

THESIS

COMPELLING RHETORICAL STRATEGIES IN ENVIRONMENTAL ADVOCACY

DOCUMENTARIES

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## ABSTRACT

### COMPELLING RHETORICAL STRATEGIES IN ENVIRONMENTAL ADVOCACY DOCUMENTARIES

Throughout the years, the documentary film has been an ever-evolving form. With technological improvements for video cameras and film quality, the use of spectacular imagery in documentaries has perhaps made the traditional, narrative-based film more entertaining and even influential. I argue this is true for the three ocean advocacy films I analyze: *My Octopus Teacher* (2020), *Mission Blue* (2014), and *Seaspiracy* (2021). *My Octopus Teacher* follows the story of Craig Foster, a filmmaker and free diver, as his life is altered by a peculiar, year-long interaction with an octopus. *Mission Blue* revolves around the autobiography of pioneering marine biologist, Dr. Sylvia Earle, discussing lessons learned during her life and framing tragic environmental events through her eyes. *Seaspiracy* enables filmmaker Ali Tabrizi to guide the audience through an investigative narrative that unveils the hidden and dangerous secrets of the fishing industry.

As I will demonstrate, ocean advocacy campaigns use documentaries as persuasive communication to sensitize audiences to the dangers facing marine life. Using an ecocriticism lens, I analyze how all three films employed compelling, well-supported verbal narratives, alongside vivid graphics and imagery, to invite viewers to embrace different calls to environmental action.

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT.....	ii
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS .....	iii
CHAPTER 1 – INTRODUCTION AND LITERATURE REVIEW .....	1
Introduction.....	1
Literature Review.....	2
<i>Environmental Movement</i> .....	2
<i>Ecocriticism</i> .....	3
<i>Documentary Film</i> .....	6
<i>Narrative</i> .....	13
Conclusion .....	15
CHAPTER 2 – <i>MY OCTOPUS TEACHER: EDUCATING WITH EMPATHY</i> .....	16
Introduction.....	16
Context.....	17
Analysis.....	18
<i>The Teacher</i> .....	18
<i>Lessons Taught</i> .....	22
<i>Lessons Learned</i> .....	24
<i>An Immersive Experience</i> .....	26
Conclusion .....	27
CHAPTER 3 – <i>MISSION BLUE: A LIVING LEGEND’S WISH</i> .....	28
Introduction.....	28
Context.....	28
<i>A Living Legend</i> .....	29
<i>The Campaign</i> .....	30
Analysis.....	31
<i>The Story of a Radical</i> .....	31
<i>The Story of her Childhood</i> .....	32
<i>The Story of Falling in Love</i> .....	33
<i>The Story of her Career</i> .....	35
<i>The Story of Hope Spots</i> .....	41
Conclusion .....	43
CHAPTER 4 – <i>SEASPIRACY: HIDDEN DEPTHS AND DANGERS</i> .....	44
Introduction.....	44
Context.....	44
Analysis.....	46
<i>The Plastic Problem</i> .....	46
<i>The Fishing Problem</i> .....	50
<i>Dangers of Fishing</i> .....	53
“ <i>Solutions</i> ” .....	56
Conclusion .....	63
CHAPTER 5 – CONCLUSION .....	64
REFERENCES .....	69

## CHAPTER 1 – INTRODUCTION AND LITERATURE REVIEW

### Introduction

Dr. Sylvia Earle describes her feelings about the ocean as, “I find the lure of the unknown irresistible.” This quotation, even out of context, suggests the appeal of many documentaries. When I was younger, documentaries were largely considered educational rather than entertaining because of their informative nature and use in school. However, as I have grown older, the stories these films tell bring entertainment and a sense of marvel to dry learning. In Sheila Bernard’s book *Documentary Storytelling*, the author explains that “Documentaries bring viewers into new worlds and experiences through the presentation of factual information about real people, places, and events, generally portrayed through the use of actual images and artifacts.” Bernard goes on to explain that documentaries are not plainly factual and that filmmakers deploy the facts by “Weaving them into an overall narrative that strives to be as compelling as it is truthful” (Bernard 3).

In this thesis, I will be assessing three documentaries that focus on ocean issues: *My Octopus Teacher* (2020), *Mission Blue* (2014), and *Seaspiracy* (2021). Each documentary has different persuasive goals and strives to achieve these goals through different rhetorical strategies. *My Octopus Teacher* aims to promote human connection to the ocean and its creatures while also advocating for more marine research. *Mission Blue* seeks to promote Dr. Sylvia Earle’s proposal for “Hope Spots,” or preservation areas in the ocean, by telling the story of Earle’s life and how it intertwines with the ocean and ocean issues. Finally, *Seaspiracy* explores the issue of overfishing and advocates a boycott of the seafood industry on a global level. This thesis uncovers and examines what rhetorical strategies these environmental advocacy

documentaries use to make them compelling and persuade audiences. I will discuss my critical method and provide a review of literature on the concepts relevant to my analysis, including environmental movement, ecocriticism, documentary form, and narrative storytelling.

## **Literature Review**

### *Environmental Movement*

For the purpose of analyzing environmental advocacy rhetoric, it is important to understand a few concepts, including the environmental movement, ecocriticism, narrative storytelling, and documentary film form. In the following paragraphs, I will explain how these concepts will be employed in my analysis. Since this paper focuses on environmental advocacy, it is vital to first understand what the environmental movement is. Glenn Strodthoff and others examine the environmental movement as a social movement in their essay “Media Roles in a Social Movement: A model of Ideology Diffusion.” Within the first few pages, they declare environmentalism as a “bona fide ‘social movement,’” as it is rooted in the ideology of social change—though, the environmental movement is quite broad (Strodthoff et al. 134). Different groups attempt to enact social change as part of the environmental movement in different ways and with different focuses. These different focuses are hard to capture, as they can span across issue type.

Research on the proper terminology or categorization of these smaller focuses seems to change depending on the source, so for the sake of this thesis, I would like to provide some analytical terms. Considering the broad scope of the environmental movement, it is important to recognize phenomena within the movement that may be a part of the larger picture, but distinctly different from other, smaller movement phenomena. For this essay, these smaller movements will be referred to as “campaigns.” The Global Nonviolent Action Database looks at specific

campaigns within a movement because all movements require multiple campaigns to achieve their various goals (“Campaigns, not movements”). Campaigns within the broad environmental movement are focused on specific goals, and it is evident that some of these campaigns have utilized documentaries as communication devices to support their causes. This is certainly the case for the documentaries analyzed in this thesis. *Mission Blue* supports Dr. Earle’s larger campaign for the implementation of Hope Spots or ocean conservation areas (“Hope Spots”). *My Octopus Teacher* champions the Sea Change Project campaign, which works to provide funding for continued ocean research (“Projects”). Finally, *Seaspiracy* is part of an effort to implement no-catch zones into 30% of UK waters (“We made Seaspiracy”). These three documentaries serve as an aspect of persuasive communication within a larger campaign that targets specific conservation goals.

### *Ecocriticism*

If you have heard the term “ecocriticism,” then you might know that it is used interchangeably with “environmental criticism.” Similarly, you may have heard environmental communication be referred to as “ecological communication.” However, I argue for the purpose of this analysis, like many before me, that the distinction between the words “ecological” and “environmental” is significant. Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm explain in their book, *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology* that the prefix, “enviro” is an anthropocentric term that centers humans (xx). The natural world, in an environmental framework, is what surrounds and is separate from human life. The term “eco” indicates interdependent systems where each part can impact the other parts (Glotfelty and Fromm xx). The natural world in an ecological framework is as much a part of human everyday life as anything else, rather than something separate. Loretta Rowley and Kevin A. Johnson’s article,

“Anthropomorphic Anthropocentrism and the Rhetoric of Blackfish” explains that an environmental framework is anthropocentric, human-centered knowledge, because it references the natural world based on human values and wants or needs (827). Centering the human experience or human values enables cultural practices that benefit humans, even if they are harmful to the environment. An ecological framework inscribes nature and human culture as interconnected components (Rowley and Johnson 830).

In addition to understanding the distinction of the term ecological framework from environmental framework, it is important to understand some relevant terms such as anthropomorphism and its varying entities. Anthropomorphism is the ascription of human qualities to nonhuman species and can appear as anthropocentric anthropomorphism and animalcentric anthropomorphism (Rowley and Johnson 827). Anthropocentric anthropomorphism is the human centered attribution of human qualities onto nonhumans that has little to do with the actual qualities of the nonhuman. It functions as a way for humans to mock, educate, moralize, and entertain (Rowley and Johnson 827).

Rowley and Johnson give two examples of anthropocentric anthropomorphism in popular culture. The first is television shows that feature talking animals acting like human characters. The second is “moral of the story” folktales that feature animals with human characteristics (speaking, having relationships, jobs, etc.) which go through some sort of moral transformation (827). These stories tend to teach children the moralistic rules of life and how to behave in society. This anthropocentric anthropomorphism tends to depict an image of the natural world and the animals in it as void of conflict and violent encounters such as starving or diseased animals and devouring other animals (Rowley and Johnson 827). This ties into the term “human gaze.” Branching from the concept of the male gaze in feminist film studies used by Marie

Mulvey, the human gaze depicts the natural world as an object for human consumption (Kolodziejcki 429). This usually entails misleading imagery that shows nature in aesthetically pleasing lights and rarely portrays the ugly side of the natural world. In contrast, animalcentric anthropomorphism, rather than situating animals and nonhuman species in likeness to humans, compares and contrasts them and is free of anthropocentric constructions on the world (Rowley and Johnson 827). It does not seek out qualities in nonhuman species that equal human qualities. Anthropocentric anthropomorphism can also be done through gendering. The article “Mother Nature enhances connectedness to nature and pro-environmental behavior,” by Ting Liu and others, studies the ways in which anthropomorphizing nature as feminine created a stronger connection to nature and increased environmentally minded behavior (Liu et al. 37). The authors also explain,

Given that traditional gender role socialization and the prototypical feminine traits of nature have been associated with exposure to stereotypical representations of the female gender and nature . . . the women-nature association can be recognized as a set of representations at the unconscious level that are involuntarily formed. (38)

Gender role socialization informs people on how certain genders are expected to behave and therefore associates representations of that gender, which can often be at the unconscious level (Liu et al. 38). When gender is assigned to a person, automatically there are representations or behaviors that person is expected to follow. This can also happen through anthropomorphism. When non-human species or things in nature are referred to by the female gender, there may be connotations associated with that gender applied to that thing in nature. For instance, when the natural world is referred to as “Mother Nature,” the term implies that the natural world is life-bearing and nurturing which is a quality mostly associated with the mothering, female gender (Liu et al. 37). Animalcentric anthropomorphism, rather than situating animals and nonhuman species in likeness to humans, compares and contrasts them and is free of anthropocentric

constructions on the world (Rowley and Johnson 827). It does not seek human qualities in nonhuman species.

Finally, Rowley and Johnson propose the inverse of anthropocentric anthropomorphism: anthropomorphic anthropocentrism. Rowley and Johnson explain that, by the process of ascribing human qualities onto animals and nonhumans, there can be more to learn about human culture and values, using the animals or nonhumans as mirrors that reflect human virtues (828). To aid in clarity and ease of reading, in this paper, the term “anthropocentric anthropomorphism” will be replaced with “humancentric anthropomorphism,” keeping it in line with the phrasing of animalcentric anthropomorphism, and distinguishing it from anthropomorphic anthropocentrism.

### *Documentary Film*

An analysis of ocean-advocacy documentaries requires a description of the documentary film form. Bill Nichols’ book *Introduction to Documentary* (2021) states, “The remarkable fidelity of the photographic image to what it records gives such an image the appearance of a document. It offers visible evidence of what the camera saw” (83). He credits short films such as *Workers Leaving Lumiere Factory*, *Arrival of a Train*, *The Waterer Watered*, *The Gardener*, and *Feeding the Baby*, to be an important foundation for the documentary despite only being a few minutes long. These productions gave insight into the historical world as it happened. Largely considered the first ever long-form and completed documentary film, *Nanook of the North*, was released in 1922 and produced by Robert Flaherty (Nichols 21). By the late 1920s, the concept of documentary film had been established.

Nichols describes documentaries, as “representation,” giving visible representation to aspects of the social world or reality (20). However, documentary cannot be just the reproduction of reality, or it would be merely a copy of something that already existed (Nichols 20). Nichols

states, “It stands for a particular view of the world, one we may never have encountered before even if the aspects of the world that is represented are familiar to us” (20). Rather than filming the world for what it is, the documentary represents the world with a specific perspective or lens. Furthermore, Nichols calls the documentary form a “fuzzy concept” because,

Documentaries adopt no fixed inventory of techniques, address no one set of issues, display no single set of forms or styles. Documentary film practice is an arena in which things change. Alternative approaches are constantly attempted and then adopted by others or abandoned. (21)

Because documentaries do not have fixed, defining characteristics, Nichols suggests that the documentary be defined by four approaches: institutions, practitioners, texts, and audience. The institutional approach suggests that documentaries are defined by the organizations that make them: “Knowing where a given film or video comes from, or on what channel it is shown, provides an important first cue to how we should classify it,” (Nichols23). This notion is pertinent to this thesis because all three films analyzed are available for viewing on the streaming platform Netflix. Although Netflix is not the producing institution behind the films, the use of its platform helps cue audiences into how the films are classified by generating lists of films by genre. Within the documentary genre page on Netflix’s application, all three films, *Mission Blue*, *My Octopus Teacher*, and *Seaspiracy*, could be found. Additionally, as mentioned previously, each film was produced as a communication tool for specific campaigns of environmental organizations. Since these organizations have an institutional goal or brand of advocating for particular issues, the association of the films with the organizations may indicate the classification of them as advocacy documentaries, as Nichols suggests.

