

**How We Sea Conservation: A Content Analysis of
Conservation Efforts Framed on
Animal Planet's *The Aquarium***

by

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ABSTRACT

With 70% of the Earth being underwater and affected by many factors, aquatic animals are disappearing. However, people are also to blame for the endangerment and extinction of species. Zoos and Aquariums are trying to help combat this issue. Some of these facilities have teamed up with Animal Planet to give a glimpse at their daily routines of taking care of animals, training, and vet visits. Georgia Aquarium is featured in *The Aquarium* that began airing in 2019. This thesis uses framing theory to analyze the frames presented in season 1 of *The Aquarium* to answer the research question: How are conservation efforts on the television series *The Aquarium* framed? After interviewing Georgia Aquarium, a codebook was made and the first season of *The Aquarium* was coded for education techniques, conservation efforts, and communication tactics.

Ultimately, the show was not about conservation efforts as originally thought, but the show was focused on being entertaining and educational. *The Aquarium* gives viewers the chance to learn about the aquatic animals that find their homes in Georgia Aquarium.

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Because Jesus came to Earth, lived a perfect life, died for my sins, and rose again three days later, my life has purpose no matter the trials I face.

I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me. Philippians 4:12B-13

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

With climate change and natural disasters becoming more prevalent around the world and affecting the Earth's waters, thousands of species are being pushed out of their homes and becoming threatened, endangered, and extinct. The vast majority of Earth is covered in water and many different species find their homes in the depths across the globe. These animals also live in various water types including freshwater, saltwater, and brackish water. These species are oftentimes more difficult to study and learn about since they reside in a different habitat than people. Georgia Aquarium has televised their aquarium and their efforts with wildlife on Animal Planet's *The Aquarium* to reach more people than just those who visit in person.

Georgia Aquarium is working towards conservation and partners with other organizations that have similar missions to help preserve animals in the wild. Georgia Aquarium provides a way for visitors to learn more about aquatic animals. The aquarium also gives the on-site scientific team the ability to learn techniques to help aquatic animals that live in the vast majority of Earth. Georgia Aquarium makes the animals more accessible to viewers and visitors to see the animals up close while the animal is in a comfortable, life-like habitat. Working with these marine animals also gives veterinarians the opportunity to learn more techniques in order to provide better care for

the various animals that find their home at the aquarium. Another way that Georgia Aquarium has been engaging audiences is through two seasons of Animal Planet's series, *The Aquarium*.

Animal Planet filmed season one of the television show, *The Aquarium* in 2019 and season two in 2020 as a form of edutainment to inform and entertain viewers.

Wildlife conservation is important to every ecosystem and using television creates an opportunity for the aquarium to educate viewers on preservation and conservation.

Wildlife conservation protects species from extinction and helps to restore the natural habitats of the species. Conservation can also mean protecting animals that are not endangered so that the species extinction rate will slow. This can also include rehabilitation and possible release of injured animals, reproduction of endangered or threatened animals to increase population, and releasing new animals into natural, wild habitats. This series is intended to provide a way for people to learn about and experience new animals that they may not have the chance to encounter in the wild. This thesis is a content analysis case study that uses framing theory to analyze the conservation efforts presented in *The Aquarium*.

Framing theory

Framing theory provides frames of attention and gives meaning to them. Framing theory includes frame-building and frame-setting (Vreese, 2005). Vreese (2005) describes frame building as, "the factors that influence the structural qualities of news frames" (p.52). Vreese (2005) also describes frame setting as, "the interaction between media frames and individuals' prior knowledge and predispositions" (p.52). These frames can be specific to certain issues but there are also generic frames. The frames can show

different spins on a story as well. Frames direct viewers' attention to a particular viewpoint instead of the whole picture without guided frames involved.

Framing theory is used to look into what topics are being portrayed and how that is communicated to viewers. Framing with television shows is typically referred to as media framing. The order frames are presented in in a show helps to determine how well the information in those frames is retained by the viewer. Competing frames or, in the instance of *The Aquarium*, multiple frames about the same species at once, can be too much at once for the viewer. The viewer will, more than likely, lose a lot of that information. Changing frames and adding frames that do not compete can help viewers retain more information on each of the different species. Georgia Aquarium features two or three species per episode and rotates scenes so that the information about each animal is better retained by the viewers. Knowing that oftentimes people view aquariums negatively, *The Aquarium* can present frames that show how the animals in the care of Georgia Aquarium are treated and the work that goes into the exhibits and feedings.

