that are narrower in focus, much like a memoir rather than an (auto)biography.

2.1.1. The Cove (2009)

The Cove represents a pivotal moment in ocean documentary history, establishing a template that future films (including one analyzed here) will follow, combining activist documentary approaches with investigative journalism, celebrity integration, and explicit advocacy goals. The film documented dolphin hunting in Taiji, Japan, using covert filming methods, hidden cameras, and military-grade technology, and employing confrontational tactics. The film was funded by the Oceanic Preservation Society, produced by Participant Media, and distributed by Lionsgate. The movie won Best Documentary Feature at the 2010 Academy Awards, demonstrating critical and commercial viability for conservation-focused documentaries.

The legacy of this film lies in its format, of Western activists investigating and exposing practices in non-Western settings, positioning Western (often white and male) subjects as heroes and non-Western spaces as arenas of environmental crisis. (Audience ratings: 8.4 IMDb; 95% RTT; 94% RTP).

2.1.2. Chasing Coral (2017)

The production of *Chasing Coral* spanned over 3.5 years (2013–2016), resulting in more than 500 hours of underwater footage. The film follows the format of *Chasing Ice*, the 2012 documentary about melting glaciers (Jeff Orlowski directed both *Chasing* films), which emphasizes the role and importance of recent camera technologies to "chase" environmental change. The budget was undisclosed but initially minimal, and the film was edited in director Craig Foster's attic with support from the Sea Change Project before Netflix acquired it. The film screened at more than 80 festivals and at more than 3,000 community screenings in at least 100 countries following its July 2017 global release on Netflix. Filming locations included Bermuda and Australia's Great Barrier Reef, with footage contributions from 30 countries documenting the 2014–2017 global bleaching event. *Chasing Coral* won the Audience Award at the 2017 Sundance Film Festival. (Audience ratings: 8.0 IMDb; 100% RTT; 89% RTP).

2.1.3. Seaspiracy (2021)

Seaspiracy received initial funding from British entrepreneur Dale Vince (amount undisclosed) and was produced by Kip Andersen, using the same production team as *Cowspiracy*. Upon its release on March 24, 2021, the film reached the top 10 on Netflix in 32 countries within days and generated a 5,000%+ increase in Google searches for "vegan seafood." Approximately 50% of viewers reported considering reducing fish consumption. The film focused on global fishing practices, with particular emphasis on Japan, Thailand, and other Asian fisheries. Extensive academic scholarship has examined the film's scientific accuracy, selective presentation, and effectiveness in raising awareness of the impacts of industrial fishing. (Audience ratings: 8.1 IMDb; 75% RTT; 87% RTP).

2.1.4. Ocean with David Attenborough (2025)

Ocean with David Attenborough represents a different lineage of the nature documentary: BBC Natural History Unit-style documentary, building on the decades-long authority of "host" David Attenborough. Distributed on Disney+, the film features a big-budget production aesthetic and prioritizes education over advocacy. This movie builds on the style, format, and success of the BBC series *Blue Planet* and its sequel, *Blue Planet II*. This film emphasizes the global state of the ocean and how human life flourishes when in harmony with it, and identifies industrial fishing as the greatest threat to the oceans, a recurring theme in ocean documentaries. (Ratings: 8.5 IMDb; 100% RTT; 94% RTP).

2.1.5. Shark Whisperer (2025)

With an estimated budget of 60,000 USD, *Shark Whisperer* represents a potential inflection point in the budget needed to tell visually impactful ocean stories. Directed by J. P. Stiles, Harrison Macks, and James Reed, this film was shot on Oʻahu, Hawaiʻi, USA, and follows marine conservationist Ocean Ramsey. Released on Netflix on June 30, 2025, the film received considerable media attention due to controversy over Ramsey's methods

and its focus on her personal brand rather than broader conservation issues. (Audience ratings: 6.9 IMDb; N/A RTT; 78% RTP).

2.2. Analytical Framework

Our analysis is grounded in decolonial methodology (Smith, 2022; Tuck & Yang, 2012), which centers questions of power, knowledge production, and colonial continuities in environmental contexts. This approach asks not only *what* is represented but *whose* perspectives are validated, *whose* experiences are centered, and *whose* futures are foreclosed by dominant narratives. We employ this framework because ocean documentaries operate at a critical intersection of representation and material consequence. These films establish epistemic authority to define the ocean crisis for global audiences, influencing public opinion, conservation funding, and marine policy. However, this authority is not neutral: It is built upon complex histories of oceanic exploration, extraction, and the privileging of Western ideologies over marine geographies (Banivanua Mar, 2016; Steinberg & Peters, 2015).

Documentary films work simultaneously through explicit content (what they say) and formal properties (how they present information visually and narratively). Understanding how ocean documentaries construct knowledge hierarchies and power relations requires analytical approaches that can examine both dimensions and their interaction. We integrate three complementary methodological traditions—critical discourse analysis, visual content analysis, and decolonial methodology—each addressing different aspects of documentary meaning-making while working synergistically to reveal patterns of colonial power in ocean conservation media. Our analysis employs critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 2017) to examine how these documentaries construct knowledge about ocean crises and position various actors within narratives of environmental degradation and salvation. Drawing on feminist technoscience scholarship on the "god trick" of claiming a view from nowhere (Haraway, 1988), we attend to how films establish objective authority while often obscuring their own positionality. We examine what Spivak (1994) terms "epistemic violence"—the erasure of subaltern voices and knowledges—by tracking whose expertise is solicited, how different forms of knowledge are valued, and whose relationships with marine environments are rendered visible or invisible. This framework guides our analysis of how films construct narrative structures, deploy visual rhetoric, and select (or omit) expert voices to establish and create ocean futures. These approaches work synergistically: Critical discourse analysis identifies what is said (i.e., which actors are positioned as agents and which solutions are proposed); visual analysis examines how it is presented (camera work, editing, lighting, encoding authority, or marginality); and decolonial methodology asks whose interests are served (who benefits, what Indigenous knowledge is erased, and how patterns connect to policy).

This integrated approach allows us to examine not only content but also the structural choices—narrative arcs, visual rhetoric, and knowledge validation—through which ocean documentaries normalize particular ideas of ocean relations and authority while appearing to merely document environmental reality. Importantly, our analysis is not solely critical but also constructive: The colonial patterns we identify across our corpus will inform a set of principles for decolonial ocean documentary, developed in Section 4.1.

2.3. Caveats

Serialized documentaries were omitted, but longer documentaries can mean (though not always) more space for more voices. Less prominent (i.e., less well-funded/promoted) documentaries may also fill these gaps. The structural conditions of documentary film production—funding sources, distribution channels, intended audiences—shape what stories can be told and how. Most documentaries in our corpus received funding from Western foundations, institutions, and streaming platforms, with intended audiences primarily in wealthy Western nations. These production conditions constrain possibilities for decolonial storytelling, yet the discourse on leveraging the ubiquity of smartphones to tell stories is lively and promising (Canella, 2022; Dayan, 2024; Vickers, 2013).

2.4. Researcher Positionality

Decolonial methodology requires explicit acknowledgment of the researcher's positionality, recognizing that all knowledge production is situated (Smith, 2022). Author SMJ is Kānaka Maoli (Native Hawaiian) with deep familial and scholarly connections to Oceania, while author AOV is Chamorro and brings decades of work in ocean conservation and policy to this analysis. Both authors have and continue to live and work as diaspora in majority-white institutions. Our analytical responsibilities and commitments emerge from both our academic training and our inherited and lived experiences of how conservation narratives augment Indigenous presence and knowledge. This positionality allows us to identify patterns of colonial representation that might otherwise appear unremarkable within Western academic frameworks. We approach these films as scholars invested in ocean futures that are just, inclusive, and capable of reconciling a turbulent past, as the future is surely to present its own unique challenges.