The second way to define documentary is the practitioner approach, which suggests that “Individual practitioners will shape or transform the traditions they inherit, but they do so in dialogue with others who share their sense of mission” (Nichols 26). Simply put, individuals or

groups of people who practice documentary film making produce the characteristics of documentary by being participants in the creation process. As Nichols explains, this approach is the main reason that documentary cannot be easily defined. The ever-changing traditions of filmmaking will transform the documentary form over time. *My Octopus Teacher* (2020), *Mission Blue* (2014), and *Seaspiracy* (2021) are all contemporary documentaries filmed and released from 2014-2021 and share similar film material and techniques. The producers of these works, being filmmakers within the same era and documentary style, work to shape the definition of documentary, and this genre of documentary (Nichols 26).

In his explanation of the third way of defining the documentary, using a corpus of texts, Nichols breaks documentary form into time periods and provides examples of movements that documentary form has occupied. The first example is of the 1930s and the Depression, in which documentary film form took on a “newsreel quality” with a focus on the politics of social and economic issues (Nichols 32). The documentary film form of the 1960s was transformed by developments in technology where filmmakers had access to lightweight cameras and could follow film subjects around. With an increased mobility, documentary film form began to take on an observational focus. By the 1970s and 1980s, documentaries adopted a reflexive role to provide new perspectives and ideas alongside archival material and interviews to bring insight on past events.

*My Octopus Teacher*, *Mission Blue*, and *Seaspiracy* can be defined by the corpus of text for being transformed by sophisticated camera technology and streaming platforms. These films were created at a time where modern technology allows filmmakers to take advanced camera technology underwater and in the air with drones. Cameras can now capture what it feels like to be submersed in the water with clear imagery and color correction or flying through the air.

Modern technology has transformed environmental documentaries so that the films now give viewers the feeling and effect of being in the film's location for themselves.

Additionally, these films have been aided by modern technology in that they are more accessible to viewers. Not only are they enhanced by sophisticated cameras and the ability to capture underwater and in air frames, but these films were also made available on streaming platforms like Netflix. The technology of streaming platforms enables viewers to venture into genres they may be unsure about. Instead of the outmoded experience of standing in the DVD (video) store trying to pick which movie to spend money on to rent, viewers are sitting in their home, most likely comfortable and with a bit of time to decide. They can even begin watching something without having to commit to watching it all the way through if they decide it does not suit their viewing needs. Streaming services allow viewers to expand the types of films they might watch. If suddenly an environmental advocacy film is trending and recommended by Netflix, then they might give it a try despite it not being their normal genre. In fact, the films used for analysis are not alone. In the corpus of texts with *Mission Blue*, *My Octopus Teacher*, and *Seaspiracy*, are films such as *Chasing Coral*, *David Attenborough: A Life on Our Planet*, and *The Cove*.

The fourth and final approach to defining documentary is by the audience or the "constituency of viewers" (Nichols 34). Nichols states, "The sense that a film is a documentary lies in the mind of the beholder as much as it lies in the film's context or structure" (35). The assumptions and expectations that viewers bring to a film shape its definition. Nichols elaborates his concept of the indexical relationship or record: "Documentary re-presents the historical world by making an indexical record of it; it represents the historical world by shaping this record from a distinct perspective or point of view" (37). He explains that this indexical relationship impacts

the reality of the documentation process. While audiences tend to assume that documentary images and sound have the “authenticity of evidence,” the documentary really entails an indexical record in which the filming strategies and tactics of producing the film can still warp the authenticity of the recorded subject (Nichols 37).

Over time, the documentary form has seen drastic changes in distribution, which has influenced how audiences can access films and which types of films are produced. In the book *How Documentaries Went Mainstream: A History, 1960–2022*, Nora Stone outlines the evolution of documentary distribution from the 1960s through 2022, highlighting specific transitional moments for the film form. From the 1960s-1970s, documentaries were distributed in a variety of ways, including college campuses, cine-clubs, art houses, revival houses, and network television, and they gained momentum and audience through these outlets (Stone 15-20). In addition, despite some failures at the box office, documentaries rose in popularity on college campuses through film festivals and even network television. However, some films did well at the box office, marking a shift in the way documentary films were not only distributed, but also perceived (Stone 25). Documentaries began to be perceived as more cinematic rather than television journalism.

In the late 1970s into the late 1980s, while documentaries were still distributed in similar ways as the decade before, the independent film movement grew and stabilized (Stone 91). This elevated the status and demand for documentary films, resulting in more documentary airtime on public television. By the 1990s, successful box-office films like *Roger & Me* (1989) and *Madonna: Truth or Dare* (1991) had contributed to distribution demand for documentaries, leading the genre to become an important aspect of the commercial film industry and to be seen even more as cinematic creations rather than purely journalistic or educational (Stone 91). This

was especially notable in HBO documentaries of the late 1980s-1990s, which used dramatized, nonfiction narratives and depictions in documentaries like *America Undercover* (1984).

In 1995, the Academy Awards changed its rules, stating that only documentaries released theatrically could qualify (Stone 108). This encouraged companies like HBO to invest in feature-length films and steer away from film festival screenings. For HBO, this investment involved almost doubling the documentary film production. The documentaries cost about \$600,000 to produce, as opposed to the original HBO fiction films, which cost \$7 million (Stone 108). In short, these Academy Award qualifying films were significantly cheaper to produce.

The 2000s brought new technology to the film industry, including the Digital Versatile Disc. While documentaries were reaching high box-office grosses and film festivals continued to embolden the genre and its distribution, cable television and DVD appeared as the “sturdiest downstream market for documentaries” (Stone 118). DVDs were cheaper to manufacture, had higher fidelity and space for extra content, and were easier to distribute than VHS (Video Home System).

The ease of distribution was especially true for Netflix, which started out as a DVD rental service that processed orders online rather than through a physical store front (Stone 141). During this time, Netflix had a program called Netflix First, in which films were exclusively available through Netflix for 90 days before being fully released. Netflix partnered with Docurama and televisions companies like PBS and Independent Film Channel and prioritized documentary films in Netflix First. This helped to create Netflix’s recommendation feature. Audiences that had previously rented documentaries were made aware of the 90-day exclusive rental, and titles that may have been lost “on a shelf in a brick-and-mortar store” received more attention (Stone 143). Stone explains, “Documentary features are a fundamental part of Netflix’s

service and brand identity, and they have been since the company's early days" (145).

Documentaries allowed Netflix to build its library and to find new release strategies or utilize recommendations.

In 2007, Netflix debuted its streaming platform, and by July 2010, 66% of its subscribers streamed media. Because streaming involves complications with licensing, Netflix pursued media that was less sought after by other companies. However, the company had years and years of history and data on movie rentals and discovered that subscribers had an "unfulfilled demand for documentaries" (Stone 155). As Netflix began to acquire "Netflix Originals," it also created or obtained original documentaries that would only be housed on the platform. This trend, of obtaining Netflix Original documentaries would continue to increase well into the 2020s. The 2020 award success of the documentary *American Factory* (2019) highlighted the way in which private financing and video-on-demand services could "fast track" visibility and success (Stone 151). Netflix circumvented commonplace theatrical distribution methods and still went on to win awards. This circumvention has driven documentary production and pushed private funding to finance such films.

In fact, Netflix's push for documentary production, along with other platforms, caused drastic changes in the realm of documentary filmmaking (169). According to Mia Galuppo and Katie Kilkenny and their article "Inside the Documentary Cash Grab," documentaries available for streaming increased around 77 percent between 2019 and 2022 (Kilkenny and Galuppo). The documentaries *Seaspiracy* and *My Octopus Teacher* were released in the middle of this time period and are likely a result of increased production.

## *Narrative*

Elizabeth A. Hjort explains in her article “Resistance Narratives in Documentaries: A Narrative Rhetorical Analysis on *GMO OMG*” that documentaries function well within social movements to shift perceptions and motivate action by producing narratives that question the current situation and social perceptions and motivate the audience to support the movement through personal connection (8). Narratives within documentaries motivate through personal connection by creating what Hjort calls a “cohesive line of thought” with personal narratives to connect facts or arguments so that an engaging story is created, rather than a logical argument (8). Joseph E. Davis discusses the use of narratives in social movements in *Stories of Change: Narrative and Social Movements*. In chapter one, Davis explains that:

Self-narratives plot the type of moral agent the individual is, and his or her purposes and intentions . . . reveal the value determinations and distinctions in the narrator’s life ‘by selectively plotting only those actions relevant or tributary to certain central purposes.’ The past is interpreted in light of an anticipated future (more or less distant), the possible self that one might be or become. (20)

Self-narratives allow the storyteller to pick certain parts or aspects of their life in order to portray their morality in a certain light. Additionally, by picking which things to relay from their past, the speaker presents who they may become. Davis also explains that, through “identification and ‘cocreation’ of a story, the storyteller and reader/listener create a ‘we’ . . . ‘my story’ becomes ‘our story’” (19). In this way, the telling of stories can “foster, sustain, and guide movement participation and allegiance” (Davis 20).

According to Melanie C. Green, in the chapter “Transportation into Narrative Worlds,” by providing an entertaining story, some narratives transport the audience unknowingly into ideologies and perspectives they may normally resist when delivered in a straightforward way (Green 90). Transportation can occur through narratives or media types that are delivered in a variety of ways and involve the audience becoming immersed in a story world (Green 88). Green

explains throughout the chapter that transportation through narratives can influence behavioral changes by reducing counterarguing, creating connections with characters, enabling mental imagery, enacting emotional engagement, and story structure. For example, in a documentary like *Mission Blue*, which tells the life story of Dr. Sylvia Earle, the audience may find itself being transported into her perspective and agreeing with her notions about the ocean without fully being aware of the effect. Green also explains that audiences are transported into story worlds through emotional engagement, highlighting that “A change from one emotional tone to another across the course of a story can help maintain interest for audiences, particularly for longer narratives” (92). This is also seen in *Mission Blue*, when the film switches from an endearing moment in Earle’s life to one of related environmental devastation.

Narratives can also create transportation in audiences through connections with characters in which the experiences of the characters are relatable, thus altering how the audience perceives the subject (Green 90). In *My Octopus Teacher*, Foster uses anthropomorphism in his descriptions of the octopus, thus relating the octopus to human characteristics that the audience can understand, such as friend and teacher. This transports the audience to a perspective in which they may align themselves and empathize with Foster or the octopus.

Story structure is also a significant way to create transportation through narrative in which the “events that are part of the cause-and-effect structure of the story are better recalled and more persuasive, even over time, than less-central story elements” (Green 92). This is evident in *Seaspircacy*, in which the structure follows an investigative story, working to uncover the hidden secrets of the fishing industry. While the call to action in the film is to stop eating seafood, the structure of the story transports the audience through discovery of seafood issues which are more compelling than the act of simply telling the audience about the issues.

Finally, imagery can transport audiences through narratives where “There experience of being transported into a story links the vivid images with beliefs implied by the story” (Green 91). Because the narratives analyzed in this thesis are all delivered through documentary film, imagery is a major component in transporting the audience into the story world. For each of the films, imagery works to transport the audience either into the perspective of the narrator or to connect the audience with the beliefs implied by the story.

## **Conclusion**

The aforementioned concepts of the environmental movement, ecological framework, documentary form, and narrative storytelling, are all relevant to the rhetorical genre analysis accomplished in this thesis. Each of the ocean-advocacy documentaries used for analysis employ narrative and storytelling, as well as stunning and compelling imagery, as tools of persuasion to encourage an ecological framework in their audiences and ask them to take action. Through storytelling riddled with anthropocentric anthropomorphism, *My Octopus Teacher* persuades audiences to care about and empathize with the octopus in the film, as well as the natural world that it is a part of, ultimately encouraging the audience to support marine research with the call to action. *Mission Blue* uses the emotional and personal narrative of Dr. Sylvia Earle’s life and career alongside historical and current video footage of the state of the ocean to motivate audiences to take actions towards protecting it. *Seaspiracy* follows narrator Ali Tabrizi on his exposition to uncover the atrocities of fishing alongside disturbing images and infographics to urge audiences to boycott the seafood industry.

## CHAPTER 2 – *MY OCTOPUS TEACHER*: EDUCATING WITH EMPATHY

### **Introduction**

Lisa Samford, a documentary filmmaker who specializes in remote expedition projects, describes *My Octopus Teacher* as “A real world ‘Charlotte’s Web’ story that is filled with heart and drama and extraordinary beauty, *My Octopus Teacher* reminds us of the transformative power of love” (*Projects*). Indeed, Samford underscores the importance of empathy to the persuasive message of this popular documentary, which began streaming on Netflix in 2020. *My Octopus Teacher* tells the story of Craig Foster, a filmmaker and free diver, whose life was transformed by an educational, year-long interaction with an octopus off the coast of South Africa. Since its release, the film has had significant impacts on viewers, including a landlocked college professor, Patty Graham of Boulder, Colorado, who felt the film was a “welcome escape from the challenges of 2020 and showed that ‘anything’s possible’” (Reeder).

Craig Foster is not only a free diver and filmmaker, but also a founder of an organization called the Sea Change Project, which is a South African non-profit whose mission is to “Tell stories that connect people to the wild, motivating them to become part of the regeneration of our planet” (*Projects*). The documentary was made to justify and gain support for this mission. This chapter provides a rhetorical analysis of the documentary film *My Octopus Teacher* to understand how it utilizes anthropomorphic appeals throughout a storytelling narrative to persuade audiences to take on an ecological perspective of the natural world. It will explicate the ways in which this environmental advocacy documentary blends information, entertainment, and persuasion to support the mission of the Sea Change Project and the broader environmental movement.