The frames analyzed in this thesis are the entirety of scenes in season 1 of *The Aquarium*. Each scene was determined to be a complete frame starting and ending with a particular animal. As soon as the animal was presented, the scene and frame started. Once the animal featured changed to a different animal, the frame ended and the next one started.

Rationale

Animal themed shows and Animal Planet itself have been on air for many years. The behind-the-scenes look at zoos, aquariums, and their conservation efforts, however, is a different take on animal shows. Zoos and aquariums have traditionally been

problematic and seen as an imprisonment for animals. *The Aquarium* follows Georgia Aquarium in Atlanta. The show displays a different side of aquariums and shows their daily efforts in taking care of each species housed at Georgia Aquarium. The framing of conservation shows has the ability to influence how people see zoos and aquariums. This thesis analyzes how conservation is framed using education techniques, conservation elements, and communication tactics.

Research question

Georgia Aquarium is using television in hopes of educating people about new species and providing information in an entertaining way that is engaging to audiences of the show.

RQ: How are conservation efforts on the television series *The Aquarium* framed?

Summary

This chapter introduces the thesis and discusses the theory to be used for the data collected. Chapter two contains a literature review discussing Georgia Aquarium, framing theory, and edutainment. Chapter two also includes the research question to be answered by the data collected. Chapter three details the method used to conduct research including the use of framing theory and the use of interviews. Chapter four lays out the results of the research done and what was found in the scenes coded. Lastly, Chapter five discusses implications of findings, areas for future research, limitations, and concluding statements.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

Animal Planet hosts a television series called *The Aquarium* that gives a behind the scenes look at the daily routines of Georgia Aquarium. Although captivity of wildlife in zoos and aquariums can be seen as problematic, Animal Planet uses *The Aquarium* to spread the message of conservation in an educational way. *The Aquarium* features Georgia Aquarium and is said to focus on personnel training, educating viewers, and conservation of wild animals. The Director of Communication at Georgia Aquarium notes,

Conservation is often challenging to not only communicate, but more importantly to get it to resonate with a viewer. *The Aquarium* gave us an opportunity to present the information in a visual and exciting way that I believe resonated with the audience. (Fontana, personal communication, February 24, 2021)

Georgia Aquarium personnel used television as their method of communicating conservation efforts to viewers in a way they felt was educational and still engaging. This thesis is a case study analyzing how the messages of conservation are frame in *The Aquarium*.

The literature review begins by presenting the organizational background of Georgia Aquarium, then examines education and edutainment programming. Extinction

and conservation efforts through breeding programs and conservation campaigns are then discussed. Lastly, framing is presented as the theoretical lens for this study.

Organizational Background

Over 70% of Earth's ecosystem is under water (Animal Planet, 2020) and Georgia Aquarium provides a way for visitors and the scientific community alike to learn more about the animals that live in the vast majority of Earth. Georgia Aquarium (n.d.) describes itself as “a scientific institution that entertains and educates, features exhibits and programs of the highest standards, and offers engaging and exciting guest experiences that promote the conservation of aquatic biodiversity throughout the world” (para. 1). Working with these marine animals at the aquarium also helps veterinarians learn more medical techniques should it be necessary to aid animals in the wild.

Georgia Aquarium would be unable to help as many animals without having partnerships with other organizations that aid in conservation efforts. One of the organizations that Georgia Aquarium partners with is the National Marine Mammal Foundation (NMMF). NMMF's mission is “to improve and protect life for marine mammals, humans, and our shared oceans through science, service and education” (Franks, 2019, para 1). NMMF partner with corporations leading the way in discoveries toward conservation. Georgia Aquarium is helping NMMF make strides towards learning about marine animals to help preserve them and their homes.