3. Results and Discussion

The following analysis examines each film through three interconnected lenses identified in our analytical framework: narrative structures that position certain actors as heroes or villains; visual rhetoric that shapes emotional and political responses; and the selection or omission of expert voices that determine whose knowledge is deemed legitimate. Each pattern we identify is supported by specific examples from multiple films in our corpus, demonstrating systematic rather than isolated tendencies. The colonial patterns documented here ultimately inform the principles for decolonial ocean media that we develop in Section 4.1.

3.1. Most Top Documentaries Support the White Savior Narrative

Our critical discourse analysis of narrative structure and voiceover authority, combined with a visual content analysis of screen time allocation, reveals a dominant pattern in which white Western protagonists serve as the primary agents of environmental knowledge production and conservation action. This reproduces what Cole (2012) terms the "white savior industrial complex." In ocean documentaries, narrative structures consistently position white filmmakers, scientists, or activists as those who truly "see" and "reveal" ocean crises and who bear the burden of saving species or ecosystems. Visual analysis shows that these protagonists receive disproportionate screen time and are privileged with visual and sonic framings. At the same time, local and Indigenous subjects appear peripherally, filmed from a greater distance, with fragmented testimony and significant shifts in background music.

Seaspiracy exemplifies this structure through convergent discursive and visual strategies. Discursively, the narrative structure positions its young British filmmaker, Ali Tabrizi, as a detective uncovering hidden truths about globalization and industrial fishing, with corporations in the UK, Africa, and Asia cast as antagonists. Voiceover authority rests entirely with Tabrizi, whose continuous narration interprets others' experiences and provides explanatory frameworks. Visual analysis reveals asymmetric treatment: Tabrizi appears in approximately 60% of scenes, filmed in intimate handheld close-ups that create viewer identification, often making direct eye contact with the camera, suggesting authenticity and transparency.

By contrast, West African fishers appear briefly (for fewer than 5 minutes total), with their ruined fisheries attributed to Asian industrial vessels. However, their own knowledge and advocacy work remain largely unexamined. They are presented at a greater distance, through fragmented commentary. When they are given a voice over their experiences of environmental degradation, Tabrizi's voice interjects to reframe them as evidence rather than as authority. This narrative arc structures Tabrizi's journey from naivete to enlightenment.

This representational strategy reflects what Rangan (2017) analyzes as the "humanitarian gaze" in documentary filmmaking—a mode of looking that positions others as "distant" and in need of rescue while consolidating the viewer's sense of moral agency and superiority. In ocean documentaries, this gaze operates through what we might term "ecological orientalism," adapting Said's (1977) concept to environmental contexts. *The Cove* extends this humanitarian gaze to the dolphins, while exoticizing the human–dolphin relationship without deeper consideration of how similar relationships in the West could be portrayed in a similarly "exotic" frame. Non-Western fishing communities are cast as sites of ecological degradation that require Western intervention, whereas the historical role of Western industrial capitalism in creating and maintaining the labor conditions that drive overfishing and economic desperation remains a lesser part of the narrative.

This pattern extends beyond *The Cove* and *Seaspiracy* to encompass most of our corpus. In *Chasing Coral*, the predominantly white crew is positioned as the primary agents of revelation: Their technological innovation—underwater time-lapse photography—is what makes the coral bleaching crisis visible to audiences, and the film's emotional arc follows their journey of discovery and devastation rather than centering the communities for whom multidimensional loss is a lived reality. *Shark Whisperer* offers the starkest instance of the white savior dynamic in the corpus: Ocean Ramsey is constructed as the singular agent of shark conservation in Hawai'i, her individual advocacy and personal brand serving as the narrative engine of the film, while Kānaka Maoli communities with deep cultural relationships to sharks appear only in subordinate roles.

The white savior pattern emerges from the interaction among the discursive, visual, and structural dimensions identified by our framework. Discursively, films construct narrative arcs centered on white protagonists' discovery and revelation, positioning others as objects to be known rather than knowledge holders in their own right. Visually, editorial decisions about how subjects are framed and the screentime they receive normalize this hierarchy. These representational patterns reinforce the image of the individual engaged in opposition to a system of corruption and conspiracy (Skiveren & Andersen, 2024). This adheres to Haraway's "god trick"—an objective, unbiased perspective on ocean crises that obscures how their positioning shapes what is seen and who is heard (Haraway, 1988).

3.2. Most Often, the Locale for the Setting Is Somewhere "Else" in the World

A related pattern involves the consistent geographic displacement of environmental crises to the Global South or other "elsewhere" locations, despite the global nature of ocean degradation and the disproportionate historical responsibility of wealthy nations for marine environmental damage. Discursively, some films frame crisis through spatial displacement—problems exist "over there"—while visual strategies employ spectacular imagery of an Eden in need of saving. This displacement performs ideological work, positioning the ocean crisis "over there" rather than implicating viewers' own contexts in broader systems of extraction and exploitation.

Chasing Coral offers an instructive example of how geographic framing operates both discursively and visually. While documenting coral bleaching events globally, the film's emotional climax centers on Australia's Great Barrier Reef. The film powerfully communicates the impacts of climate change on coral ecosystems and the urgency of action. However, its geographic focus and lack of engagement with Australian Aboriginal, Torres Strait Islander, and Fijian peoples—who have managed reef systems for tens of thousands of years and whose traditional ecological knowledge offers critical insights into reef resilience—exemplify broader patterns of Indigenous erasure in environmental media (Plummer, 2018).

The documentary dedicates significant screen time to the technical challenges faced by the predominantly white film team in developing underwater time-lapse photography, positioning Western technological innovation as the means of revealing the coral crisis. Meanwhile, Aboriginal peoples' intimate knowledge of reef ecology, their experience of reef changes over time, and their contemporary advocacy for reef protection receive no attention. This absence reflects the historic and ongoing displacement of Indigenous voices and a "disenchantment" of Westerners and nature (Johnson & Murton, 2007). These tendencies are akin to parachute science that treats Indigenous territories as sites for data extraction while dismissing Indigenous knowledge and sovereignty claims (de Vos & Schwartz, 2022). As Moulton (2024) demonstrates in their assessment of racialized geographies, environmental problems are frequently understood through the intersection of race and nature, impacting how we both manage and imagine the future of such places.

The Cove and *Seaspiracy* reinforce this geographic displacement. *The Cove* locates the crisis in Taiji, Japan—an isolated fishing village rendered as an exotic site of atrocity requiring Western activists to travel there and expose it, while the broader conditions of dolphin exploitation in Western contexts remain outside the frame. *Seaspiracy* extends this logic across multiple locations, each appearing as another "elsewhere" visited in rapid succession, constructing a geography of crisis that spans the Global South, while the structural role of wealthy Western nations in industrial fishing receives comparatively less scrutiny. *Shark Whisperer* demonstrates that geographic displacement need not require actual distance: Hawai'i is treated as an exotic marine frontier rather than an Indigenous territory.

Geographic displacement functions through spatial, temporal, and epistemological dimensions. Spatially, films locate crisis "elsewhere"—the Global South, remote islands, and exotic locations—through both linguistic choices ("pristine," "remote," and "untouched") and visual aesthetics (aerial shots that emphasize distance and isolation, devoid of human presence). Temporally, narrative structures present crisis as emerging now, requiring urgent intervention, rather than as the slow violence resulting from centuries of colonial extraction, for which Western nations bear primary responsibility. Epistemologically, knowledge

validation privileges Western experts who travel to document the crisis while minimizing local and Indigenous peoples who live within and possess a sophisticated understanding of these systems, such as place names and histories. These choices may influence material consequences for ocean conservation, such as funding that flows to Western organizations working abroad (Betsill et al., 2021), policies designed by distant institutions imposed on local communities, and displacement of frontline peoples in the name of protecting "global heritage" (Igoe & Brockington, 2007). This convergence naturalizes a spatial imaginary in which the ocean crisis occurs elsewhere, requiring Western expertise and intervention.