## Context

The film features Foster as the narrator for his experiences, accompanied with corresponding footage. Foster explains in the beginning of the film that he was suffering from adrenal fatigue, so he started free diving in the kelp forest off the tip of South Africa. Every day, he felt his body go through changes, such as being able to adapt to the cold temperatures, and he began to feel more energized. Foster wanted to document the things he saw on his dives and started filming his expeditions. During one of these, he encountered an octopus. Every day, he dove to the same spot and continued to film his interactions with this octopus, eventually gaining its trust and developing what Foster refers to as a “friendly relationship.” For about a year, he recorded significant moments for the octopus such as hunting, mating, and dying. Foster credits the octopus with teaching him to “feel that you are part of this place. Not a visitor. And that’s a huge difference” (*Projects*).

*My Octopus Teacher* was filmed in 2010 and released ten years later in September 2020 on Netflix as part of the Sea Change Project. It has since won Best Feature at the EarthxFilm Festival and was nominated for eight awards with Jackson Wild Media (Scott). Out of the eight nominations, *My Octopus Teacher* won the Grand Teton, Best People & Nature, and Best Editing (“2020 Media Awards”). The film made its debut multiple months into the global COVID-19 pandemic. TODAY!’s author Jen Reeder wrote an article titled “Netflix’s film about a burned-out man and an octopus is the antidote to 2020.” According to Reeder, “*My Octopus Teacher*, a quiet yet extraordinary documentary, is resonating with people in a tumultuous year marked by political division, social unrest, and COVID-19 isolation” (Reeder). This quotation suggests the impact such a documentary may have on its audience given the social situation of its release. In addition, there are positive responses to the film on Twitter, such as, “The world

would be a better place if every human watched this stunning piece of filmmaking,” and “Really well-done film that highlights some of the amazingness that exists in nature” (Reeder). Given these statements, it seems the film has made an impact on people’s perceptions about the natural environment and the impact they can have on it.

Loretta Rowley and Kevin A. Johnson, in their paper “Anthropomorphic Anthropocentrism and the Rhetoric of *Blackfish*,” use specific environmental terms to discover and explain the persuasive techniques *Blackfish* employs in this impactful environmental advocacy documentary. As explained in my literature review, Rowley and Johnson’s article was a valuable resource for my thesis because it elaborated on the use of “anthropomorphism” and “ecological framework.” While Rowley and Johnson used the term “anthropocentric anthropomorphism,” I will be using “humancentric anthropomorphism” in its place, to keep in line with the phrasing of “animalcentric anthropomorphism,” and to assist with clarity. In my analysis of *My Octopus Teacher*, I argue that the film uses different approaches to anthropomorphism, along with immersive imagery, to foster empathy in the audience for the central character of the octopus. This documentary invites audiences to learn about the octopus and marine ecosystems, to care about them, and to embrace the film’s call to action. Throughout his narration, Foster asks his audience to relate to the octopus by ascribing human qualities or roles through humancentric anthropomorphic rhetoric, including “teacher,” “friend,” “gender,” and “intelligence.”

## **Analysis**

### *The Teacher*

The first and most prominent reference to a human attribute is “teacher.” The title of the movie, *My Octopus Teacher* explicitly identifies the octopus as a teacher—a role normally

associated with other humans. In another instance of this, Foster explains, “And it hit me. How she was teaching me so much” (00:57:01). By utilizing humancentric anthropomorphism in this way, Foster is assigning a quality to the octopus that is likely relatable to audiences, giving them reason to care about or admire her. Once the audience thinks of the octopus as a teacher, they may be open to learning what the octopus can teach them.

While characterizing the octopus as his teacher, Foster also describes what she has taught him: “I fell in love with her, but also with that amazing wildness that she represented and how that changed me. What she taught me was to feel that you’re part of this place, not a visitor” (1:22:14). This anthropomorphizing gives the audience a new way to look at the octopus, as a teacher, and then gives the audience an understanding of what the octopus teaches: to feel that they are a working part of the world.

The second way that Foster assigns a human quality to the octopus, is by describing it as his “friend.” In the beginning of the film, he explains one of his first encounters with her saying, “There she was. It’s like a human friend, like, waving and saying, ‘Hi, I’m excited to see you’” (00:28:42). In this statement, not only is Foster calling this animal a friend, a title normally applied to other humans, but he is also describing the octopus as if it has human emotions and gestures. He is claiming she feels human emotions such as excitement and endearment, and that she has the capacity to extend a warm greeting. In another instance of a human-like quality of friendship, Foster describes what he thinks is playful behavior: “But I couldn’t help thinking, ‘She’s playing with the fish.’ You see play often in social animals. Here is a highly antisocial animal playing with fish, (she) rushed over, grabbed hold of me” (1:09:30). These quotations show the continuation of associating human emotions, such as socializing, frolicking, and

playing, and human gestures such as a grabbing hug. This physical interaction is an expression of friendship and caring on the octopus's part, at least in Foster's eyes.

The third way Foster attributes a human quality to the octopus is by gendering it. In her interview with Foster and the director, Pippa Ehrlich, Radha Rangaraj asks, "Did you have to be overly aware of how anthropomorphic the narrative should be?" to which Ehrlich responds, "We were aware of avoiding anthropomorphism which is why Craig did not name the octopus . . . Of course, it is impossible to avoid anthropomorphism entirely, especially with a story like this." It appears Foster was trying not to anthropomorphize the octopus by leaving it nameless. However, I argue that Foster still anthropomorphizes the octopus by gendering it with "she" and "her" pronouns because gender is a framework taken on by humans to express their identity within social constructs (Baum and Westheimer). It is important to note that I have referred to the octopus in this essay with "she" and "her" pronouns to keep in line with terms used in the movie. By calling the octopus a "she," Foster aligns the octopus with a she/her identity and thus places the social constructs of that identity upon the animal. This also further supports my claim that anthropomorphism can aid in encouraging the adoption of an ecological framework. As Liu and fellow contributors found in their research, women are more often associated with nature than men, and when nature is female gendered, it can result in a stronger connection to nature and environmental advocacy (43). By anthropomorphizing the octopus within the female gender, Foster encourages the audience to relate to her, Mother Nature, and the natural world.

The fourth human quality used to describe the octopus is "intelligence," or that it is an animal capable of thinking in a way that is comparable to humans. Foster describes different observations of the octopus in the act of hunting. He describes moments in which the octopus either uses interesting strategies to capture prey successfully, or, if she fails, new strategies that

she attempts until she succeeds. The first story is of Foster's experience with the octopus during nighttime. He finds her, unusually, in shallow water doing "These lightning fast strikes. Using her arm like this strange weapon. Just rolling it up in this fraction of a second. And I saw her catch three fish like this" (00:37:35). Foster explains that hunting in the shallows during nighttime was smart and strategic because it is dangerous in the "deeper forest" at night. He claims this makes the octopus an "incredibly clever animal" because she retreats into shallow water that predatory sharks cannot access.

Another hunting encounter in which Foster explains the intellect of the octopus is when the octopus is shown hunting crabs and lobsters. He narrates a scene in which the octopus sees a crab she would like to eat. However, the crab notices her and hides under an anemone. The octopus realizes this and moves to another area and camouflages herself. When a crab moves from its hiding spot, the octopus darts to it. In another instance, she tries the same method multiple times on a lobster, but it repeatedly gets away. Eventually, the octopus strategizes a new way to hunt them:

And then, a couple of weeks later, watching her coming round the side, corralling me so that she can then get between the lobster and myself. Using me as part of her hunting strategy. And instead of that messy lunge ... throwing her web over the top. And then there's nowhere for it to go. This is an animal that is strategizing and working out very quickly how best to hunt a very tricky prey. (00:54:40)

Foster uses this hunting and strategizing example to anthropomorphize the octopus and attribute an intelligence that involves reasoning akin to humans. He also explains how the octopus shows intelligence in eating other mollusks with hard shells:

How the hell does she kill and eat them? At the base of all those arms, there's a drill that can drill through hard shell and then drop venom in there, like a snake, and see how that mollusk reacts. But some of these mollusks will only relax if that drill is precisely in the apex of the shell, on the abductor muscle. She basically must do geometry to work out exactly the precise spot where she needs to drill that shell in order to get her food. (00:55:57)

In this description, Foster explains how the octopus gets her food, but adds that she “basically has to do geometry,” attributing a human intelligence quality to her by describing this method as mathematical. He later adds that this is “high-level invertebrate intelligence” (00:56:48).

Finally, Foster attributes a human quality of intelligence to the octopus based on the way she outsmarts predators and wards off attacks. During one of these scenes, intense music plays and a pyjama shark appears in the vicinity of the octopus. Foster explains that he is worried she will be attacked again, as she was earlier in the film. However, as the shark makes an attack, the octopus shoots into the kelp and hides. When that does not work, she climbs out of the water and onto the rocks, but she has to go back into the water to survive. When she goes back into the water, she swims to the bottom near some shells. The shark attempts to attack again but is unable to grab her as she picks up the shells and some rocks and encases herself in them. Foster explains, “And the shark, it’s just been completely outwitted . . . How she can think that quickly and make those life-and-death decisions it’s just pretty incredible” (01:06:56).

### *Lessons Taught*

While there is significant humancentric anthropomorphism throughout the documentary, there is also some animalcentric anthropomorphic rhetoric, which positions the octopus in her habitat as an animal without human traits. This rhetoric functions to educate the audience about the animal biologically rather than emotionally, so they can understand the significant role these animals have in nature. These moments of animalcentric anthropomorphism tend to depict the octopus as she is positioned in the natural world, free of human-centered constructions. Within the film, these depictions include the octopus hunting, her underwater habitat, and the octopus’s reproductive process.

When the documentary depicts the octopus hunting the crab, Foster describes the octopus as not only an intelligent hunter, but an advantaged hunter in the way she is built. He refers to her as a “liquid animal,” which means she has the ability to mold her body to fit through small spaces (00:49:51). This sort of quality is one that does not equal a human value and compares the octopus against the crab, which is not a liquid animal and is being hunted. It also situates the octopus apart from humans, who certainly cannot be considered a “liquid animal.” This animalcentric-anthropomorphic framing rhetoric teaches the audience more about this creature by showing its physical attributes that differ greatly from humans.

In another instance of animalcentric anthropomorphic rhetoric, Foster describes the habitat in which he sees the octopus. He explains that he often gets asked, “Why are you going to the same place every day?” In response he says, “that’s when you see the subtle differences. And that’s when you get to know the wild” (00:57:33). While Foster explains this, the camera shows beautiful imagery of strange looking creatures in and around the octopus’s habitat. This imagery and explanation embody animalcentric anthropomorphism by showing the audience the very different world the octopus lives in. This works to inform the audience more about the animal and this habitat so they can better understand or care about its protection.

Foster also uses animalcentric-anthropomorphic rhetoric when describing the reproduction of the octopus. Near the end of the movie, Foster narrates the day that he visited the octopus’s den and found a second octopus next to her (01:11:34). He explains that it is rare to see two octopuses near each other, but that it was normal for two mating octopuses. However, while Foster is explaining the reproduction process of octopuses, the film begins to play melancholy music. Foster states:

I knew quite well the stages of an octopus’s life. There was a sort of this dread in the bottom of my stomach. She wasn’t coming out of that den. There was no more feeding,

no more hunting. A huge part of her body is actually given to those eggs. So she drops in weight, and she loses an enormous amount of strength . . . she's just slowly dying.  
(01:12:17)

The melancholy music along with the explanation that the octopus, Foster's friend and teacher, is dying appeals to the emotions of the audience, opening them up subtly to learn about the lifecycle of octopuses. The next day Foster goes back to the den to find the octopus lying outside of it, "barely alive" (01:14:07). The music in this scene is gentle and emotional, and the footage of the octopus in this state is devastating. Foster is struggling to narrate his story and appears to be choked up: "And the fish, you know, feeding on her. It was just heartbreaking. The next day, a big shark came and just took her away, you know, into the misty forest" (01:14:27).

The octopus's end of life is devastating for viewers who have become emotionally attached to her, just like Foster had. This animalcentric anthropomorphism rhetoric exhibits that the octopus, like humans, can be a parent that would sacrifice itself for its children if necessary. However, unlike humans, the octopus is immediately destined to die upon reproduction and is eaten by surrounding animals. The audience learns that octopus reproduction and motherhood is quite different from that of humans even though it is something humans also experience. Human mothers give a lot to their children and provide nutrients while they are in the womb, but they do not stop eating and they usually do not die (thanks to modern medicine). The exposure of the fleeting nature of the octopus's life to an emotionally attached audience might compel them to feel that they should do something to protect the species.

### *Lessons Learned*

Foster has enacted humancentric anthropomorphism to encourage the audience to empathize with the octopus and its marine environment, thus setting them up to learn about the octopus biologically with animalcentric anthropomorphism. In empathizing and learning, the audience begins to take on an ecological framework, seeing everything is interconnected.

The process of taking on the ecological framework is demonstrated through Foster himself. In an early part of the film he says, “I hadn’t been a person that was overly sentimental towards animals before. I realized I was changing. She was teaching me to become sensitized to the other. Especially wild creatures” (00:43:47). Foster is admitting that he is becoming sensitized to the “other,” meaning he is beginning to empathize with animals that are not like him. While he has not taken on an ecological framework yet, he is in the process of it. Later on, Foster has a realization of how interconnected the underwater world is:

All the other animals, predator and prey, and this incredible forest, um just nurturing all of this. And now I know how the helmet shell is connected to the urchin and how the octopus is connected to the helmet shell. And as I draw all these lines, all these stories are just being thrown up. (00:57:50)

With this statement, it seems Foster experiences a revelation of how the marine world functions and he comes to view the world through an ecological framework. However, it is not until the end of the movie where he finally admits adopting that perspective of himself, “What she taught me was to feel that you’re part of this place, not a visitor” (01:22:37). This signification of Foster’s own adoption of an ecological framework functions as an example for viewers to follow.