While Georgia Aquarium is working to conserve animal populations across the world and share that message on their own, they have also partnered with Animal Planet to give people a behind-the-scenes look at the care and training that goes into protecting wild animals. Georgia Aquarium began featuring their conservation efforts on television

on Animal Planet on *The Aquarium* in 2019 (Fontana, personal communication, February 24, 2021). Georgia Aquarium gives television viewers the opportunity to learn about organizational processes that would not normally be accessible to the general public. When someone learns about something in a fun way, perhaps they will show concern for the animals. The aquarium and show producers hope people will begin to care more about conserving habitats and animals because of what is learned on *The Aquarium*. Animal Planet says that their channel is, “a global leader in real life entertainment, serving a passionate audience of superfans around the world with content that inspires, informs and entertains” (Animal Planet, para. 1). They are entertaining and educating with the shows they air all over the world, giving viewers the opportunity to learn about the animals and the conservation efforts going on all around the world.

Education Programs

Many aquariums now have programs in place that give visitors the opportunity to learn more about various species. The educational efforts were previously no more than signs at the animal enclosures that most people simply passed over. This was also supposed to educate the public on the animal they were looking at. However, Pearson et al. (2014) note “traditional zoo signage is often poorly attended to and may miss the most important information required by visitors” (para. 5). A study by Anderson et al. (2003) found that training demonstrations with an explanation increases the amount of time a visitor spends at an enclosure. The longer the time at the enclosure, the more opportunity to learn about the species. Anderson et al (2003) asked visitors to complete a survey after leaving the enclosure to assess how much information they had learned from training sessions. The researchers distributed another survey as visitors left the park later that day.

The results showed increased retention just by having explained training during visitation. These visitors were able to recall facts about the animals presented to them even as they exited the facility hours later. Many aquariums also offer in-person educational experiences. These encounters allow a keeper to be with the animal in a room full of people while the visitors get to touch, be around, and learn more about an unfamiliar wild aquatic animal.

Television shows such as *The Aquarium* are giving viewers the opportunity to watch the behind-the-scenes training process with explanation, learn about the animal, how close it is to extinction, and learn what threats are in the wild for this animal. The viewers watch and learn about different animals within the one-hour time slot. This is a means of providing prolonged exposure, and in turn, more education on conservation.

Edutainment

Education programming, such as *The Aquarium*, seeks to edutain. Edutainment is defined as the mixing of educational content with entertainment as support to increase learners' enthusiasm (Akskal, 2015). The entertainment aspect keeps the educational aspect more exciting to retain audience attention. *The Aquarium* takes the knowledge of each species and delivers the message of conservation in an entertaining method. The show gives viewers an educating yet entertaining look at their daily routine at Georgia Aquarium.

Disney World and SeaWorld both exemplify edutainment. They both provide entertaining aspects yet are also presenting educational content in a fun way. Bir et al. (2019) studied the edutainment value of both Disney World and SeaWorld in Orlando through interviews with park visitors and others who had heard about and read about the

attractions. The authors noted that Disney World attractions such as The Seas with Nemo and Friends and Kilimanjaro Safaris are more interesting to visitors because they both present information with real animals and add an element of entertainment. Some Disney attractions incorporated animated characters that visitors recognize in order to enhance entertainment value. On the other hand, results showed that while people found SeaWorld to be entertaining, they did not find that keeping large marine mammals in captivity was ethical. Many zoos and aquariums along with attraction-based destinations such as Disney World and SeaWorld are giving people a chance to encounter wild animals and learn about them while they are also entertained by them. Bir et al. (2019) found that most of the people interviewed do seek out educational activities even if they attend for entertainment purposes. Educational and edutainment programming is a means for supporting zoological efforts to conserve species in the wild.

Extinction

Thousands of species become extinct each year at an alarming rate. The World Wildlife Fund (n.d.) states that species are becoming extinct 1,000 to 10,000 times faster than the species' natural extinction rate. The natural extinction rate is the number of species that would go extinct without the fault of humans. The World Wildlife Fund (WWF) credits one species for so many global extinctions and that is humans: "In general terms, population growth and our consumption are the reasons for this enormous loss. Specifically, habitat destruction and wildlife trade are the major causes of population decline in species" ("Living Planet Index", para.1). This means that humans are destroying these habitats forcing the different species to find refuge where they cannot survive or where they are being killed. This is not good for humans either in the long run

because, “wildlife and the ecosystems are vital to human life,” and “the destruction of nature is as dangerous as climate change” (Carrington, 2018, para. 8). What humans fail to realize is that the wildlife ecosystem problems they cause affect them as well through zoonotic diseases that can harm humans such as SARS and COVID-19.