3.3. The White Gaze on Place

Perhaps the most insidious pattern involves presenting marine locations as what we term "acultural geographies"—places represented as beautiful but essentially empty stages for environmental drama, devoid of human history, culture, or agency. Alternatively, if there is a human history, it is represented as a brutal geography of fear filtered through the white gaze (Fanon, 1970). This echoes longstanding colonial practices of representing colonized lands as *terra nullius* (Plumwood, 2002). In the marine context, these representations construct *mare nullius* (Mulrennan & Scott, 2002). Mulrennan and Scott argue that "assumptions of land–sea continuity underlie people's cultural constructions of coastal and marine environments" (Mulrennan & Scott, 2002). We extend this physical and cartographic thinking to the domain of film representation.

This pattern operates across our corpus, both in its presence and in its absence. Viewers are presented with spectacular imagery of coasts, reefs, and marine life; Western protagonists discover and document these spaces that appear to be ignored despite the crises unfolding. Absent from view are the millennia of human–ocean relationships; pre-colonial place names and their embedded knowledge; colonial fractures of cultural stewardship systems; and contemporary struggles for sovereignty. Intentional or not, these absences naturalize the crisis narrative.

Shark Whisperer, the 2025 film focused on the activist and freediver Ocean Ramsey, exemplifies the use of acultural geography. The film is set in Hawai'i, where the protagonist was born, raised, and currently lives. Kānaka Maoli have a rich oral history and written record of the role that *mano* (shark in 'ōlelo Hawai'i) play (Puniwai, 2020). Despite Ramsey's attestation to the influence of this culture on her understanding of sharks' value, these stories are not told in the film. The visceral images of shark culling in the 1980s and 1990s are highlighted as reasons for her advocacy. Yet, her advocacy is portrayed as untethered from the cultural significance of sharks in this geography.

The film briefly acknowledges this cultural context—Ramsey states that Hawaiian culture has "influenced her understanding" of shark value—but treats it as a personal anecdote rather than a place-based knowledge worthy of substantive engagement. When Kānaka Maoli are given screen time, it is brief and serves either as a legitimizer or a foil to her position. Either role is antithetical to Native Hawaiian philosophy, which holds that people serve the land and sea (Chang et al., 2019). Additionally, the film forgoes an exploration of Hawaiian place names for the various locations. Place-names are encoded with *mo'olelo* (stories) about people, historical events, or meaningful more-than-human dynamics (Oliveira, 2014). The erasure of these place-based relational knowledge systems not only severs audiences from historical knowledge systems but also constrains the possible environmental futures (Olazabal et al., 2024).

This pattern of acultural geography extends across our corpus. *Chasing Coral* locates the Great Barrier Reef as a ground-zero for the unfolding mass coral bleaching event, yet never mentions that Aboriginal Australians and Torres Strait Islanders have managed these reef systems for over 60,000 years. The film presents the reef as a natural wonder under threat rather than as territories with continuous Indigenous stewardship. When the film captures the emotional devastation of witnessing coral bleaching, the emotional labor is performed by the Western film crew; Aboriginal peoples' grief over the loss of their ancestral waters remains unimagined. Similarly, *The Cove* films in Taiji, Japan, but presents the location as simply a site of dolphin hunting rather than engaging with the complex local maritime history, fishing traditions, or the community's own debates about these practices.

Seaspiracy operates through a related but distinct form of acultural geography. Rather than lingering in any single location long enough to reveal cultural depth, the film moves rapidly across locales, treating each as an interchangeable site of environmental crisis. This anthology of atrocities structurally forecloses the possibility of understanding any location as a territory with its own culture, history, and human–ocean relationships. Communities appear as perpetrators or victims within a narrative controlled entirely by the Western filmmaker; their own relationships with marine environments remain invisible.

The material consequences of these representational and editorial choices are significant. When ocean conservation polices are developed and imposed on places presented as acultural, they frequently displace the communities that had stewarded these ecosystems (Jacobs et al., 2022). These approaches reentrench the mare nullius narrative, imposing an imaginary devoid of human inhabitants and elevating external authority. Ocean documentaries provide cultural legitimation for such actions. When operationalized in this manner, ocean documentaries facilitate the construction of spatial imaginaries that lack legitimate defenders and require intervention by those beyond local ability. Decolonial narratives would imagine an ocean future in which outsiders bring tools to support, rather than supplant, the strategies and stories of local communities (Bennett et al., 2022).

3.4. Knowledge Hierarchies and Epistemic Colonialism

Across our corpus, a clear hierarchy of knowledge emerges, privileging Western scientific expertise while marginalizing or entirely excluding other ways of knowing the ocean. This epistemic hierarchy reflects broader patterns of what de Sousa Santos (2015) terms "epistemicide"—the murder of knowledge systems that accompanies colonial domination. While scientific knowledge offers crucial insights into marine ecosystems and environmental change, our analysis reveals how films construct this knowledge as the only legitimate form; its exclusive privileging dismisses the sophisticated ecological knowledge developed by Indigenous peoples and coastal communities over generations (Gibbs et al., 2025; Latulippe, 2025; Leonard et al., 2022). Coding of expert appearances reveals stark patterns. Documentary after documentary features Western scientists—typically white men—as authoritative voices explaining the ocean crisis, while fishers, Indigenous knowledge holders, and communities living daily with marine ecosystems appear, if at all, as sources of anecdotal evidence rather than legitimate experts. Discursively, Western experts—coded as legitimate—are introduced through institutional credentials (university affiliations, research organizations), and their authoritative voiceover interprets the ocean crisis for viewers, providing uninterrupted analytical space. Visual analysis of interview staging shows scientists appear in settings that encode authority: laboratories with equipment visible, research vessels with organizational branding, and offices with

academic markers (diplomas, marine specimens, scientific charts). *Chasing Coral* features coral scientists explaining mechanisms of bleaching, but lacks traditional knowledge holders who could discuss observed changes in reef health over decades or generations. This pattern exemplifies what Harding (1993) analyzes as "strong objectivity"—the false equivalence between one particular standpoint (Western scientific) and universal objective truth. By positioning Western science as the sole legitimate knowledge system, these films participate in ongoing colonialism.

By contrast, when fishers, Indigenous knowledge holders, or community members appear, the visual and discursive treatment differs markedly. They appear in informal settings—on boats, in markets, outside homes—visual framing that implicitly codes their knowledge as local and anecdotal rather than systematic. Camera distance is typically greater than that used by scientists; shot durations are shorter; and the clips are fragmented rather than extended sequences, with editing frequently juxtaposing their testimony with scientific voices that reframe or interpret what they have said. Crucially, knowledge validation operates hierarchically: Scientists' testimony serves as the explanatory authority, while local knowledge is treated as data requiring scientific interpretation.

The Cove and *Seaspiracy* both reproduce these knowledge hierarchies in specific ways. In *The Cove*, Western marine biologists and activists serve as the sole authorities on dolphin cognition and welfare; the Japanese fishing community's understanding of their relationship with dolphins—whether rooted in tradition, livelihood, or local ecological knowledge—is rendered entirely invisible, subsumed by the activist's investigative framing. *Seaspiracy* similarly positions Western experts—economists, scientists, NGO representatives—as the authoritative voices on industrial fishing, while fishers in Senegal, Thailand, and elsewhere who live within these systems appear only as brief, fragmented testimonials. When West African fishers speak about their depleted fisheries, their testimony is immediately reinterpreted through the filmmaker's voiceover rather than being allowed to stand as expertise in its own right.