In watching and anthropomorphizing the octopus, Foster also reflects on his own, human values of living life, consequently building his confidence to get past difficulties. Rowley and Johnson refer to anthropomorphic anthropocentrism as looking in a mirror to discover the values of the human experience, and Foster compares his life to the octopus’s as “mirroring each other.” He says that his year-long relationship with the octopus “changed my relationship with humans.” This gives Foster credibility as a narrator of this story. If the octopus could cause this sort of change in Foster, then it may incite change within the audience as well.

### *An Immersive Experience*

According to Rangarajan, the film, *My Octopus Teacher*, is “an immersive visual and sensory experience, with indulgent views of the verdant underwater world and the star of the film—the intelligent and sentient octopus.” For a complete understanding of how the film attempts to persuade audiences, it is necessary to analyze these visual and sensory elements and explore how they influence the audience’s emotions and feelings.

Foster’s narration of his experiences is accompanied with video clips and recordings. These visual and aural elements not only allow viewers to have a beautiful visual of the story, but at times, makes them feel as though they are exploring the kelp forest with Foster and the octopus. The camera takes the perspective of someone actually swimming through the water and is helpful in promoting an ecological framework because it makes the viewers truly feel as if they are a part of the natural world.

Along with the camera perspective, the film utilizes music, visual metaphors, and editing to help emphasize the feelings audience members should be feeling at a particular moment. For example, when Foster describes an exciting or sad moment, the music will match the tone of his voice and the feeling or emotion of the moment. The image on the screen may change to some visual metaphor or the editing may be rapid or slow depending on the mood. For instance, when Foster is explaining the octopus’s hunting strategies, the inflection in his voice indicates he is excited. Fast-paced music will play along with the narration and rapid editing to portray a feeling of thrill to the viewer. In the ending scenes, right before the octopus’s fate is revealed, a shot of the beach with crazy waves and stormy skies is shown as a visual metaphor, foreshadowing the devastating events to come. Melancholy music plays along with the visual metaphor, and Foster’s narration takes on a sullen tone. This music, imagery, and narration lead the audience to

feel and understand that something bad is about to happen. Through this influence over audience emotions, audience members become more involved with the octopus's story and may care or empathize with it more causing them to be more inclined to take future actions towards protecting the natural world in which the octopus lives.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter analyzes the way *My Octopus Teacher* utilizes anthropomorphic narrative and imagery to encourage an ecological framework with audiences. Through storytelling riddled with anthropocentric anthropomorphism, *My Octopus Teacher* attempts to persuade audiences to care about and empathize with the octopus in the film, as well as the natural world that it is a part of, ultimately encouraging the audience to support marine research with the call to action. Because anthropocentric anthropomorphism functions out of a human-centered epistemology, attributing human qualities to the octopus allows audience members to see a nonhuman species from a perspective they can understand. In doing so, the film encourages audiences to empathize and care about the octopus and other non-human creatures and places the audience in a position to learn about them. Animalcentric anthropomorphism functions alongside anthropocentric anthropomorphism by teaching the audience specific things about the octopus and its surrounding habitat, such as its hunting techniques, reproduction process, or interconnectedness within its local ecosystem and the ocean. Once the audience cares about the octopus and has learned new things about it, the film can offer an ecological framework, inviting the audience to understand that they are a part of an interconnected world and that their actions matter. Thus, fulfilling the Sea Change Project's mission of "motivating them to become part of the regeneration of our planet."

## CHAPTER 3 – *MISSION BLUE*: A LIVING LEGEND’S WISH

### **Introduction**

“For all at last return to the sea—to Oceanus, the ocean river, like the ever-flowing stream of time, the beginning and the end” (Rachel Carson, *Silent Spring*). This quotation is the first thing that viewers see when watching the documentary, *Mission Blue*. Taken from Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring*, it pays homage to the book that is considered a milestone publication for catalyzing the modern environmental movement as we know it today (Parks). Carson’s book synthesized scientific research on toxic, chemical pesticides such as DDT and proposed an ecological approach to environmental management (Parks). In a 1963 U.S. Senate subcommittee hearing about pesticide policies on the federal and state level, Carson testified and her book was used as expert evidence (Parks).

Carson’s words are a fitting way to begin analyzing *Mission Blue*, the autobiographical documentary about Dr. Sylvia Earle’s life and career, because they underscore important themes in Dr. Earle’s work: the significance of the ocean, the connections humans have with it, and the need to protect it. This thesis chapter assesses *Mission Blue*’s narration and visual depictions of Earle’s life story and her interactions with the ocean as it invites the audience to see the ocean and the issues it faces through Earle’s eyes and embrace the mission of establishing more marine protection areas.

### **Context**

#### *A Living Legend*

Earle has been referred to as “Her Deepness,” by the *New York Times* and *New Yorker* (Scripture). The Library of Congress has even deemed her a living legend (“Sylvia Earle”). What

would cause someone to be labeled with such honors? At a time when women were not welcomed in the scientific field, Earle was a well-respected and well-accomplished scientist and is thus considered a pioneer for women in marine science. In the 1960s, while finishing school and her dissertation, Earle went on multiple research voyages to the Galápagos Islands, Chilean coast, and Panama Canal Zone (Brandman). She finished her dissertation and received her Ph.D. in 1966, while simultaneously setting a milestone in marine research by using a Self-Contained Breathing Apparatus (SCUBA) to collect data and document marine life, a feat which had never been done before in the field of marine research (Brandman). SCUBA refers to the life support equipment divers use to breathe air from a tank underwater for finite periods of time, and the act of using SCUBA to dive is now referred to as SCUBA diving.

In 1968, Earle joined the Smithsonian Institution's Man-in-Sea project and, at four months pregnant, became the first woman to descend 100 feet underwater in a submersible (Brandman). In 1969, Earle captained the first all-female team for NASA's Tektite II Project, which required marine scientists to live and conduct research underwater (Brandman). Amongst many other accomplishments, Earle has authored several books, started a non-profit organization, founded two companies, received honorary awards, and was the first female chief scientist for the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (Brandman).

### *The Campaign*

In 2009, Earle made her debut TED speech about her wish to "protect our oceans." This speech catalyzed a series of events. Earle was awarded the TED Prize honor and its monetary component of \$100,000, and with that money, she started her non-profit "Mission Blue" (Scripture). The organization aims to further marine research and work towards establishing more Hope Spots or marine protected areas (Scripture). When Mission Blue was first

established, there were only 15 Hope Spots, but by 2014, there were 50 (Scripture). Currently, in 2026, there are over 150 (“Hope Spots”).

Following the founding of the organization, Earle produced an autobiographical documentary, *Mission Blue*, which presents her personal biography, life’s work, and her wish for more Hope Spots. She has also written and produced multiple books and documentaries, including her 2009 novel *The World is Blue*. In 2016, after informing President Obama about her mission, Earle encouraged him to increase the Papahānaumokuākea Marine National Monument to be the largest marine reserve in the world (“Ocean Protection”). In the same year, the International Union for the Conservation of Nature set a goal to establish marine protected areas in 30% of the ocean by 2030, increasing and extending Earle’s original goal of 20% by 2020 (“Ocean Protection”).

It could be argued that Earle’s 2009 speech catalyzed a campaign that worked to motivate people to advocate for Hope Spots and consequently resulted in increasing the percentage of protected ocean. For the purposes of this chapter, Earle’s campaign is referred to as Mission Blue. Within the environmental movement, Earle’s campaign for marine protection areas is rooted in an ecological framework in which she argues human fate is the same as the ocean’s fate, thus humans must protect the ocean for their own sake.

Earle’s campaign utilizes *Mission Blue* as a rhetorical tool to persuade audiences to question the current status and situation of the ocean and to enact change. *Mission Blue* uses the emotional and personal narrative of Sylvia Earle’s life and career to motivate audiences to question the state of the oceans as they are now and to take actions towards protecting them. Ultimately, the film encourages audiences to become part of Earle’s mission: Mission Blue.

## Analysis

*Mission Blue* follows the long and accomplished life of Dr. Sylvia Earle, overviewing points in her childhood, family life, career, and aspirations for the future. In this analysis, these different points are broken into sections: The Story of a Radical, The Story of her Childhood, The Story of Falling in Love, The Story of her Career, and The Story of Hope Spots. Each storyline highlights moments in Earle's life and position to the ocean in these moments with nostalgic and feel-good imagery. The storylines also juxtapose these life moments against modern ocean issues, framing them within Earle's perspective, with jarring images of degradation in the places Earle has spent her life. The following pages will examine how the film uses imagery and alternating storylines to encourage the audience to take on an ecological framework and enact change by joining in on Earle's aspirations for Hope Spots.

### *The Story of a Radical*

One of the strategies of the film is to encourage an ecological framework, inscribing nature and human culture as interconnected components. This is addressed early in the film, when American radio host Hugh Downs asks Earle, "Aren't you a radical?" (00:03:49). This quotation is not necessarily out of line considering she appears to ascribe to an ecological framework, which could be considered radical. Earle's response encompasses what appears to be the goal of the documentary:

If I seem like a radical at all, it may be because I see things that others do not. I think if others had the opportunity to witness what I have seen in my lifetime, what I see when I go diving and the perspective that I've gained from thousands of hours underwater, I would not seem like a radical at all. (00:03:54)

In this instance, Earle explains that her wish for the ocean is only seen as radical because people do not understand fully what is going on or have not seen what she has seen. If people had the experience she had, then they would know the reality of the situation. This statement, only three

3 minutes into the documentary, is like a thesis statement for the film: through this documentary, viewers will view Earle's life and experiences with the ocean so that they may understand the reality she sees, affirming that it's not such a radical take after all. Additionally, as one of the filmmakers, Fisher Stevens, explains, "I didn't want to leave Sylvia's world, so I didn't . . . What I didn't realize at the time, was that this would be the beginning of a three-year odyssey, a chance to see the ocean and world through Sylvia's eyes," which invites the audience to join him in experiencing Earle's life through viewing the documentary (00:07:22).

### *The Story of her Childhood*

The film depicts specific moments in Earle's childhood to show the audience where Earle comes from, not just in location or region, but also in ideology. Earle provides descriptions of her upbringing, including the way her parents treated animals, the environment, and science. This allows Earle to share the values that have shaped her life, while also building a sense of nostalgia in the audience with the use of old photos and music. To facilitate this, Stevens asks: "Take me back to how you became so passionate about the ocean," and Earle begins describing her childhood in New Jersey (00:08:00). As she speaks, nostalgic music plays, invoking feelings of memories, and the documentary displays old print photos as if they are being shown through a slide viewer. Earle describes her mother and father in an endearing way, attributing specific details about them. She states, "My mother was known as the bird lady of the neighborhood. People would bring injured squirrels, birds, frogs. Anything that needed help" (00:08:45). This immediate connection of nature to moments of her childhood shows the audience that Earle has always been involved in protecting nature and its inhabitants, as she was exposed to it by her mother as a young child. It also exemplifies this element of empathy for smaller creatures most people come across in their lifetimes, making Earle's mother figure someone the audience can

like and relate to. She has nurturing elements people tend to expect of mothers, making her not just Earle's mother, or this experience just Earle's experience, but everyone's experience or story.

This same strategy is used when describing her father. Earle states, "My father who was really so bright, and so capable of fixing things. When I was a little kid, I'd try to take things apart to see how they worked and he always reminded me to save all the pieces, don't lose any" (00:09:08). This description of Earle's father creates identification with the audience as a fond collection of memories of a hands-on father figure. Earle uses this memory of her father to segue into some concerns she has about the state of life on Earth. She says, "We're losing a lot of the parts, the loss of the diversity of life on Earth, the bits and pieces have disappeared, and we don't know how to put things back together again once they're gone" (00:09:19). After building nostalgia and creating identification with the audience for Earle's connection to her parents, she uses this childhood lesson her father taught her to raise a concern she has and will address in the film.

### *The Story of Falling in Love*

While the previous portion of the film gives us a glimpse into Earle's early childhood and the values she gained from that time in her life, the film shifts to focus on some of her first moments experiencing the ocean. Earle situates her audience to understand her enchantment with the ocean, and the uniqueness of having a "backyard" that was the beach. Earle narrates her first encounter with the ocean, which initially sounds apprehensive, but then morphs into wonderment: "When I was 12, we picked up and moved to Florida. At first, I was not particularly charmed, because I loved the other place [New Jersey] so much," (00:09:33). However, Earle quickly begins to explain the draw of the Gulf Coast: "But the Gulf of Mexico

was this great blue body of water, that created this mythic place that lured my parents there. Some kids play in the streets, some kids have a back yard. My backyard was wet. It was the Gulf of Mexico. It was glorious” (00:09:47). Earle’s delight in describing this “mythic place” offered an unusual or exotic setting, in which the audience could, to some extent, live vicariously. In other words, Earle’s description of her joy in moving to the Gulf Coast may have tapped into the yearning many audience members might have felt about living near the sea. As Earle summed up her vivid memory, “That is where I first fell in love with the ocean” (00:10:10).

Earle continues the strategy of describing what it was like to live near the ocean to cultivate a sense of yearning in the audience for Gulf living. She explains, “I could see it. I could hear it. I could smell it. I could touch it. I could splash around in it. It was just heaven for a kid, for me. It’s just this paradise” (00:10:13). Not only does this explain to the audience the appeal of living near the coast, it also creates an image of a lovely wonderland, a play of enjoyment for a child.

The depiction of an idyllic, Gulf childhood comes crashing down, as Earle’s narration transitions into one of environmental devastation. The images from the film switch to those of an oil spill, and the audio relays a newscaster saying, “Happening now, an explosion and fire devastate a massive oil rig off the Louisiana coast” (00:10:56). Another newscaster narrates, “And it’s raising fears of an environmental disaster in the making” (00:11:04). Suddenly, this narration of living in paradise is replaced with oil-tainted blue ocean and a story of catastrophic disaster.