People can get involved and make a positive impact in many ways. Some conservation efforts, however, have been detrimental due to unintentional introduction of diseases to populations of wildlife (Deem et al., 2001). Although many diseases cannot be passed from animal to human, most diseases are easily transmitted from a human to an animal. While species extinction may seem irrelevant to humans, Platt (2010) notes that “as species disappear, infectious diseases rise in humans and throughout the animal kingdom” (para. 2). The various species can become very ill due to the harsh conditions they are forced into and many of them do not survive. Humans contribute to extinction rates and can contribute to conservation efforts according to organizations like Georgia Aquarium.

There are many different species that either live in, or around, water or ice and depend on it for survival. One huge threat for these animals is climate change (Learmonth et al., 2006). As the world heats and melts, more animals are becoming extinct. Pollution of oceans is another cause of aquatic animal extinction. Aquariums like Georgia Aquarium are stepping in and helping to preserve endangered species to repopulate them in the wild. The animals at the aquarium are used to educate people on various aquatic species and give visitors a reason to care about how they treat the world and support conservation efforts.

Conservation through Aquariums

Aquariums educate people on conservation efforts by providing an up-close view to these animals that they would not get the chance to see otherwise. Zoos and aquariums are capable of producing beneficial research on these animals to help with the ones in the wild (Wildwelfare, 2018). This can lead to preventative measures being taken against extinction. With an animal in captivity, whether rescued or born in captivity, the trainers can spot injury and then the vets are able to tend to those injured animals before something far worse could occur that would be inevitable with the animal in the wild. In the wild, the animal would be more susceptible to predators and odds are, the animal would not live much longer after being hurt. Hone (2014) notes of animals,

it is perfectly possible to keep them in a zoo or wildlife park and for them to have a quality of life as high or higher than in the wild. Their movement might be restricted (but not necessarily by that much) but they will not suffer from the threat or stress of predators (and nor will they be killed in a grisly manner or eaten alive) or the irritation and pain of parasites, injuries and illnesses will be treated, they won't suffer or die of drought or starvation and indeed will get a varied and high-quality diet with all the supplements required. (para. 4)

Georgia Aquarium is stepping in to help many aquatic species. According to Ballantyne and Packer (2016), the biggest challenge for zoos and aquariums is being able to incorporate the scientific aspect of the animals with the conservation outlook. By combining both science and conservation, the teams are able to educate visitors on the animal itself and on how to help protect the species. Godinez and Fernandez (2019) credit visibility of the animal with how influential the experience is for visitors. The same study

also notes that visitors' opinions can change based on the type of experience they have when visiting (Godinez & Fernandez, 2019). Because visibility influences the overall experience, Animal Planet programs could be breaking barriers by showing behind the scenes looks into daily aquarium life as well as the animals' training and feeding routines.

Aquariums are also doing a lot of work to help conserve species in the wild. The animals are no longer kept in tanks for entertainment, but are used to educate people and help reproduce the species for the wild. Through education programs and breeding programs, aquariums are partnering with conservation organizations to help keep species from going extinct.

Breeding Programs

Many aquariums have breeding programs to help keep a population from extinction. The main point of these programs "is to help conserve animals that are endangered or threatened in the wild so that a species doesn't become extinct" (Temple, 2015, para. 2). Often an aquarium only has either males or females and will bring in the opposite sex from another facility to help contribute to the breeding program. This is part of the Association of Zoos and Aquariums (AZA)'s Species Survival Plan (SSP). The AZA (2011) explains, "Each SSP Program coordinates the individual activities of participating member institutions through a variety of species conservation, research, husbandry, management, and educational initiatives" (p. 7). Another part of the SSP is looking into genetics. For instance, if an aquarium has a female and the only male is her son, they are siblings, or they share DNA in any way, the SSP will find a different male so that there are no cases of inbreeding.

The question with many of these programs is whether it is worth it to keep the animals in tanks in aquariums rather than in the wild; however, the breeding programs have an ultimate end goal of releasing more into the wild. Some animals, if they get hurt or have a medical condition, would not be safe going back into the wild so they are kept and used in breeding programs to help repopulate the species. Aquariums all over the world are working together to help conserve wildlife. Many of the facilities bring in species from other facilities across the globe to help with breeding programs. Further, education is being presented in a way that is easy for people to understand and become more involved and caring towards wildlife. Breeding programs and educational efforts are further supported by highly visible conservation campaigns.