The few moments when documentaries include Indigenous or local knowledge prove instructive. In *Shark Whisperer*, Kānaka Maoli individuals appear briefly. However, their screen time totals approximately 2.5% of the 87-minute runtime. Knowledge hierarchies are evident when a Kānaka Maoli cultural practitioner describes the Hawaiian relationship with sharks, and Ramsey then explains shark behavior from a scientific perspective. Indigenous people and their knowledge remain subordinate to her mission, and their motivations are reduced to serving as either validation or opposition to Ramsey's advocacy and conservation efforts, rather than fostering sovereign relationships with their territories. They become "legitimizing tokens"—included to demonstrate inclusivity while their epistemological contributions remain unengaged.

This epistemic colonialism has material consequences. Marine conservation policies shaped solely by Western scientific knowledge often fail when imposed on communities whose distinct understandings of marine ecosystems lead to divergent management priorities (Jacobs et al., 2022; Leonard et al., 2022). Moreover, by dismissing non-Western knowledge systems, ocean documentaries reinforce broader patterns of exclusion that keep Indigenous and local communities out of decision-making about their own territories (Jacobs et al., 2025). Ocean documentaries reproduce this epistemological colonialism not through explicit statements but through accumulated formal choices—screen time, camera work, editing, sound—that naturalize whose knowledge counts as authoritative.

3.5. Visual Rhetoric and the Aesthetics of Crisis

The visual language employed across these documentaries reveals patterns in how the ocean crisis is made knowable and emotionally resonant. Images do not simply document reality but actively construct particular ways of seeing and relating to their subjects (Azoulay, 2010). Ocean documentaries employ sophisticated visual and auditory rhetoric that shapes viewers' emotional and political responses to the marine crisis, creating sympathy or antipathy for the focal species. For example, sharks are often accompanied by ominous minor-keyed music (Nosal et al., 2016), while marine mammals such as dolphins are accompanied by more warm and uplifting music (Shiffman, 2022).

Spectacular imagery of marine life and seascapes dominates, presenting oceans as sites of sublime beauty. This aesthetic strategy serves important communicative functions, drawing audiences into engagement with marine environments they might never directly experience. However, the emphasis on beauty can obscure violence and complicate critical engagement. As DeLoughrey (2019) argues, "blue planet" aesthetics can produce what Nixon (2011) terms "representational challenges" in relation to the environmental crisis—the slow violence of ecosystem degradation resists spectacular visualization, leading filmmakers toward more visually dramatic but potentially depoliticizing imagery.

The Cove employs contrasting visual strategies, using hidden cameras, night-vision footage, and graphic imagery of dolphin slaughter to construct a thriller-like narrative of revelation and exposure. This aesthetic positions viewers as investigators uncovering hidden atrocity. The film alternates between beautiful underwater cinematography of dolphins in open ocean—implied as pristine and correct—and harsh documentary footage of the cove, suggesting dissonance and imbalance. This aesthetic juxtaposition suggests moral clarity: dolphins as beautiful innocents, hunters as villains. Additionally, camera positioning places viewers as investigators alongside activists, editing patterns build suspense through thriller conventions, and graphic imagery of blood-red water provides visceral shock. However, as Chouliaraki (2013) argues, such visual strategies risk creating "ironic spectatorship"—viewers who consume images of suffering as entertainment rather than with meaningful political commitment.

Chasing Coral and *Shark Whisperer* employ visual strategies that, while distinct from *The Cove*'s thriller aesthetics, reinforce the pattern of spectacular imagery to evoke emotional and political responses. *Chasing Coral* employs stunning underwater time-lapse sequences that render coral bleaching as a slow-motion spectacle—ghostly white reefs emerging over weeks and months. This imagery is extraordinarily effective at generating emotional impact, but it positions the crisis as merely ecological, ignoring the crisis of fishing communities. *Shark Whisperer* alternates between breathtaking footage of sharks in their habitat and visceral archival footage of shark culling in the 1980s and 1990s, mirroring *The Cove*'s moral-clarity strategy: beautiful creatures as innocents, cullers as villains, and a heroic protagonist bridging the two. The emotional arc is constructed almost entirely through visual contrast, with the cultural and political contexts of shark management in Hawai'i remaining outside the frame.

The deployment of expert voices follows predictable visual patterns. Scientists appear detached from the crises unfolding, waiting to swoop in like superheroes. Fishers and community members appear embedded within the turmoil, trapped by the crisis, and in need of saving. The portrayal of community in crisis furthers the weight and impact of the white savior narrative explored in Section 3.4.

3.6. Individualized Solutions and Depoliticization

A final pattern involves the tendency toward individualized solutions—particularly consumer choice and personal lifestyle changes—rather than structural critique or collective political action. While many films acknowledge systemic dimensions of the ocean crisis, their proposed responses typically emphasize individual responsibility, particularly through consumption choices. This reflects broader neoliberal environmentalism that displaces responsibility from corporations and states onto individual consumers (McCarthy & Prudham, 2004).

Seaspiracy concludes by advocating for personal choice not to consume seafood, framing this as the most effective intervention. While plant-based diets can reduce environmental impacts, this emphasis on individual consumer choice obscures questions of food sovereignty, the livelihoods of billions who depend on fishing, and the political-economic structures that drive industrial overfishing. Gephart et al. (2024) highlight the varied and complex nature of global seafood consumption. For example, the global increase from 1996 to 2019 was driven by a 162% increase in the inland and marine aquaculture sector, whereas marine capture fisheries declined by 21.5% over the same period. Additionally, nearly 50% of ocean nutrients are derived from the aquaculture sector, and 10% are destined for non-food uses, such as fishmeal and fish oil (FAO, 2024).

This tendency toward individualized solutions extends across the corpus, though it manifests differently in each film. *The Cove* concludes by mobilizing viewers toward individual acts of awareness and consumer choice—signing petitions, avoiding dolphin-show tourism, and refusing to purchase dolphin meat—without interrogating the structural economic and political conditions that sustain dolphin hunting in Taiji. The film's power lies in its capacity to provoke moral outrage, but the actions it offers are commensurate with that outrage: personal, immediate, and emotional rather than structural. *Shark Whisperer* further localizes the solution, centering Ocean Ramsey's individual advocacy and personal brand as the primary agent of change in shark conservation. The film's narrative positions personal passion as a sufficient response to a crisis that is, structurally, driven by industrial fishing economies, wildlife management policies, and colonial patterns of resource extraction. *Ocean with David Attenborough* offers a more nuanced treatment: While the film does not entirely avoid individualization, its emphasis on the interdependence of healthy oceans and human flourishing gestures toward a more systemic understanding of ocean sustainability, though it stops short of explicitly naming the structural drivers.

This individualization performs ideological work. It suggests that the ocean crisis can be resolved through aggregated individual choices rather than requiring the transformation of political and economic systems. It allows viewers to feel empowered through consumer choices while avoiding more difficult questions about wealth distribution, colonial legacies, and whose livelihoods should be prioritized in transitions toward sustainability. As Dauvergne (2016) argues, this "environmentalism of the rich" centers concerns and solutions accessible to wealthy consumers while dismissing the needs and knowledge of marginalized communities.