Not only has Earle made her story the audience’s story by appealing to them with the wonderment of living on the Gulf Coast, but she also carries them through the devastation that she went through. Earle explains that while she was growing up near the Gulf, there was only

one oil site. She says, “Now, there are more than 33,000 drill sites. All of us, we are the beneficiaries of having burned through fossil fuels. Coal. Gas. Oil” (00:11:49). She narrates her feelings after the oil spill occurred: “It was shocking. And it just got worse as the news unfolded. Of course, the tragedy was the human lives lost” (00:11:34). Connecting this major event in the Gulf of Mexico to her life story shows the emotional impact such an event can have on a person that has such a personal connection to this part of the ocean. By appealing to and creating identification with the audience, Earle has invited viewers to feel what she feels.

Given the severe ecological problems and loss of human life, it would be easy to blame an entity like the oil industry, but Earle does not do that. Instead, Earle makes the responsibility collective. The collective “we,” the audience, Earle, everyone in the world, has caused this problem with “having burned through fossil fuels.” This implicates audience members for being part of the problem. However, Earle does not leave the audience feeling guilty with no way to relieve such guilt. She goes on to say, “I really came here to speak for the ocean.” At this point, the filmmaker, Jackson, steps in to say, “She’s the one that’s out in the front, leading the charge in the fight to save the ocean. And she’s made it her life’s purpose in the last couple of decades to make sure everybody else understands what’s going on and why it’s important.” (00:12:51). This quotation not only situates Earle as a leader in saving the ocean, but it provides the audience with a solution: they can join Earle in her fight to save the ocean.

### *The Story of her Career*

After Earle tells the audience about her introduction to the ocean, she then goes on to describe her education, her career, and her Hope Spots. The story of Earle’s career is the longest narration and arguably the backbone of the documentary as it reflects that her life’s work has been dedicated to saving the ocean. The film continues to alternate timelines, showing

momentous occasions throughout Earle's career and switching to show a modern event impacting the ocean that relates to those moments from her career.

Earle begins to describe her early career, explaining that, "I always wanted to be whatever it is that a scientist does" (00:16:07). She describes another ocean advocate, Jacques Cousteau, and credits him with being her inspiration for getting in the water. His documentary *Silent World* encouraged her to get into the ocean to see what he saw. As she puts it, "to see fish swimming in something other than lemon slices and butter on a plate" (00:18:49). This statement is a nod to what Earle is doing within this documentary, showing people what the underwater world and its inhabitants look like outside of our anthropocentric perception. She goes on to describe diving and how it was largely experimental in the 1950s until Cousteau invented the Aqua-Lung. He was one of the first to use a Self-Contained Underwater Breathing Apparatus, therefore inventing SCUBA diving, as we know it today. Earle explains that while she was enrolled in marine biology classes, her professor obtained two of the first SCUBA sets available. Footage of people diving with dated gear and images of coral and fish are shown, and a song plays along with lyrics that say, "The sea of love. . .Come with me" (00:18:49). Earle explains the huge significance of SCUBA technology:

Most of all, it was the gift of time. To be able to stay and watch the creatures that were there and it made me want to always go deeper, stay longer. In the water, anyone can be a ballerina. You can stand on one finger, you can do back rolls . . . and along the way you see all this, this galaxy of life. (00:18:53)

Earle is inviting the audience to experience the wonderment of SCUBA diving by describing the feeling she experienced at that moment in her life. The footage of older dive gear and the song create an essence of nostalgia that also appeals to the audience. In addition, she provides plausibility that the viewers could do something like SCUBA or get involved in the ocean when

she says, “My mother, at 81, put on a mask and flippers and took on the ocean,” showing that if an 81-year-old can do it, then the audience can as well (00:20:28).

Right after this moment, the documentary changes to footage of Florida, and Earle describes the unrestrained development of Florida in a dark tone. She describes the detrimental impact it has had on the Florida ecosystems and water bodies, and emphasizes the impact humans have by saying, “I saw the before. I saw the after influence of what we can do to the natural world,” (00:22:28). In this statement, Earle makes a direct connection to an ecological framework. She continues to explain how big agriculture and industrial farming have impacted the Gulf of Mexico, describing how fertilizer runoff causes dead zones. Earle states, “The Gulf of Mexico already hosts one of the most notorious dead zones on the planet. The Deepwater Horizon spill just made things a lot worse” (00:24:02). The framing of diving and the appeal of being underwater is juxtaposed by the detrimental impacts in Florida caused by development, agriculture, and oil drilling. This juxtaposition has a heightened effect, since the audience had just seen the wonderment of diving in the ocean through Earle’s eyes. Startling imagery of the development and oil drilling impacts may have a more emotional effect on the audience, since it is as if they are seeing it themselves.

The documentary makes it very clear that Earle’s life story is that of her career because she has dedicated her life to the ocean. The story of Earle’s career has short tangents into descriptions of her love life and family life, but each tangent connects these aspects of Earle’s life back to her career. Because her personal life in these tangents is intertwined with the story of her career, these narratives will be analyzed in this section. The first tangent begins with the director, Fisher Stevens, asking Earle, “So let’s be honest. You’re 18. You’re very beautiful. Aren’t all your friends going off, getting married?” (00:24:29). To this, Earle responds,

Of course, I enjoyed dating boys and so on. But I wasn't interested in anybody who wasn't interested in what I was interested in . . . I was attracted to the nerdy types, I suppose, who loved talking about the stars, space, about animals, or about diving. (00:24:44)

This statement supports the notion that Earle is prioritizing the ocean in her life, even in the aspect of her love life. This prompts Stevens to bring up Earle's marriage to John Taylor as it was impacted by her career. Earle tells the story of one of her first ocean expeditions: "As a young scientist, this spirit of exploration was all around, and I wanted to be a part of it. And then came this opportunity to go on the International Indian Ocean Expedition in 1964" (00:26:23). She explains that the expedition was six weeks long and on the other side of the world. She had two children ages four and two with Taylor, and she says, "I think for me, the stress was being apart from family, and of course a mom with kids but certainly with my husband as well. And maybe it was inevitable, we did come apart" (00:31:06). These statements further support that Earle prioritized her career and passion for exploring the ocean over her love life. This encourages the audience in hearing Earle's story and seeing the ocean through her eyes to understand and feel her dedication to the ocean in themselves.

This story, and the significance of ocean exploration for Earle, is also juxtaposed with the issue of trash and pollution. Earle quickly shifts the narration to discuss what she describes as the biggest discovery that was made in the International Indian Ocean Expedition: ocean trash. Earle explains, "I have yet to take a dive, even in the deepest dive I've ever made, and not see tangible evidence of our presence. To see trash, junk on the bottom of the ocean two and half miles down" (00:29:26). Stevens points out, "It's not just dumping waste and garbage. Between 1950 and 1998, there have been more than a hundred nuclear test blasts either underwater or on remote islands" (00:29:56). These statements express the extent to which trash and waste plagues the ocean, and the extent to which humans are willing to push chemicals and pollutants into the

ocean. By showing Earle's dedication to the ocean alongside the tragedy of ocean pollution, the film encourages the audience to adopt Earle's dedication and care about these issues.

The next story of Earle's career describes her time spent in the Galapagos in 1996, where she was one of 12 scientists on a ship. Earle describes her experience:

It was an enchanted kingdom, underwater. It was the sharkiest place I'd ever seen. Look over the side, it looked like somebody had taken a box of those wooden matches and just dropped them on the bottom, and every match was a shark. (00:34:29)

The wonderment and serenity of Earle's tone certainly implies that the encounter with that many sharks was not one filled with worry or concern, as most people might expect. Along with this quotation, the film features old footage of hundreds of hammerhead sharks peacefully swimming around. She continues explaining: "You could dive down among them. Sharks just not paying attention to you" (00:34:47). Earle switches from describing her dives with sharks to the way sharks are perceived by the general public, stating, "But at the time, people thought sharks were the enemy. The only good shark was a dead shark . . . but, in fact, that wasn't the real problem. Sharks were never after humans . . . we're not on their menu" (00:35:00).

Earle then transitions to the current-day issue of the shark fin trade. Pictures of shark finning appear on the screen and she states, "What's really tragic about it is they don't even bother to keep the shark. They just take the fins and throw the shark back in the water," (00:35:40). The footage of the shark finning is gruesome. Fishermen are seen dragging a shark on board a vessel using a gaff hook through its mouth as the animal thrashes around. One of the fishermen goes at the shark with a knife, slicing off each fin as the shark writhes on the deck of the boat in a pool of its own blood. After this imagery, Earle explains how often finning live sharks occurs: "It's tens of millions of shark fins that are harvested every year for soup, principally in China. It essentially created an enormous hole in the ecosystem," (00:35:51).

The story of Earle's serene experience diving with sharks is positioned against gruesome depictions of millions of sharks being killed for their fins and thrown back into the ocean as waste. Earle's initial description enables the audience to see sharks through Earle's eyes, as animals that coexist in the ocean with other creatures and not as bloodthirsty monsters like they are often depicted. Then, the film shows the audience the atrocities being done against sharks so that they might see this current issue with the hurt and urgency for change that Earle sees.

The next moment of Earle's career focuses on her time spent with the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA). Based in St. John, USVI, the Tektite II project intended for a group of scientists to live under water in a container for two weeks. She explains the situation: "How would you like, as a scientist, to spend two weeks living underwater, down in the Virgin Islands? That was the pitch . . . it didn't occur to me that women need not apply" (00:38:27). She continues, "Jim Miller, head of the program, who had to finally make the call, said, 'Well if half the fish are female, half the dolphins, half the whales, I guess we can put up with a few women,'" (00:38:49). These quotations, while not explaining the ocean through Earle's perspective, help to establish the position Earle was in at this point in her career and in dedicating her life to the ocean. She was not only learning about the ocean, doing research, and working, she was also fighting gendered glass ceilings making her efforts to work for the ocean even more significant. This shows the audience that despite the hurdles Earle faced, she still spent her life advocating for the ocean thus making the audience feel as though they are enabled to take up such an effort.

In addition to the science pioneering aspect of this story, Earle also shares the wonderment Tektite brought, stating:

I felt like a kid in a candy store except that everything was living. You're outside with the creatures and you just get to know them as individuals. You actually see this group of

five angelfish that are always there first thing in the morning and they have different attitudes, different personalities. That's what, I think, has given me a different perspective than most probably have. (00:40:12)

This statement not only provides Earle's exciting experience living amongst the ocean's creatures, allowing the audience to envision themselves in her place, it also anthropomorphizes the fish to make them more relatable to the audience. This story of wonderment for the uniqueness of the fish and their relatability, is coupled with the current condition of the reef in which Tektite was placed. Earle states "When I came to the Caribbean as part of the Tektite mission of 1970, the reefs here were full of life. Today those reefs are gone. It's happening all over the world." Taking the audience from a sense of awe to a sense of devastation, Earle's storytelling strategically places the audience to look at the loss of coral reefs from her eyes, eyes that once saw very healthy reefs.

### *The Story of Hope Spots*

While the story of Hope Spots could be considered an extension of Earle's career, I have chosen to treat this as a distinct part of the documentary, because it marks a shift in direction for Earle's work. During her early life and career, a lot of the work she did as a scientist was based in discovery, going on exploratory expeditions, diving in submersibles at depths never achieved before, and researching the impacts of being submerged for extended periods of time on the human body. Earle remarks:

If I could be born anywhere in time, it would be now. It would be now because this is the time, as never before, that we know. We understand what we didn't know 50 years ago. If we wait another 50 years, opportunities we now have will be gone. This is the moment. Our decisions, our actions will shape everything that follows. (01:25:52)

The mission and story of Hope Spots, working to prevent the irreparable, is a new direction for Earle. The film presents "Hope Spots" as a broad plan for helping to repair the damages done, and prevent irreversible damages, to the ocean. Through ocean protection statistics and success

stories, the film suggests the significance of Hope Spots and urges the audience to help advocate for the establishment of more protected areas throughout the world.

Stevens clarifies precisely what Earle is advocating in the documentary: “Sylvia has a wish for the planet, what she called her Mission Blue. And it’s really very simple. Protect the ocean in the same way we protect the land.” Earle continues Stevens’s explanation: “About 12% of the land around the world is now protected, but only a fraction if 1% of the ocean is fully protected globally” (01:09:04). This is essentially how Earle pitches her Hope Spot Mission, since protected land areas are recognized as hot spots that are in good shape but under threat. She states, “But why don’t we call them Hope Spots? Because if we take action, recover, we’re at least making them better than they otherwise would be” (01:09:48). After seeing the devastation of ocean pollution, shark finning, over development, and mass coral die-off through Earle’s eyes, Earle then offers the audience a bit of hope, a sort of solution: Hope Spots. Having preservation areas in the ocean in which conservation and restoration practices can take place helps relieve some of that devastation. To supply the audience with proof of such solution, Earle describes Cabo Pulmo, Mexico:

For more than a century, it was a thriving fishing village and then the tourists came and then sport fishermen, and then the industrial fleet with their long lines and nets. . . . In 1997, the people who live there took the ocean back. Together they created a Hope Spot 70 kilometers round, making it completely off limits to fishing and dumping and drilling. Cabo Pulmo has replaced fishing with ecotourism and the community is thriving.  
(01:10:55)

In addition to Cabo Pulmo, Earle also discusses the Great Barrier Reef, Marine Park Authority, and Coral Sea, which are protected areas in Australia. This solution works rhetorically to give her audience a sense of hope and a sense of ability to take action towards healing the ocean. The film ends with Stevens asking Earle, “Do you ever have a moment where you say to yourself, ‘I’m not gonna do it today.’” Earle replies,

If you saw a child falling out a 10-story window, and you have the ability to reach out and catch him, you do everything you can to position yourself to catch him. You don't take a break and say, 'Oh, while the child is falling out of the sky, I'm gonna go over— No. You're there 24/7. You're there with every ounce of what you got. You want to save that child. (01:22:34)

This final analogy continues to encourage the audience to see ocean issues with the urgency Earle does, as if a child's life is in danger, and encourages the audience to take action by advocating for these Hope Spots, with the same effort they would use to save the falling child.

