

Documentaries: our biggest weapon in the climate fight?

Maddyness is collaborating with environmental publication Ours to Save to bring readers fresh perspectives on sustainability. In this article, Clara Meyer-Horn speaks to Sam Sutaria from WaterBear, a free new climate change documentary platform.

When the BBC aired *Blue Planet II* in 2017, it made huge waves across the UK. There was something about the gut-wrenching scenes, like an albatross feeding its starving chicks with plastic, paired with David Attenborough's melancholy-tinged narration, that had a galvanising effect.

People were shocked and disturbed by plastic pollution like never before. In the wake of the film's release, internet searches for 'plastic recycling' in the UK shot up by 55%. Beach cleans exploded all over the country and whole households changed their habits, refusing plastic packaging at the grocery store and opting for reusable bags instead. Schools swapped to reusable plates and cutlery, plastic straws disappeared from bars and cafes and companies began implementing plastic-reducing plans... all thanks to *Blue Planet II*.

"Documentaries are the best tool we have to create change and to spark movements", says Sam Sutaria, Head of Strategy at soon-to-launch [WaterBear Network](#). "The format allows people to really become deeply immersed in an issue, to learn, to understand and become inspired. Film transfers emotion

better than any other medium”.

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WaterBear Network is ‘the world’s first streaming platform dedicated to the future of our planet’. Inspired by the UN Sustainable Development Goals, the digital platform aims to increase awareness of environmental issues and other global challenges through the showcasing of documentaries, original multimedia content and live streaming events.

CEO and founder Ellen Windemuth has been producing documentary content for over 25 years. She recently produced the Netflix Original docufilm *My Octopus Teacher* in collaboration with the Sea Change Project, one of WaterBear’s 75 NGO partners.

Through powerful storytelling, the Sea Change Project aims to protect and raise awareness for the Great African Sea Forest. Moving away from the classic narrative that sets humans apart from nature, the project wants to motivate scientists, policymakers and individuals to connect with their environment, reminding them they are an inextricable part of the natural world – and must therefore conserve it.

Millions were moved by the film. It gathered over 2,000 press mentions and celebrities such as Diana Ross and Richard Dawkins took to Twitter to express their support. World-renowned ethologist and environmentalist Jane Goodall even named it as one of her favourite movies of all time, saying “It’s absolutely unbelievable”.

Due to its inherent entertainment value, WaterBear has quickly been dubbed as the new ‘Netflix for wildlife documentaries’, but Sam is quick to clarify: “We’re a lot more than that”.

Beyond showcasing beautiful content, WaterBear’s interface is specifically

designed to catalyse meaningful change. Sam explains that often people feel moved by documentaries, and are motivated to make a difference, yet fail to actually follow through with concrete actions. “At WaterBear, we work hard to overcome this attitude-action gap”, he says.

Central to their business model is a feature called ‘WaterBear Connect’, “an interactive timeline that sits on the content”. “As the viewer, you can swipe up on the content, and actually engage in calls to action directly, while you’re watching”, Sam explains. The aim is to make it as easy as possible for the viewer to engage with NGOs, to sign petitions, to share content or to donate money to the issues they care about most.

Considering that people often become weary of classic ‘donate’ or ‘share’ options, the Impact Team at WaterBear was tasked with thinking up ever more creative ways of engaging viewers. An example of this is the [#MyWildTeacher](#) campaign, which was launched off the back of My Octopus Teacher.

The campaign encourages people to spend more time in nature and to share their own story with a ‘wild teacher’. WaterBear is planning to create a short film out of the submitted content – and the best 20 stories will win free tickets for the 2021 Jackson Wild Film Festival. As Sam says,

“Calls to action like that offer people a chance to show their support, while also creating impact.”

The value of storytelling over doomsday predictions

Finding unique ways to communicate environmental issues is key when trying to overcome the dreaded ‘apocalypse fatigue’ around climate change. Over 80% of all news and mainstream media play up doomsday predictions of floods, fires, storms and mass extinctions, which may do more harm than good.

[Psychological research](#) suggests that overdoing the threat of catastrophe makes people feel overwhelmed with fear and guilt, making even well-intentioned people disconnect and avoid the topic rather than engaging with it – a major roadblock when trying to spark conversations and seek solutions.

“People are really busy. They have stuff going on in their lives, rent to pay, kids to look after, jobs to do. Then, on top of being worn down by all these daily life struggles, the media is shouting at them about how the world’s going to end, and how they need to do more and feel guilty all the time. It’s counterproductive”, says Sam.

The shift from looking only at climate science to looking at human response to climate change messaging is long overdue and WaterBear is trying to plug the gap. Through “creating a beautiful user experience” they want to take people on a journey, fuelled by good stories and engaging, diverse formats, rather than being yet another “shouty platform”.

“I think the reason why My Octopus Teacher was so successful is because it is stripped back, pure and raw. It is just a story about a man and an octopus. There are no frills, it wasn’t an expensive film. It is just pure, great storytelling”, Sam says. “I think the more we can take the time to unearth those stories and share them with the world, the better. Storytelling has been around forever, it’s not a new concept, but we now need it more than ever.”

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