3.7. The Exception to the Rule

Ocean with David Attenborough stands out as one of the exceptions to these general patterns. Despite covering nearly all ocean ecosystems—from coral reefs to the ocean depths—the film is interspersed with narrative accounts of human–ocean relationships from Liberia to Hawai'i. Broadly, *Ocean* centers a diverse

set of human–ocean relationships, rather than positioning any one experience or perspective as the primary agent of knowledge or praxis. The film is interspersed with vignettes that elevate local and Indigenous relationality to the environment (Tynan, 2021). For example, the film highlights the Kānaka Maoli relationality to the ocean as a valid system for sustainability and conservation without making it dependent on validation from Western epistemologies. This represents a fundamental departure from the hierarchies established in most films in the genre.

Centering these varied ocean identities helps expand how we might imagine who the ocean is for and what values need to be engaged with (Kelly et al., 2023). Furthermore, the expectation of Attenborough's authority as a "subject matter expert" is subverted by his opening statement: "After living nearly 100 years on the planet, I now understand the most important place on Earth is not on land, but at sea." Attenborough, who may serve as a caricature of the white male objective knower, demonstrates humility in his understanding of the importance of the oceans. Ultimately, these reflections reinforce the film's central message: that human society flourishes and depends on healthy, thriving oceans. Importantly, this connects to the varied forms of ocean literacy that are fundamental for ocean sustainability (Shellock et al., 2024).

However, even this exceptional example reveals ongoing tensions in the genre. The film still employs a famous white British narrator, maintaining a sense of authority while subverting it. His stature may serve as a mechanism for establishing trust during, hopefully, a moment of transition. Imagining a fully decolonized film, we might have seen Attenborough feature in a vignette, rather than serve as the narrator and guide. Nevertheless, *Ocean with David Attenborough* demonstrates that progress is occurring within mainstream documentary production. Films can deploy narrative choices that reorient and deconstruct knowledge hierarchies.

3.8. Production Contexts and Structural Constraints

The patterns exhibited throughout our corpus do not emerge solely from individual creative choices or unconscious biases. Instead, these representational patterns reflect embedded constraints within the production, funding, and distribution systems of nature documentaries. Unpacking these material conditions is essential for evaluating how these patterns persist and for developing alternative frameworks for a more inclusive development of ocean futures.

Funding models and narrative constraints present the most significant challenge to transformation in this space. Ocean documentaries require substantial financial capital. Production budgets in our corpus range from an estimated 60,000 USD (*Shark Whisperer*) to well over 1 million USD (*The Cove*, *Chasing Coral*), with the BBC Natural History Unit's productions easily exceeding those values. These financial packages create dependencies that shape narrative possibilities.

Complicating this matter is the emergence of the digital streaming platform model. Platforms such as Netflix and Disney+ are bellwethers for a significant shift in ocean documentary production. Netflix's model, exemplified here by *Chasing Coral*, *Seaspiracy*, and *Shark Whisperer*, prioritizes content known to perform well algorithmically—films that generate immediate engagement, social media discussion, and subscription value. Algorithmic optimization shapes content in predictable ways. Netflix's data-driven approach favors individual-centered narratives over complex systemic analysis because protagonist-driven stories test better with mainstream audiences in focus groups and A/B testing (Lotz, 2022). *Shark Whisperer* best exemplifies

this, as the narrative is constructed around not merely the issue of shark conservation but also the enigmatic personality of Ocean Ramsey.

4. Conclusion

Our systematic analysis of five prominent ocean documentaries from 2009 to 2025 reveals persistent colonial patterns in how the ocean crisis is represented, whose knowledge is validated, and what solutions are proposed. These patterns operate through convergent discursive, visual, and structural dimensions that naturalize Western authority while marginalizing Indigenous and frontline community voices, knowledge, and agency. Across our corpus, the films consistently center Western protagonists—filmmakers, scientists, and activists—as primary agents of knowledge and conservation, reproducing white savior dynamics while sidelining Indigenous voices. Crises are framed as occurring in the Global South or in romanticized "edens," and ocean spaces are portrayed as empty, acultural geographies. This erasure perpetuates policies that displace communities and funnel resources to Western-led organizations. Western scientific expertise dominates through institutional credentials, extended screen time, and authoritative voiceovers, while Indigenous knowledge is tokenized as anecdotal and visually coded as less legitimate. Formal choices— camera angles, editing, and sound—reinforce epistemic hierarchies. Visual rhetoric emphasizes sublime beauty, obscuring colonial histories and structural drivers of ocean degradation, while claiming objectivity through Haraway's "god trick." Solutions lean toward individualized consumer actions rather than systemic change, reflecting neoliberal environmentalism. These patterns persist due to structural constraints: Streaming algorithms favor hero-centric narratives, funders demand clear villains and measurable impacts, and acquisition teams privilege conventional formats, leaving Indigenous and Global South perspectives largely excluded from mass-distributed ocean storytelling.

Documentary films are crucial modes for communicating the ocean polycrisis and identifying equitable and lasting solutions. These films help us better understand the world of marine social-ecological systems and their precarious position. The documentaries examined here have undoubtedly advanced public understanding of marine environments, fostering emotional connection to ocean life and raising awareness of critical threats. However, our analysis demonstrates that these films simultaneously risk perpetuating colonial relations of representation and knowledge production that undermine possibilities for just ocean futures. The marine imaginaries constructed by popular ocean documentaries matter. They shape which aspects of the ocean crisis become visible and urgent, whose knowledge counts as legitimate, whose livelihoods merit concern, and what futures appear possible. When these imaginaries center white Western protagonists as saviors, position crisis as occurring elsewhere, erase Indigenous and local community histories and agency, privilege Western scientific knowledge alone, and emphasize individual consumer solutions, they foreclose more transformative possibilities. These convergent patterns—white Western centering, Indigenous erasure, geographic displacement, knowledge hierarchies, visual depoliticization, individualized solutions, and structural production constraints—reveal how some of the most viewed and impactful ocean documentaries reflect colonial histories even while advocating for environmental protection.

4.1. Toward Decolonial Ocean Media

There remains a need for a more diverse set of narratives to counter the prevailing white savior narrative. What would a decolonial ocean documentary look like? Drawing directly on the colonial patterns identified

throughout the corpus, we propose five principles for decolonial ocean media. Each principle responds to a specific pattern our analysis uncovered: the marginalization of frontline voices, the erasure of Indigenous knowledge systems, the suppression of historical accountability, the obscuring of structural drivers behind individualized solutions, and the prioritization of spectacle over relational storytelling. Together, these principles constitute not abstract aspirations but an achievable framework—one that, as our analysis has shown, is already beginning to take shape within mainstream production:

- Centering Frontline Voices: Rather than following Western protagonists discovering ocean crisis, decolonial documentaries would center the knowledge, analysis, and visions of Indigenous peoples, small-scale fishers, and coastal communities living on the frontlines of ocean change. This requires not token inclusion but fundamental reorganization of narrative authority (Smith, 2022).
- Historical Accountability: Decolonial ocean media would engage honestly with colonial and neocolonial histories that produced the contemporary ocean crisis—the decimation of marine populations through industrial whaling and fishing originating in European colonization, the displacement of Indigenous peoples from coastlines, and the creation of economic systems compelling unsustainable resource extraction. Environmental crisis cannot be understood ahistorically (Whyte, 2018). Many contemporary conservation policies continue to perpetuate colonialism by relying on an incomplete and biased account of history (Villagomez & Johnson, 2024).
- Epistemic Justice: Rather than privileging Western scientific knowledge alone, decolonial approaches would take seriously the sophisticated ecological knowledge developed by Indigenous and local communities, treating these knowledge systems as equally legitimate and necessary for understanding and responding to the ocean crisis (Leonard et al., 2022). This requires humility about the limitations of Western science and a willingness to learn from other epistemologies, especially as the polycrisis escalates.
- Structural Analysis: Decolonial ocean documentaries would maintain a focus on the political and economic structures driving ocean degradation—capitalism's growth imperative, colonial patterns of resource extraction, and unequal power relations that determine whose knowledge and whose livelihoods matter (Brockington & Duffy, 2010; Li, 2010). As emphasized in previous recommendations, many of the socioeconomic and conservation policies are rooted in colonialism.
- Relational Rather Than Spectacular: Rather than emphasizing spectacular imagery that positions viewers as distant observers of beautiful but threatened nature, decolonial media would explore relationships—how different communities understand themselves as related to marine environments, how colonial violence disrupted those relationships, and how they might be rebuilt (George & Wiebe, 2020; Todd, 2016).