## **Conclusion**

*Mission Blue*, while appearing to be an autobiographical film, functions as an environmental advocacy documentary within Earle's campaign. It follows the life story of Dr. Sylvia Earle, showing snippets and narrations of various stages of her life alongside footage of current issues impacting the ocean. The strategy of alternating between Earle's life story and current issues works to situate the audience to see the current issues from Earle's perspective, which is that of an ecological framework. The analysis covers four sections of Earle's life, or four stories: The Story of her Childhood, The Story of Falling in Love, The Story of her Career, and the Story of Hope Spots. Each story section lays a foundation for understanding Earle's experience with the ocean in a certain way, enabling the audience to understand Earle's perspective on the issues the ocean faces today. Storytelling within the documentary works to show the audience that Earle's ecological framework is not so radical after all and encourages viewers to take on an ecological framework of their own while embracing the advocacy of Hope Spots.

## CHAPTER 4 – *SEASPIRACY*: HIDDEN DEPTHS AND DANGERS

### **Introduction**

Early on in the documentary *Seaspiracy*, environmental journalist George Monbiot exclaims:

There's this image of the fishing industry, which is deeply implanted in our minds from childhood. It's a little red boat chugging across a sparkling sea with Captain Birdseye at the wheel, with his white beard, and his twinkly blue eyes, and his fisherman's cap. And of course, what it really is, is a death machine. (Tabrizi 00:34:54)

The statement captures the essence of the film and reveals the basic strategy that director Ali Tabrizi employs to reframe the traditional, romantic narrative of the fishing industry. Released in March 2021, the film caused quite a stir amongst viewers and charted Netflix's top ten films in the first week of its release (Korban). This may be largely due to the riveting imagery and compelling narrative used throughout the documentary, which follows Tabrizi on his journey to investigate the reality of the fishing industry across the world, examining contentious situations such as the Taiji dolphin hunt in Japan, shark finning practices in China, slave labor in Thailand, salmon fish farms in Scotland, and whaling in the Faroe Islands. This chapter will analyze how *Seaspiracy* uses imagery, expert interviews, and an exposé narrative in its storytelling to convince audiences that fishing is a major environmental issue that can only be changed through boycotting the fishing industry and ending the consumption of seafood.

### **Context**

On March 23, 2021, *Seaspiracy* was released on Netflix on a global scale (“Seaspiracy Documentary Launches”). *Seaspiracy* joins a group of investigative documentaries created by filmmaker Kip Andersen: *Cowspiracy*, *Christspiracy*, and *What the Health*. The aforementioned films feature an “investigative narrative,” that works to uncover concealed truths on specific

topics. This narrative style makes them compelling with audiences, often reframing the way viewers see certain issues. *Seaspiracy* immediately gained popularity, charting as the top Netflix movie in Hong Kong, Singapore, UK, and the USA. The film had a global, positive reception and caused a stir on social media platforms such as Twitter (now X) (Korban). Many Twitter users expressed their newfound awareness, with musician Bryn Adams tweeting “Watch Seaspiracy on Netflix. #Donteatfish #Stopkillingfish #Seaspiracy” to his then 655,600 followers (Korban). A wildlife photographer, Richard Dowling, tweeted, “I'm not ashamed to say I just sat and cried. I don't even eat seafood and I cried! Please watch this with an open mind and be willing to challenge the societal norms that you follow when you put your fork to your mouth” (O’Conner). However, the documentary also received negative reception and some harsh criticisms. A PhD student studying Climate Change on Twitter, George Hoppit, explained, “The white savior and questionable science of #Seaspiracy does not help its conservation goal. Engaging constructively with those involved in fisheries is the way forward, not blanket statements saying the entire industry is wrong. We can do so much better” (O’Conner). *Seaspiracy* portrays Earth Island Institute and Marine Stewardship Council in a negative light. Both of these organizations claimed the film took their comments out of context or depicted their interviews in a misleading way (McVeigh). For instance, Mark Palmer of the Earth Island Institute explains, “The film took my statement out of context to suggest that there is no oversight, and we don’t know whether dolphins are being killed. That is not true” (McVeigh). Indeed, claimed Palmer, because of recent measures, “the number of dolphins killed are very low.” While viewers may be divided, the film was still quite the conversation-starter on the fishing industry and seafood consumption. While the year following its release did not see drastic shifts in fish consumption or changed regulations, there is a *Seaspiracy* Instagram account

that regularly posts global fishing industry updates and has over 937,000 followers (Instagram). So, what made this film so compelling? It attracted significant viewership and moved folks to post on social media about how it has changed their perceptions about seafood.

## **Analysis**

Throughout the film, Tabrizi seeks to uncover the truth about ocean plastic and, ultimately, the fishing industry. He reveals different issues to form an investigative narrative and works to build mistrust in competing narratives that audiences are used to hearing about the fishing industry. The issues Tabrizi exposes include plastic pollution, regulatory companies allowing atrocities, the ecological impact, the danger it puts humans in, and the myth of sustainable fishing. Each issue is investigated in stages within the film and often is addressed by visits to different parts of the world, guiding viewers through each exploration from Tabrizi's own perspective and thought process. For this analysis, I have broken down these stages into categories: The Plastic Problem, The Fishing Problem, Dangers of Fishing, and Solutions. The following pages will examine how the film uses compelling and illustrative imagery, video evidence, investigative narrative, and interviews with credible characters to convince audiences that fishing is a major environmental problem that can only be fixed by ceasing seafood consumption and fishing all together.

### *The Plastic Problem*

To explain the plastic problem, the film looks at Tabrizi's initial notions of the ocean, the significant impact humans have on the world around them, types of plastic pollution in the ocean, and the startling discovery that most of the plastic pollution comes from fishing gear. Tabrizi brings the audience along on an investigation to uncover the seemingly hidden truths about our ocean and plastic use.

Early in the film, Tabrizi establishes that his initial perspective of the ocean shifted as soon as he began filming the documentary. He explains that when he started out on this filming journey, he was excited to learn about the ocean and make a documentary about its greatness. However, once he began his research, his perspective drastically changed. Tabrizi states,

It's home for up to 80% of all life on Earth. And with the vast majority of our seas still unexplored till this day, for me, the oceans were an indestructible source of inspiration. But not long after starting the project, this romantic vision that I always had of the ocean completely changed. (00:02:31)

During this statement, corresponding imagery showcases the beauty and greatness of the ocean. Viewers are shown vibrant fish, jumping dolphins, and deep blue ocean. However, he says that his “romantic vision” changed, and the beautiful imagery disappears. In its place, a news headline shows, “Pregnant Whale Died with 50 Pounds of Plastic in her stomach,” along with many more similar headlines. The film displays tweets that are trending with the #deaddolphin, pointing to the fact that it was so frequent for whales to die in this way that there were associated hashtags on social media platforms. This is when Tabrizi begins to explore the plastic issue. He explains that in the southeast coast of England, whales were washing on shore in what was the largest stranding episode in last 100 years. There was one main culprit responsible for these strandings: plastic. This information provides an explanation for Tabrizi’s romantic vision shift, and he explains,

I was forced to confront a side of the story I never knew. A story of just how huge our impact on the seas had become. These animals washing up with their stomachs filled with plastic was devastating not only because of their incredible intelligence, but because they even help keep the entire ocean alive. (00:03:28)

While he explains this, images and footage of deceased whales and dolphins in various stages of decay and some with bloated stomachs are shown. The quotation relays to his audience something they can relate to, that the ocean is vast and awe inspiring, as is often expressed with beautiful images like in the film. However, Tabrizi explains that he was forced to shift from this

perspective, and, using the juxtaposition of the beautiful imagery with the imagery of the stranded and decaying whales, encourages his audience to take this shift with him.

In addition to guiding his audience through this shift in perspective on the ocean, Tabrizi guides his audience to shift into an ecological framework. Tabrizi shows the audience that just by using plastic, humans have impacted the lives and population of whales, which keeps the ocean alive thus having a huge impact on the entire ocean. Emphasizing the human impact, Tabrizi goes on to explain that,

When dolphins and whales return to the surface to breathe, they fertilize tiny marine plants in the ocean called phytoplankton, which every year absorb four times the amount of carbon dioxide than the amazon rain forest does, and generates up to 85% of the oxygen we breathe. So, in a world concerned with carbon and climate change, protecting these animals meant protecting the entire planet. The way I saw it was, if dolphins and whales die, the ocean dies. If the ocean dies, so do we. (00:03:41)

This explanation shows the audience that this ocean problem is actually a human problem due to our human impact on carbon output and climate change, encouraging the audience to shift from an environmental framework to an ecological framework. In just the first four minutes of the film, Tabrizi has used his personal perspective, imagery, news headlines, and scientific data to encourage audiences to perceive the ocean as having serious issues that could be detrimental to humans.

Having discovered that plastic was the cause of whale strandings, Tabrizi directs his focus to an investigation of ocean plastic, inviting the audience to investigate with him. He discovers that there are “huge floating garbage patches accumulating in the middle of the ocean,” and provides corresponding imagery as photographic evidence (00:40:20). Tabrizi continues to relay startling facts such as “the equivalent of a garbage truckload of plastic is dumped in the sea every single minute,” and “this smaller plastic breaks down into smaller and smaller pieces known as microplastics which now outnumber the stars in the Milky Way galaxy . . . and is

seeping into every living creature in the ocean” (00:04:28). While these facts are relayed, computer generated, visual effects are shown of plastic being dumped by the truck load, ocean water and waves filled with innumerable plastic products such as gallon jugs and soda six-pack rings. The film depicts microplastics that are small and white on a black backdrop as if they were stars in the galaxy, but when the camera zooms out, it was all inside of a fish, relaying to the audience that there are hidden microplastics in the fish themselves (00:04:32). These statistics and images show the audience just how much plastic from our everyday use ends up in the ocean, how it could affect our fish as a food source, and that this is a real problem. This is emphasized when Tabrizi explains that he went on an anti-plastic brigade attending all the beach cleanups he could, calling local businesses to ask them to stop using single-use plastics, but no matter what he did, there was always more plastic.

Consistent with his exposé narrative, Tabrizi reaches a startling discovery and encourages his audience to be startled by this discovery with him. He uncovers that the major source of the plastic in the ocean is actually fishing related, stating “Forty-six percent of it is fishing nets, discarded fishing nets, which are far more dangerous for marine life than our plastic straws” (00:28:07). This momentous discovery ultimately becomes the driving force of the film. Encouraging his audience to feel bamboozled along with him, Tabrizi questions why he had never heard of this statistic before and realizes that he needs to investigate the fishing industry to learn more. This is when he states the aforementioned quote,

There’s this image of the fishing industry, which is deeply implanted in our minds from childhood. It’s a little red boat chugging across a sparkling sea with Captain Birdseye at the wheel, with his white beard and twinkling blue eyes, and his fisherman’s cap. And of course, what it really is, is a death machine. (00:34:54)

This quote encapsulates Tabrizi’s own perspective shift on the fishing industry and illustrates an image that much of his audience may be able to relate to. Describing this familiar picture of the

fishing industry and then comparing it to a “death machine” disrupts the viewers perspective of the fishing industry, opening them up to hearing more of what Tabrizi may have to tell them through his investigation.

In discovering the plastic pollution, the film uses Tabrizi’s perspective to draw the audience into the exposé narrative of uncovering the problems our oceans face. Statistics on plastic pollution amounts, illustrative computer-generated images, and real photo or video evidence, work to convince the audience about the plastic problem our ocean faces. Having learned that the majority of ocean plastic is from discarded fishing gear, and that this fact seems to have been seriously hidden or overlooked, Tabrizi sets out to explore the fishing problem.

### *The Fishing Problem*

With this troublesome revelation about the fishing industry, Tabrizi works to convince his audience that the industry is a problem, and explores other ways, aside from plastic pollution, that it is afflicting our oceans. The film follows Tabrizi as he investigates and uncovers these other issues, which include overfishing, habitat destruction, loss of key species, nefarious fish exports, and lack of oversight.

In his investigation of overfishing, Tabrizi describes how the sheer number of fish being removed will devastate ecosystems because of how important fish are in supporting the ocean. Many viewers might not know the role that fish play in our planet ecology. Tabrizi lays out the significance of fish by using a spaceship analogy:

The Earth is a spaceship. It’s on a trip around the galaxy. It takes 250 million years just to make one orbit. And every spaceship has a life-support system, provides us with the food we eat, the air we breathe, and regulates the climate, the temperatures. That life support system is run by a crew of earthlings and there’s only so many crew members you can kill before the machinery begins to break down, you run out of engineers. And that’s what’s happening, we’re killing off the crew. (00:40:44)

Tabrizi is comparing the fish and other marine life in the ocean as the crew on our Earth spaceship that helps maintain our food and air supply. By fishing and extracting these animals out of our oceans, we are devastating our systems that maintain our climate and food chain. It's not just the extracting of the animals, but also the methods of extracting animals. This analogy provides the audience with something to relate the fishing problem to.

To elucidate the impact of overfishing, Tabrizi analogizes trawling fishing to deforestation. Tabrizi explains that trawling nets “scar the sea floor” and leave a “barren wasteland behind” (00:42:12). He compares the acres of forest removed to the acres of ocean ecosystems scarred: “Every year, approximately 25 million acres of forest are lost . . . However, bottom trawling wipes out an estimated 3.9 billion acres every year” (00:42:24). In addition to using analogies, Tabrizi uses imagery to reinforce the shocking amount of ocean being wiped out. While he explains that, “This was equivalent to wiping out the land area of Greenland, Norway, Sweden, Finland, Denmark, the UK, Germany, France, Spain, Portugal, Italy, Turkey, Iran, Thailand, and Australia combined,” the film displays a globe with each of the listed countries being erased from the Earth’s surface (00:42:48). The comparisons and visual depictions of missing land masses that most folks are used to seeing on a map helps to further illustrate just how detrimental these fishing practices are to our oceans.

While Tabrizi showed that bottom trawling is quite devastating to ocean habitat on its own, he works to strengthen his argument, expanding it to include the problem of overfishing key species such as blue fin tuna and sharks, and the lawlessness behind it. In classic exposé fashion, the film shows Tabrizi surreptitiously filming tuna being brought into a port. The filming is done at night indicating that the fisherman’s actions are potentially nefarious. He narrates that less than 3% of the natural population of blue fin tuna remains in the world, but,

because it is such a high grossing industry it continues to be fished. The camera pans from the tuna to another pile of fish as Tabrizi states, “I noticed that tuna weren't the only highly prized species they were landing. Sharks were everywhere, and they were all having their fins sliced off” (00:16:11). As he finishes his sentence, a fisherman on camera yells “Turn off the video!” further indicating to the audience that the fishermen are doing something they do not want anyone to know about.

The film continues to emphasize the nefarious nature of the seafood industry by interviewing conservationist Paul De Gelder. He explains that it “Is a multi-billion-dollar industry and is oftentimes heavily criminally involved” (00:16:34). The audience is then shown the film crew, being told multiple times to stop filming at the port and at different processing centers for shark finning. Not only is the shark-finning industry known for shady and illegal practices, but it also poses a significant threat to ocean ecosystems. As De Gelder explains,

People should be afraid of not having sharks in the ocean. Sharks keep the oceans healthy. They keep the fish stocks healthy. They keep the ecosystems alive. They keep the coral reefs alive. If we don't have these sharks, if these sharks get finned into extinction, the ocean's gonna turn into a swamp. (00:18:35)

Although most people might consider sharks to be dangerous or a threat, this explanation gives the audience a different perspective and shows the significance of sharks while underlining another way that the fishing industry is harming the ocean.

Falling back on the overarching exposé narrative, Tabrizi questions the authenticity of regulatory government agencies or ocean advocacy organizations and addressed their negligent oversight. In an interview with journalist George Monbiot, he points out that environment groups never focus on fishing being the biggest ocean issue, stating, “Where are the big environment groups? Why aren't they all over this like a rash . . . It is the fishing industry that is destroying . . . the life of the seas” (00:43:04). By continuing to point out the shortfalls of the environmental

groups, Tabrizi is building mistrust in the narratives we have been told about environmentalism and ocean protection. Instead of participating in beach cleanups and reducing your plastic use, simply abolishing the fishing industry would solve the majority of the ocean's plastic and ecological issues. Continuing this approach of building mistrust, Tabrizi explains that, although 5% of ocean is "protected," none of it is actually protected from fishing or bottom trawling. In Monbiot's interview, he describes a TV segment he watched in which government minister was asked, "Are you gonna protect it against industrial fishing? Are you gonna protect it against oil drilling?" The minister responds, "No. Well, we're going to put some restrictions on sea kayaking" (00:44:13). This instance provides proof that the laws and regulations in place to protect the ocean are mostly useless.

The investigative approach of the film highlights various aspects of the fishing problem, including overfishing, habitat destruction, loss of key species, lack of oversight, and nefarious fish exports. Each aspect is relayed to the audience in convincing ways, whether by the crew's discrete filming in possibly dangerous locations, Tabrizi's emphasis on mistrust in regulatory agencies, or the use of deforestation analogies. While the film has investigated the problems of fishing, there is still more to uncover.

### *Dangers of Fishing*

Once *Seaspiracy* exposes the environmental destructiveness of industrial fishing, the film turns to exposing other problems in the industry that impact humans. Bottom trawling and overfishing may be killing our oceans, but the seafood industry is also impacting the safety of people. The film scrutinizes news reports, conducts haunting interviews, and records incidences that exhibit the atrocities the industry has on human, such as slave labor, torture, and even murder.

Tabrizi first examines how the fishing industry has harmed regulation observers and fisherman themselves. Graphic footage and emotionally moving narratives from credible characters help Tabrizi make his case. In the seafood industry, certain countries may require fishing vessels to have observers aboard to regulate overfishing or ensure that endangered species are not being fished. The film explores multiples stories of these observers being murdered or threatened at sea, and Tabrizi states,

In fact, other attempts to regulate the industry were also failing, with government observers who are given the task of monitoring fishing activity on ships being murdered at sea, thrown overboard, like Keith Davis, a 41-year-old American observer, who in recent years went missing off the coast of Peru, never to be seen again. (00:51:36)

To further convince the audience that this is a grave issue, Tabrizi continues to explain how 18 observers went missing in five years in Papua New Guinea. One might be a coincidence, but 18 seems deliberate and evidence of a major problem. In addition, he describes the terrifying story of an observer in the Philippines: “Ms. Gerlie Alpajora received death threats from the family of a tuna fisherman who was arrested for illegal fishing. Soon after, armed men entered her home, and she was assassinated in cold blood with a gunshot to the head in front of her two young boys” (00:52:00). These stories show the audience that the seafood industry has ties to serious criminal activity including safety threats and murder. In addition to exposing this issue, Tabrizi recounts multiple instances of these situations, showing the audience that it is a frequent, serious issue.

The horrific story of Gerlie Alpajora is just an introduction to the audience of the fishing industry’s sinister impact on humans. Tabrizi explains, “Those that are behind illegal fishing are the same criminal groups that are behind drug trafficking, human trafficking, and other crimes” (00:52:19). Not only is the fishing industry harming regulation observers, but the fishermen also themselves are in danger. The film first shows aerial footage of a man writing out a message

from a fishing vessel along with sinister music. The narrator explains, “This recent aerial footage shows a fisherman in Southeast Asia writing a secret message to the drone, out of sight of the captain. Slavery at sea is a massive problem” (01:06:18). Further supporting Tabrizi’s effort to expose the fishing industry and the nonprofits that wash over their atrocities, he explains,

I was so fed up by all these companies and NGOs bluewashing the truth, but honestly, I didn't know what to think. The only way I could find out for sure if fishing slavery was still going on today by actually speaking to these fishing slaves ourselves. (01:08:06)

To provide further evidence of the horrors of the seafood industry, the film utilizes haunting interviews with fishermen, in which they explain the terrible experiences they have faced. These interviews feature distorted recordings of the interviewees to mask their voices and one person stating, “Don't film my face. I can be hunted down for helping you.” (01:09:18). The fear of the interviewee is relayed to the audience through the changing of their voices and the use of silhouette to portray them. The interviewees go on to describe how they were coerced into slavery on the ships, the brutal punishments they endured if they didn’t work hard, including having boiling water splashed on them, being hit with an iron rod, and having their lives threatened. The anonymous interviewees supply the film with convincing accounts of slavery in the fishing industry, and the shown insistence by the interviewees that their identity be hidden further gives credibility to the information they relay. Rather than show their face and state their name to receive recognition, the sacrifice of anonymity and safety helps to build their credibility. The statements by the interviewees not only work to convince the audience that slavery in the fishing industry is real, but also to instill a sense of danger in the audience. One of the interviewees recounts, “On the ship I was on, sometimes they kept dead human bodies in the freezers after killing them. On my ship, boys dropped into the sea and drowned. I saw their dead bodies floating on the water surface days later” (01:10:34). During this man’s statement, the film shows an animation of these events. Although the faces of the animated bodies are strategically

cut out of frame, and the depiction is animated, the image is quite gruesome and recreated in a way that it will stir an emotional response in viewers against these actions and ultimately against the industry.

The film uses news reports, firsthand recounts, and imagery to convince the audience of the authenticity of the terrors of the fishing industry. Now that Tabrizi has taken his audience on a journey to discover the real problems facing our ocean, including plastic pollution, regulatory companies allowing atrocities, the ecological impact, and the danger it puts humans in, he can explore possible solutions to the fishing industry problem.

### *“Solutions”*

In exploring the solutions to the fishing industry problem, Tabrizi utilizes an “elimination order” method. One by one, he evaluates the legitimacy of different solutions, including sustainable fishing, fish farms, and plant-based faux seafood. Ultimately, only one solution is deemed plausible. The film shows expert interviews, analogies, and video evidence to continue to build distrust in regulatory industries, argue against so-called better fishing practices, and deconstruct public perception about seafood consumption.

The first possible solution he addresses is sustainable fishing. Tabrizi interviews Captain Paul Watson, founder of the Sea Shepherd Conservation Society, where Captain Watson states, “Well, first of all, there is no such thing [as sustainable fishing]. It’s impossible . . . It’s not sustainable, it’s just a marketing phrase” (00:45:49). This interview immediately rejects sustainable fishing as a possible solution to the problems that Tabrizi discovered throughout the film. Captain Watson’s words have weight with the audience for two reasons. First, Captain Watson may have some recognition from the hit TV series “Whale Wars,” which aired for 7 seasons beginning in 2008 (IMDB). The show followed Captain Watson and his crew as they

dangerously combatted the Japanese Whaling industry on the seas. Captain Watson's recognizability, and even celebrity, if you will, for putting his life on the line for ocean conservation makes him appear to be a credible source on the issue of sustainable fishing. Second, as he explains that "sustainable fishing" is a marketing term: "There's not enough fish to justify that. Everything is now sustainable. It's not sustainable. Just a marketing phrase, that's all" (00:45:08). This statement helps support Tabrizi's notion of mistrust in the authorities of the fishing and regulatory agencies by conveying to the audience that they cannot trust the words or terms they hear or read when making decisions about their food. To further emphasize this, Tabrizi asks Watson, "So don't you agree with organizations that recommend people eat more sustainable seafood as a way to protect the ocean?" To which Watson responds,

No, I disagree with it completely. You know, basically what they're trying to do is to appeal to the big tent. They want the people who eat fish to support them. And this was a problem when I was National Director for the Sierra Club, that was their problem. They didn't wanna come out against hunting, against fishing, or against meat-eating. Because they thought they would lose membership support if they did. A lot of these groups aren't interested in solving the problem, they're interested in exploiting the problem. 873 There's a lot of groups out there, climate change, conservation, whatever. It's a business. It's a feel-good business. (00:45:17)

In the above quote, Watson uses his experience and credibility as a long-term activist, having served as the National Director of the Sierra Club, to explain how regulatory and activist organizations pander to their membership bases, rather than try to fix the real problems. This interview works to further instill distrust in the audience of the nonprofits or agencies they trust to fix problems. The mechanism of building mistrust is also executed with video evidence.

Further investigating the legitimacy of sustainable fishing, the film shows Tabrizi searching the Oceana website. Tabrizi narrates: "I looked on Oceana's website. They were the world's largest marine conservation group, but there wasn't a single mention of reducing or eliminating seafood consumption" (00:45:55). Tabrizi has established that the fishing industry

has major environmental impact, so when he points out that a major marine conservation group ignores the issue, it suggests to the audience that Oceana is not credible and should not be trusted. This further catalyzes Tabrizi's investigative, exposé narrative. Tabrizi continues to dispute the concept of sustainable fishing in a meeting with Karmenu Vella, the European Commissioner for Environment, Maritime Affairs and Fisheries, to discuss sustainable fishing. Vella uses an economic analogy to explain sustainable fishing.

Imagine that you have money in a bank, you have capital, you put, I don't know, €100 in the bank. That €100, which is the capital, is giving you interest. As long as you are taking the interest, and spending the interest without touching the capital, then that is sustainability. (00:47:48)

This analogy works to explain to the audience how sustainable fishing should work, so that Tabrizi can dispute claims that sustainable fishing is possible. He explains that sustainable fishing cannot be possible because, "Today's oceans aren't only in debt, but they're in a major depression" (00:48:18). Using the explanation from Vella as a credible source, Tabrizi references earlier established knowledge about how much we are overfishing to determine that sustainable fishing cannot occur in the current state of our oceans, ultimately deciding that sustainable fishing is not a feasible solution to the fishing problem.

The second possible solution under examination is fish farming, which is at first framed as a very feasible solution. Tabrizi explains to the audience, "With no bycatch, no illegal fishing, no sea-floor damage, no killing of endangered species, and no dangerous working conditions, it was exactly what I was looking for" (01:01:42). However, the issues with fish farming are quickly revealed, including pollution, disease, and overfishing. The film shows a fishing farm website explaining that 1.2 kg of feed is needed to produce one kg of farmed salmon (01:02:13). Tabrizi narrates that he discovered the feed is "Heavily processed and is made of dried fish meal and extracted fish oil (01:02:20). During this explanation, the film shows an animated processing

machine that funnels copious amounts of animated fish into two spigots, one which produces fish oil and another that produces fish meal. He states, “So in reality, you need many times more fish going into the farmer's feed than will ever come out. So, fish farming was just wild fishing in disguise.” (01:02:31). The use of the fish farm’s own website as a credible source and the imagery of the production of fish oil and meal, provides the audience with evidence to support the notion that fish farming was just as unsustainable as wild fishing.