4.2. Limitations and Future Research

These principles require systemic changes in funding, distribution, and audience development. Decolonial ocean media requires not just different stories but also different systems for producing and supporting them. However, our study has important limitations. We examined films primarily distributed through Western platforms (Netflix, Disney+) and funded by Western institutions, potentially missing alternative storytelling traditions. The limitations of our study, particularly the absence of systematic audience-reception research, leave open the investigation of how diverse viewers interpret these representations. Our corpus was limited to English-language feature documentaries, excluding shorter films, serialized content, and non-English

productions that may employ different frameworks. Additionally, the positionality and relationality of our author team privilege specific patterns. We acknowledge that no neutral viewing exists; all interpretation is situated, and our analysis reflects this positioning.

This study opens multiple avenues for future research examining ocean media, conservation discourse, and decolonial environmental communication. Our analysis identified representational patterns but did not examine how audiences interpret these films. Systematic reception research could investigate how Indigenous viewers, coastal community members, and Global South audiences read these documentaries, and whether viewing contexts and positionalities produce resistant or alternative readings that contest problematic framings. Alongside understanding how viewers interpret these messages, it is critical to understand where they receive environmental information, especially as more video content transitions to short-form "reels" such as those found on TikTok and Instagram. Shorter formats may be more inclined to some of the sensational tactics described earlier.

While we argued that documentaries shape conservation policy, establishing causal connections requires longitudinal research tracking specific films' influence—how The Cove influenced dolphin policies, whether Seaspiracy's success translated into measurable policy or funding changes, and which documentary strategies effectively influence policy versus generate attention without structural impact. As previous research has shown the impacts of the Blue Planet series on viewers' plastic consumption behavior (Dunn et al., 2020), connecting these science communication tools to policy remains a promising and necessary next step.

These research directions reflect our conviction that critical analysis must be accompanied by constructive alternatives, empirical assessment of impacts, and genuine partnership with communities whose voices have been marginalized in ocean media. The ocean crisis is inseparable from the colonial crisis. The same systems that colonized peoples and dispossessed them of territories have colonized the oceans, treating marine environments as resources for extraction rather than as relations requiring responsibility (Davis & Todd, 2017). Therefore, addressing the ocean polycrisis requires decolonizing not only our material relationships with marine environments (Spalding et al., 2023) but also the imaginaries through which we understand those relationships.

Documentary films and other popular media have immense potential and are essential for advancing more just ocean futures. However, realizing this potential requires thoughtful reflection and a transformation in who tells ocean stories, whose knowledge is treated as authoritative, what histories are acknowledged, and what futures are made imaginable. Historical processes of colonization, industrialization, and exploitation shape both the material and the imaginary. Decolonial ocean documentaries would make these processes and their ongoing consequences visible, while centering the knowledge, agency, and visions of those communities fighting for ocean justice.

References

Achebe, C. (2014). An image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's Heart of Darkness. In B. Moore-Gilbert, G. Stanton, & W. Maley (Eds.), *Postcolonial criticism* (pp. 112–125). Routledge.

Armitage, K. C. (2003). Commercial Indians: Authenticity, nature, and industrial capitalism in advertising at the turn of the twentieth century. *Michigan Historical Review*, *29*(2), 71–96.

Azoulay, A. (2010). Getting rid of the distinction between the aesthetic and the political. *Theory, Culture & Society*, *27*(7/8), 239–262. https://doi.org/10.1177/0263276410384750

Banivanua Mar, T. (2016). *Decolonisation and the Pacific: Indigenous globalisation and the ends of empire*. Cambridge University Press.

Beaulieu, M.-C. (2016). *The sea in the Greek imagination*. University of Pennsylvania Press.

Bellows, A. M., Painlevé, J., McDougall, M., & Berg, B. (Eds.). (2001). *Science is fiction: The films of Jean Painlevé*. MIT Press.

Bennett, N. J., Alava, J. J., Ferguson, C. E., Blythe, J., Morgera, E., Boyd, D., & Côté, I. M. (2023). Environmental (in)justice in the Anthropocene ocean. *Marine Policy*, *147*, Article 105383. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.marpol.2022.105383

Bennett, N. J., Le Billon, P., Belhabib, D., & Satizábal, P. (2022). Local marine stewardship and ocean defenders. *npj Ocean Sustainability*, *1*(1), Article 3. https://doi.org/10.1038/s44183-022-00002-6

Betsill, M. M., Enrici, A., Le Cornu, E., & Gruby, R. L. (2021). Philanthropic foundations as agents of environmental governance: A research agenda. *Environmental Politics*, *31*(4), 684–705. https://doi.org/10.1080/09644016.2021.1955494

Brereton, P. (2022). Cinema, ecology, and environment. In A. Hansen & R. Cox (Eds.), *The Routledge handbook of environment and communication* (pp. 329–342). Routledge.

Brockington, D., & Duffy, R. (2010). Capitalism and conservation: The Production and reproduction of biodiversity conservation. *Antipode*, *42*(3), 469–484. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8330.2010.00760.x

Brockington, D., & Igoe, J. (2006). Eviction for conservation: A global overview. *Conservation and Society*, *4*(3), 424–470.

Canella, G. (2022). Democratizing documentary and interactive social media practices. In K. M. Ryan & D. Staton (Eds.), *Interactive documentary* (pp. 65–77). Routledge.

Chang, K., Winter, K. B., & Lincoln, N. K. (2019). Hawai'i in focus: Navigating pathways in global biocultural leadership. *Sustainability*, *11*(1), Article 283. https://doi.org/10.3390/su11010283

Chouliaraki, L. (2013). *The ironic spectator: Solidarity in the age of post-humanitarianism*. Wiley.

Chris, C. (2006). *Watching wildlife*. University of Minnesota Press.

Cohen, M. (2022). *The underwater eye: How the movie camera opened the depths and unleashed new realms of fantasy*. Princeton University Press.

Cole, T. (2012, March 21). The white-savior industrial complex. *The Atlantic*. https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2012/03/the-white-savior-industrial-complex/254843

Crylen, J. (2018). Living in a world without sun: Jacques Cousteau, homo aquaticus, and the dream of dwelling undersea. *Journal of Cinema and Media Studies*, *58*(1), 1–23.

Dauvergne, P. (2016). *Environmentalism of the rich*. MIT Press.

Davis, H., & Todd, Z. (2017). On the importance of a date, or, decolonizing the Anthropocene. *ACME: An International Journal of Critical Geographies*, *16*(4), 761–780. https://doi.org/10.14288/acme.v16i4.1539

Dayan, D. (2024). Approaches and dilemmas in using documentary filmmaking to empower affected voices challenging mainstream narratives. In J. Morrison & S. Pederson (Eds.), *Silenced voices and the media: Who gets to speak?* (pp. 263–274). Springer.

de Sousa Santos, B. (2015). *Epistemologies of the South: Justice against epistemicide.* Routledge.

de Vos, A., & Schwartz, M. W. (2022). Confronting parachute science in conservation. *Conservation Science and Practice, 4*(5), Article e12681. https://doi.org/10.1111/csp2.12681

DeLoughrey, E. (2019). Toward a critical ocean studies for the Anthropocene. *English Language Notes, 57*(1), 21–36. https://doi.org/10.1215/00138282-7309655

Duncan, P. D. (2018). (Science) fiction: Genre hybridization in Jacques-Yves Cousteau and Louis Malle's *The Silent World* (1956). *Journal of Popular Film and Television, 46*(2), 108–117. https://doi.org/10.1080/01956051.2018.1465886

Dunn, M. E., Mills, M., & Veríssimo, D. (2020). Evaluating the impact of the documentary series *Blue Planet II* on viewers' plastic consumption behaviors. *Conservation Science and Practice, 2*(10), Article e280. https://doi.org/10.1111/csp2.280

Fairclough, N. (2017). CDA as dialectical reasoning. In J. Flowerdew & J. Richardson (Eds.), *The Routledge handbook of discourse studies* (pp. 13–25). Routledge.