However, being unsustainable is not the only issue with fish farming. The film assesses health safety and humane conditions on a visit to a fish farm in Scotland. Tabrizi explains, “So when I went to document the issues . . . I filmed some of the most severe sea lice infestations that's ever been recorded. Salmon being eaten alive by an infestation of sea lice parasites” (01:03:37). While this is being said, the film shows a fish at the farm, with its skin and scales flaking off over its entire head, revealing the muscle underneath. The firsthand account of the incident and the graphic video evidence is very convincing of the “being eaten alive” claim’s authenticity. Tabrizi bolsters the emotional impact of this example by contemplating the evolution of salmon and how unnatural and cruel fish farming is to this magnificent creature: “It was sad to think that this incredible species, which had evolved for millions of years to migrate across entire oceans and navigate up rivers to reach the exact same spawning grounds they were born in were now confined to swim in circles in their own filth (01:03:46). The statement works in conjunction with the jarring imagery of the parasite-infected salmon, swimming in clouds of fecal excrement, to disgust and horrify the audience, who may have felt that fish-farmed salmon were healthy and environmentally benign. Instead, the documentary aims to deter fish consumption because of potential health and humane concerns.

In need of more information about fish farms, Tabrizi goes on a covert visit to the Marine Harvest Salmon Farm, where “salmon go to die” (01:04:38). Don Staniford, an activist that works to expose issues in fish farms, went with the film crew. While the film shows them standing over a pile of dead salmon, Staniford states, “And this is the Mortality Mountain . . . These fish are dying from anemia, lice infestation, infectious diseases, chlamydia, heart disease” (01:04:46). The film shows the image of the dead fish pile, with overlaid text in a list of the spoken afflictions, emphasizing the number of afflictions the salmon experience at the farm. The descriptive narration, along with the gruesome video of the piles of dead salmon continue to appeal to audience’s emotions and potential concerns over the health safety of consuming farmed fish ultimately showing that fish farming is not the solution it may have appeared to be.

In a turn of events, Tabrizi explains that he may have found the solution he has been waiting for: bona fide sustainable fishing. This brings him to the Faroe Islands, where whaling has been long rooted in indigenous fishing practices (01:13:17). This seems to be the solution Tabrizi has been waiting for because the practice is considered to be sustainable because the whales are not overharvested. Whaling in the Faroe Islands occurs as large scale event called the “Grind,” where hundreds of fishermen harvest whales in one area. The documentary’s footage of the Grind is unsettling and gruesome (01:15:26). Viewers watch as the whales swim into the bay, not knowing they will soon meet their demise. Fishermen in boats begin to slaughter the whales, one by one, and their bodies are pulled through the water by rope. Their dead or dying bodies lay limp on the shoreline, and blood oozes from their bodies into the ocean. The sea is red. You can hear the whales squeaking in what appears to be pain or distress (01:15:51). There is no narration during this footage. The sounds and imagery work to appeal to the audience’s emotion with graphic visual evidence. Tabrizi then shares his reaction: “I finally understood sustainability. It

just meant that something could continue on and on forever regardless of how much suffering,” (01:17:57).

While Tabrizi seems convinced that sustainable fishing causes too much suffering to be a plausible solution, the audience may not be. To persuade the audience of this, the film works to build empathy for fish and sea creatures and shows that eating seafood is a cruel act. Tabrizi interviews renowned marine scientist Dr. Sylvia Earle. She explains, “To me, it's remarkable that the question is even asked that, ‘Do fish feel pain?’ As a scientist, it's common sense. They have a nervous system, fish do. They have the basic elements that all vertebrates have,” (01:19:59). With the credibility of Dr. Earle, the audience learns that fish can feel pain the same way as humans do. Continuing to build empathy for fish, Dr. Earle states, “And also, there's evidence that fishes show, uh, curiosity, perhaps concern, perhaps, uh, fear, when they can see other fishes being taken out of their tanks, and chopped up on a block right outside the tank” (01:21:48). The audience now knows that not only do fish have feelings like humans, but they might also think like humans and can understand when they are in potential danger. Thus, sustainable fishing is not a feasible solution because, as Tabrizi claims, it causes immense suffering.

With the solution of sustainable fishing discredited for its cruelty, Tabrizi introduces the final solution to be examined: cease fish consumption. He explains, “Plant-based solutions, I think, is definitely one of the best options we have to go forward,” (1:24:42). Having said that, Tabrizi realized many audience members might reflexively reject plant-based options. Certainly, eliminating seafood consumption would cause the seafood industry to become obsolete, but is it reasonable for the audience to cease eating seafood? Tabrizi asks the audience, “What am I going to miss out on if I stopped eating seafood?” (1:22:30). To answer this question, the film interviews expert Dr. Michael Klaper, who explains, “A common belief is that fish are the best

source of these essential omega-3 fatty acids, but people don't realize that fish don't make omega-3 fatty acids. It's the algae cells that are making the omega-3 fats, and the fish swallow the algae cells" (01:23:52).

To further support claims that humans don't need to eat fish to be healthy, the documentary shifts to an interview with Dominique Barnes, a marine biologist and co-founder of a plant based faux seafood company. She suggests, "So why not just eat the algae that has those great benefits we're looking for?" (01:24:15). She claims that their alternative food products taste like seafood, so "You're not gonna miss out on taste, it's there for you. It's delicious. But you will miss the cholesterol, there's no PCBs, no mercury, no heavy antibiotics. You get the things you want from seafood, but none of the negative things" (01:24:29). These interviews with Dr. Klaper and Barnes work to make seafood alternatives more appealing and seemingly more feasible for the audience to make the switch.

Ultimately, ceasing to eat seafood and choosing plant-based alternatives is the only legitimate solution Tabrizi endorses to solve the problems of the seafood industry. At the end of the film, calm and beautiful imagery of seascapes and fish are shown, while Tabrizi contends,

Although I still pick up trash on beaches and have embarked on a project to continue investigating and reporting on environmental issues, with so many plant-based alternatives emerging for almost every seafood product I could imagine. I realized the single best thing I could do every single day to protect the ocean and the marine life I loved, was to simply not eat them. (01:25:24)

Tabrizi's final statements encapsulate the entirety of the film and his personal feelings throughout the journey of filming, while also including the final call to action. The film leaves the audience with a sense of hope, stating that, although companies and governments are not ready to stop fishing or establish large scale, no-take zones, the audience is empowered in their own agency to cut back on seafood consumption.

Tabrizi utilizes elimination order to consider and discredit each “solution” to the fishing problem. Each solution is tossed aside until only one remains. The film uses expert interviews to contend that commercial fishing could never be sustainable, gruesome imagery and facts to show that fish farms are a health hazard, and unsettling footage to underscore that true sustainable fishing causes suffering. Tabrizi indicates that the only true solution is to cease eating seafood and calls upon his audience to do so with a sense of hope in their agency to help solve the extreme problems uncovered throughout the film.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter investigates the documentary form as a vehicle for calling attention to a problem, investigating various solutions, and then providing hope for the audience that one of these solutions could solve or alleviate the problem. The film takes the audience on an investigative journey with the film’s narrator, Ali Tabrizi, to uncover the problems facing our ocean. As the audience is taken on this journey, the true issues of the ocean are revealed, including plastic pollution, overfishing, habitat destruction, organized crime, and slave labor. The film builds mistrust in our news, the governments that regulate fishing industries, and the nonprofits that claim to advocate for the ocean in order to convince the audience that the true problems our oceans face have been concealed. Common perceptions of the ocean and the fishing industry are slowly deconstructed, revealing its unknown depths and dangers, and the authenticity of sustainable fishing or alternative fishing practices is called into question. The use of graphic images, illustrative animations, expert interviews, and an overarching exposé narrative work to strongly invite the audience to follow the film’s ultimate call to action: cease seafood consumption.

## CHAPTER 5 – CONCLUSION

The films *My Octopus Teacher*, *Mission Blue*, and *Seaspiracy* leverage documentary film form as a persuasive communication tool. Because documentaries are often perceived as representing reality, the different depictions of the ocean, and the issues it faces, hold certain elements of credibility or authenticity. As I have discussed in this thesis, all of the films employ similar rhetorical techniques, including compelling verbal narratives and vivid imagery, but these rhetorical techniques are applied in different ways in each film to accomplish distinct goals.

*My Octopus Teacher* tells the story of Craig Foster, a filmmaker and free diver, whose life was transformed by an educational, year-long interaction with an octopus off the coast of South Africa. The personal accounts of his experience, his anthropomorphic description of the octopus, the things he learned from it, and the imagery of stunning underwater images that provide an enchanting immersive experience, all work to encourage the audience to empathize, learn, and care about the animal and the ocean it calls home. *Mission Blue* presents the self-narrated autobiography of Dr. Sylvia Earle, depicting foundational and endearing moments from her life against the backdrop of coinciding catastrophic environmental events. These moments of Earle's life are framed in nostalgic or enchanted ways, romanticizing her perspective of the ocean and positioning the audience to see the degraded status of the ocean with her urgency to establish more protected marine areas. *Seaspiracy's* director, Ali Tabrizi, guides the audience through an investigation that uncovers the secrets of the fishing industry. Through unsettling imagery, staggering statistics on overfishing, and convincing interviews, the film reconstructs the audience's perspective of seafood and empowers them to take action against the industry by ceasing its consumption.

This thesis contributes to the field of rhetoric and communication by highlighting different persuasive strategies that inform environmental communication. The assessment of anthropomorphism in the second chapter (*My Octopus Teacher*) adds to the work done by Rowley and Johnson by continuing to investigate the ways in which documentaries may utilize anthropomorphism to promote ecological frameworks. The analysis in the third chapter (*Mission Blue*) contributes to the ever-building and already large body of work on the rhetoric of storytelling by explicating the way Dr. Earle tells her life story. It also shows the relevance of ecological frameworks within environmental advocacy rhetoric and gives a medium-close reading of how ecological frameworks can be encouraged. The examination in the fourth chapter of *Seaspiracy's* strong investigative, exposé narrative highlights how this rhetorical strategy can be imposed upon other environmental issues to combat common but harmful misconceptions.

With the world facing increasing environmental threats and concerns over climate change, the significance of environmental communication necessarily will increase as well. Based on my personal experience as an environmental educator in the Virgin Islands, this analysis of the aforementioned films identifies the rhetorical strategies and techniques that make them compelling and suggests they can be applied in practice. In fact, the persuasive tactics identified in these films are often used in my own work. For example, I have employed an investigative narrative, exposing the hidden dangers of drinking plastic bottled water filled with forever chemicals rather than filtered and purified tap water. I have explained to snorkelers the importance of wearing mineral sunscreen that does not kill coral, citing the grief of swimming past old friends, or rather, the skeletons of coral animals I can remember from my childhood, forever fixed upon the ocean floor in some of my favorite snorkel spots. I have anthropomorphized a small shark, infantilizing it to convince a fearful visitor that they are not

just killing machines. I am someone who, like Dr. Sylvia Earle, knows the enchantment of certain ecosystems, like the ocean, and has watched it decline throughout the years.

Having used some of these narrative techniques in my own work, I have noticed that there are parameters in which they should be used. Each technique may be effective or ineffective depending on the situation and the persuasive goals that an educator may have. For example, anthropomorphizing animals has been certainly effective when I need to educate an audience about protecting species they may not know much about. On St. John, hundreds of people flock to a beach called Maho Bay in which many juvenile sea turtles forage sea grass every day. These hundreds of people have seemingly, and purely anecdotally, altered the foraging behavior of the sea turtles, pushing them to forage in deeper areas away from humans during peak beach visitation hours. This may be caused by the drive that visitors have to get their perfect sea turtle picture, getting much too close to a federally listed endangered species. When I give sea turtle protection seminars, I often anthropomorphize the sea turtles, explaining that they are just kids and teenagers, juvenile and sub adult sea turtles, that are here to eat so that they can grow bigger and reach adulthood. I relate the sea turtle to terms reserved for human youth and appeal to the audiences's frame of reference that children and teenagers need food to grow to encourage them to keep their distance when observing the sea turtles.

The investigative narrative is useful in situations where the target audience may have longstanding misconceptions about the topic. In the Virgin Islands where almost all water is harvested from rainfall and cisterns are impossible to keep sterile, many residents will choose to drink bottled water purchased at the store. However, as one might imagine, this means that the small island, which already ships off all of its trash to the mainland United States, is producing exorbitant amounts of single use plastic bottles. Certain organizations aim to improve drinking

water infrastructure and reduce plastic use. The seemingly best way to approach misconceptions generations of people have had around the safety of bottled water or the difficulty of filtering and drinking cistern water is through an investigate approach which breaks down the harmful realities of bottled water and the ease of filtering and purifying cistern water.

Finally, the reframing of my own experiences has been helpful when describing issues people often have not encountered themselves. I often use my own experiences of growing up on St. John in an avid diving and ocean exploring family to describe the way I see the state of the ocean and encourage my audiences to see it that way too. For instance, visitors are often fearful of sharks being in the water. However, I will explain that growing up, I never saw sharks on snorkels or dives. Now, I often do. I explain how this is exciting because it means that the ecosystems are possibly healthier because sharks are considered critical species for healthy reef habitats. I can also describe my own interactions with sharks, putting their fears at ease and encouraging them to see sharks the way I do.

A single master's thesis can only add to the inventory of research concerning the rhetorical potential of documentaries and effective methods for social movements to influence the public. However, there are many more topics that could be addressed. As more environmental advocacy documentaries emerge and have more exposure with streaming platforms like Netflix, future research may explore how the genre evolves. There is also room to delve deeper into how these documentaries carry on their message after the film's release in other media forms, such as newsletters, websites, and social media. Many of these films are situated as just one communication tool in a larger, long-term campaign that utilizes many different communication channels. Research into the relationship of these communication channels may help practitioners to further achieve their persuasive goals. Future research might

also assess the potential decreased use of long-form films like documentaries. With the rise in popularity of short form video, research may evaluate the ways short videos break down compelling components of documentary into smaller, more digestible and accessible clips that can reach wider audiences.

Overall, identifying, understanding, and teaching effective rhetorical strategies provides avenues for positive social and environmental change. For me, this is critical if I want to prevent the continued degradation of our home, planet earth. As Earle says in *Mission Blue*, “We now can learn from the past and as never before, do something about it before it’s too late” (01:08:57).

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