Fanon, F. (1970). *Black skin, white masks.* Paladin.

FAO. (2024). *The state of world fisheries and aquaculture 2024: Blue transformation in action.*

George, R. Y., & Wiebe, S. M. (2020). Fluid decolonial futures: Water as a life, ocean citizenship and seascape relationality. *New Political Science, 42*(4), 498–520. https://doi.org/10.1080/07393148.2020.1842706

Gephart, J. A., Agrawal Bejarano, R., Gorospe, K., Godwin, A., Golden, C. D., Naylor, R. L., Nash, K. L., Pace, M. L., & Troell, M. (2024). Globalization of wild capture and farmed aquatic foods. *Nature Communications, 15*(1), Article 8026. https://doi.org/10.1038/s41467-024-51965-8

Gibbs, M. C., Rotolo-Ross, R. S., Parker, L. M., Scanes, E., Gibbs, J., Ross, P. M., & Przeslawski, R. (2025). Indigenous ecological knowledge of marine and freshwater organisms and ecosystems on Sea Country: From past absences to future inclusion. *Marine and Freshwater Research, 76*(5), Article MF24247. https://doi.org/10.1071/mf24247

Halpern, B. S., Frazier, M., O'Hara, C. C., Vargas-Fonseca, O. A., & Lombard, A. T. (2025). Cumulative impacts to global marine ecosystems projected to more than double by mid-century. *Science, 389*(6766), 1216–1219. https://doi.org/10.1126/science.adv2906

Haraway, D. (1988). Situated knowledges: The science question in feminism and the privilege of partial perspective. *Feminist Studies, 14*(3), 575–599.

Harding, S. (1993). Rethinking standpoint epistemology: What is "strong objectivity"? In L. Alcoff & E. Potter (Eds.), *Feminist epistemologies* (pp. 49–82). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203760093

Hynes, S., Ankamah-Yeboah, I., O'Neill, S., Needham, K., Xuan, B. B., & Armstrong, C. (2021). The impact of nature documentaries on public environmental preferences and willingness to pay: Entropy balancing and the Blue Planet II effect. *Journal of Environmental Planning and Management, 64*(8), 1428–1456. https://doi.org/10.1080/09640568.2020.1828840

Igoe, J., & Brockington, D. (2007). Neoliberal conservation: A brief introduction. *Conservation and Society, 5*(4), 432–449.

Jacobs, L. A., Avery, C. B., Salonen, R., & Champagne, K. D. (2022). Unsettling marine conservation: Disrupting manifest destiny-based conservation practices through the operationalization of Indigenous value systems. *Parks Stewardship Forum, 38*(2). https://doi.org/10.5070/p538257522

Jacobs, L. A., Fisk, J., Carlson, A. K., D'Antonio, A., Payan Hazelwood, S., Perry, E. E., Adams, M., Newman, R.,

Grayson, R., Gazing Wolf, J., Chestnut, T., Mitchell swəlítub, T. A., Mitchell, K. J. R., Whitebear, L., Champagne, K., Avery, C. B., & Gonzales-Rogers, P. (2025). U.S. parks and protected area power structures: From historic policies to Indigenous futurities. *Earth Stewardship*, *2*(3), Article e70016. https://doi.org/10.1002/eas2.70016

Jasanoff, S. (2015). Future imperfect: Science, technology, and the imaginations of modernity. In S. Jasanoff & S. H. Kim (Eds.), *Dreamscapes of modernity: Sociotechnical imaginaries and the fabrication of power* (pp. 1–33). University of Chicago Press.

Johnson, J. T., & Murton, B. (2007). Re/placing Native science: Indigenous voices in contemporary constructions of nature. *Geographical Research*, *45*(2), 121–129. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1745-5871.2007.00442.x

Kelly, M. R., Kasinak, J.-M., McKinley, E., McLaughlin, C., Vaudrey, J. M. P., & Mattei, J. H. (2023). Conceptualizing the construct of ocean identity. *npj Ocean Sustainability*, *2*, Article 17. https://doi.org/10.1038/s44183-023-00025-7

Kimmerer, R. W. (2017, June 12). Speaking of nature. *Orion*. https://orionmagazine.org/article/speaking-of-nature

Ladle, R. J., Correia, R. A., Do, Y., Joo, G.-J., Malhado, A. C. M., Proulx, R., Roberge, J.-M., & Jepson, P. (2016). Conservation culturomics. *Frontiers in Ecology and the Environment*, *14*(5), 269–275. https://doi.org/10.1002/fee.1260

Latulippe, N. (2025). Race, Indigenous knowledge, and a relational alternative in fisheries policy research. *Marine Policy*, *175*, Article 106600. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.marpol.2025.106600

Lawrence, M., Homer-Dixon, T., Janzwood, S., Rockstöm, J., Renn, O., & Donges, J. F. (2024). Global polycrisis: The causal mechanisms of crisis entanglement. *Global Sustainability*, *7*, Article e6. https://doi.org/10.1017/sus.2024.1

Leiserowitz, A. A. (2004). Day after tomorrow: Study of climate change risk perception. *Environment: Science and Policy for Sustainable Development*, *46*(9), 22–39. https://doi.org/10.1080/00139150409603663

Leonard, K., Buttigieg, P. L., Hudson, M., Paul, K., Pearlman, J., & Juniper, S. K. (2022). Two-eyed seeing: Embracing the power of Indigenous knowledge for a healthy and sustainable ocean. *PLoS Biology*, *20*(10), Article e3001876. https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pbio.3001876

Li, T. M. (2010). Indigeneity, capitalism, and the management of dispossession. *Current Anthropology*, *51*(3), 385–414. https://doi.org/10.1086/651942

Lotz, A. D. (2022). *Netflix and streaming video: The business of subscriber-funded video on demand*. Wiley.

Mamiya, C. J. (1992). Greetings from paradise: The representation of Hawaiian culture in postcards. *Journal of Communication Inquiry*, *16*(2), 86–101. https://doi.org/10.1177/019685999201600207

McCarthy, J., & Prudham, S. (2004). Neoliberal nature and the nature of neoliberalism. *Geoforum*, *35*(3), 275–283. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2003.07.003

McKinley, E., Burdon, D., & Shellock, R. J. (2022). The evolution of ocean literacy: A new framework for the United Nations Ocean Decade and beyond. *Marine Pollution Bulletin*, *186*, Article 114467. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.marpolbul.2022.114467

McMain, E. M., & Torres, J. (2023). Saviors, nurturers, or magically insane: A braided reading of white women characters in three ecological narratives. *Feminist Media Studies*, *23*(4), 1643–1658. https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2022.2041692

Michel, J.-B., Shen, Y. K., Aiden, A. P., Veres, A., Gray, M. K., The Google Books Team, Pickett, J. P., Hoiberg, D., Clancy, D., Norvig, P., Orwant, J., Pinker, S., Nowak, M. A., & Aiden, E. L. (2011). Quantitative analysis of culture using millions of digitized books. *Science*, *331*(6014), 176–182. https://doi.org/10.1126/science.1199644

Militz, T. A., & Foale, S. (2017). The "Nemo Effect": Perception and reality of *Finding Nemo*'s impact on marine aquarium fisheries. *Fish and Fisheries*, *18*(3), 596–606. https://doi.org/10.1111/faf.12202

Mitman, G. (2012). *Reel nature: America's romance with wildlife on film*. University of Washington Press.

Moulton, A. A. (2024). Racializing nature: The place of race in environmental imaginaries and histories. In G. L. Simon & K. Kay (Eds.), *Doing political ecology* (pp. 238–257). Routledge.

Mulrennan, M., & Scott, C. (2002). *Mare nullius*: Indigenous rights in saltwater environments. *Development and Change*, *31*(3), 681–708. https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-7660.00172

Nixon, R. (2011). *Slow violence and the environmentalism of the poor*. Harvard University Press.

Nosal, A. P., Keenan, E. A., Hastings, P. A., & Gneezy, A. (2016). The effect of background music in shark documentaries on viewers' perceptions of sharks. *PLoS ONE*, *11*(8), Article e0159279. https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0159279

Ntona, M., & Schröder, M. (2020). Regulating oceanic imaginaries: The legal construction of space, identities, relations and epistemological hierarchies within marine spatial planning. *Maritime Studies*, *19*(3), 241–254. https://doi.org/10.1007/s40152-020-00163-5

Olazabal, M., Amorim-Maia, A. T., Alda-Vidal, C., & Goodwin, S. (2024). What is limiting how we imagine climate change adaptation? *Current Opinion in Environmental Sustainability*, *71*, Article 101476. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cosust.2024.101476

Oliveira, K. A. R. (2014). *Ancestral places: Understanding kanaka geographies*. Oregon State University Press.

Parker, H. N. (2011). Toward a definition of popular culture. *History and Theory*, *50*(2), 147–170. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2303.2011.00574.x

Plummer, D. (2018). *Displacement in place: The delegitimization of Indigenous sovereignty through media framing and erasure in environmental conflict* [Unpublished honors thesis]. University of Oregon.

Plumwood, V. (2002). Decolonising relationships with nature. In W. Adams & M. Mulligan (Eds.), *Decolonising nature* (pp. 7–30). Taylor & Francis.

Puniwai, N. (2020). *Pua ka wiliwili, nanahu ka manō*: Understanding sharks in Hawaiian culture. *Human Biology*, *92*(1), 11–17. https://doi.org/10.13110/humanbiology.92.1.03

Rangan, P. (2017). *Immediations: The humanitarian impulse in documentary*. Duke University Press.

Ratté, S. (2019). (Un)seen seas: Technological mediation, oceanic imaginaries, and future depths. *Environment and Society*, *10*(1), 141–157. https://doi.org/10.3167/ares.2019.100109

Rust, S., Monani, S., & Cubitt, S. (2015). *Ecomedia: Key issues*. Routledge.

Said, E. W. (1977). Orientalism. *The Georgia Review*, *31*(1), 162–206.

Shellock, R. J., Fullbrook, L., McKinley, E., Cvitanovic, C., Kelly, R., & Martin, V. (2024). The nature and use of ocean literacy in achieving sustainable ocean futures: A systematic map. *Ocean & Coastal Management*, *257*, Article 107325. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ocecoaman.2024.107325

Shiffman, D. (2022). *Why sharks matter: A deep dive with the world's most misunderstood predator*. JHU Press.

Skiveren, N., & Andersen, M. (2024). Conspiratorial storytelling and environmental crisis. *Green Letters*, *28*(1/2), 31–47. https://doi.org/10.1080/14688417.2024.2416252

Smith, L. T. (2022). *Decolonizing methodologies: Research and Indigenous peoples* (3rd ed.). Bloomsbury Academic.

Spalding, A. K., Grorud-Colvert, K., Allison, E. H., Amon, D. J., Collin, R., de Vos, A., Friedlander, A. M., Johnson, S. M., Mayorga, J., Paris, C. B., Scott, C., Suman, D. O., Cisneros-Montemayor, A. M., Estradivari, Giron-Nava, A., Gurney, G. G., Harris, J. M., Hicks, C., Mangubhai, S., . . . Thurber, R. V. (2023). Engaging the tropical majority to make ocean governance and science more equitable and effective. *npj Ocean Sustainability*, *2*, Article 8. https://doi.org/10.1038/s44183-023-00015-9

Spivak, G. C. (1994). Can the subaltern speak? In P. Williams & L. Chrisman (Eds.), *Colonial discourse and post-colonial theory: A reader* (pp. 171–219). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315656496

Starosielski, N. (2012). Beyond fluidity: A cultural history of cinema under water. In S. Rust, S. Monani, & S. Cubitt (Eds.), *Ecocinema theory and practice* (pp. 149–168). Routledge.

Steinberg, P., & Peters, K. (2015). Wet ontologies, fluid spaces: Giving depth to volume through oceanic thinking. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, *33*(2), 247–264. https://doi.org/10.1068/d14148p

Todd, Z. (2016). An Indigenous feminist's take on the ontological turn: 'Ontology' is just another word for colonialism. *Journal of Historical Sociology*, *29*(1), 4–22. https://doi.org/10.1111/johs.12124

Torma, F. (2012). Probing the seven seas. Towards an oceanic and postcolonial concept of 'tropicality.' *Revue d'anthropologie des connaissances*, *6*(3), 603–624. https://doi.org/10.3917/rac.017.0135

Troumbis, A. Y., & Iosifidis, S. (2020). A decade of Google Trends-based conservation culturomics research: A critical evaluation of an evolving epistemology. *Biological Conservation*, *248*, Article 108647. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.biocon.2020.108647

Tuck, E., & Yang, K. W. (2012). Decolonization is not a metaphor. *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society*, *1*(1), 1–40.

Tynan, L. (2021). What is relationality? Indigenous knowledges, practices and responsibilities with kin. *cultural geographies*, *28*(4), 597–610. https://doi.org/10.1177/14744740211029287

Vickers, R. (2013). Mobile media, participation culture and the digital vernacular: 24-hours.in and the democratization of documentary. *Ubiquity: The Journal of Pervasive Media*, *2*(1/2), 132–145. https://doi.org/10.1386/ubiq.2.1-2.132_1

Villagomez, A., & Johnson, S. M. (2024). Disavowing the doctrine of discovery: Indigenous healing, decolonization, and implications for environmental justice in the Pacific Remote Islands Area. *Environmental Justice*, *18*(4), 252–260. https://doi.org/10.1089/env.2023.0048

Wang, R., & Li, Y. V. (2025). What are these stories for? A rhetorical ecofeminist revisit of the binary mazes in the ecological film series *Avatar*. *Environmental Communication*, *19*(5), 904–916. https://doi.org/10.1080/17524032.2025.2473482

Whyte, K. (2018). Settler colonialism, ecology, and environmental injustice. *Environment and Society*, *9*(1), 125–144. https://doi.org/10.3167/ares.2018.090109

About the Authors

Steven Mana`oakamai Johnson is an assistant professor in the Ashley School of Global Development and the Environment at Cornell University. He is a geographer investigating the intersections of ocean conservation, climate change, and Indigenous knowledge. His work draws on collaborations with communities in Micronesia and Hawai'i.

Angelo O. Villagomez is a senior fellow at the Center for American Progress, where he advances ocean policy and climate solutions. Raised in the Mariana Islands, he brings a deep connection to island communities to his work, championing conservation strategies that blend cultural knowledge, public policy, and equitable environmental stewardship.