Conservation Campaigns

One company that implements wildlife conservation campaigns is Disney. With the wildlife films that Disney creates, there is typically a wildlife charity that receives a small portion of the sales of tickets. For the live-action movie, *The Lion King*:

The Walt Disney Company. . . announced a global conservation campaign to raise awareness of the crisis facing lions and other wildlife across Africa. *The Lion King* “Protect the Pride” campaign focused on protecting and revitalizing the lion population, with Disney lending its support to the Wildlife Conservation Network’s (WCN) Lion Recovery Fund (LRF) and their vision to double the lion population across Africa by 2050 through efforts that engage communities to ensure a future for African wildlife and their habitats. (Walt Disney Company, 2019, para. 1)

The Lion King was not the first movie that Disney partnered with to bring awareness to conservation efforts. Every Disney nature movie produced is tied to a campaign to help save the species presented in the movie.

Another giant in conservation campaigns is the World Wildlife Foundation (WWF). WWF says, “We want to see wildlife thriving. We work with many partners to achieve this, seeking to protect plant and animal species by tackling the root causes of the many serious threats” (WWF, n.d., para. 12) The World Wildlife Foundation has been working to protect species and their habitats for years. The company was founded in 1961 and has partnered with other organizations to help bring conservation importance and relevance to light.

One noticeable difference is that Disney uses their films as an edutainment way to bring awareness and donate money to conservation organizations. On the other hand, WWF not only helps through monetary donation but also through being on the ground working with specific regions to conserve the wildlife.

Zoos Victoria has started a campaign to help save the orangutans called “Don’t Palm Us Off.” This is in an effort to help stop deforestation to produce palm oil in areas where orangutans live (Pearson et al., 2014). One of the goals of this campaign was to make it more visible on packaging if the product had used palm oil to help consumers make a wise choice in picking another item or brand that is not causing harm to orangutans.

Bates (2010) analyzed social marketing tactics that ocean conservation campaigns use. One program is the Monterey Bay Aquarium Seafood Watch. Because aquarium visitors were already perceived as conscientious of aquatic animals, the aquarium was

focused on teaching them which animals were sustainable and helping make better seafood choices (Bates, 2010) This is a way to enhance what visitors already know and teach them to learn to make more environmentally friendly choices. If people already care, it is easier to show them small changes that can make a bigger difference.

The New Hope for the Oceans offers another conservation approach by partnering with faith-based organizations to help conserve aquatic species (Schaefer, 2017).

Schaefer (2017) argues that this organization works because science alone cannot save the animals and faith-based organizations can help with conservation in a variety of ways, such as by adding cultural values and ethics that have to be considered when researching and engaging conservation efforts (Schaefer, 2017). Essentially, the religious organizations care about the animal and are able to bring that care to accompany scientific research that has already been done. While people want to help animals, there are some situations that are harder to fix, such as climate changes.

Learmonth et al. (2006) discuss how to predict trends in climate change and how it will affect oceans. They explain that the climate system “is made up of a number of components: the atmosphere, oceans, land surface, cryosphere (ice areas) and biosphere (including human influences)” (p. 441). Each of these layers of the climate affects one another and if one system is not working correctly, the whole chain will be askew. The salinity of water is also increasing as evaporation takes effect (Learmonth et al., 2006). Water evaporation leaves higher levels of salt content in the waters. Because of climate changes, water temperature adjusts leaving some species unable to live, eat, or breed in the waters. McClanahan et al. (2008) also researched conservation and climate change, looking specifically at the Western Indian Ocean. They explain that when waters warm

during El Niño, reefs suffer bleaching effects (when the coral turns white) and mortality (McClanahan et al, 2008). Ultimately, the changing temperatures affect the reefs which also affects the other aquatic species that depend on those corals. Conservation efforts are not well resourced for climate change and protection of the coral reefs (McClanahan et al., 2008).

Ultimately, conservation efforts need to reach people in a way that sparks action. People browsing an aquarium on a random visit is not enough to get people to care about the animals. *The Aquarium* shows people what they would not see on a normal visit: the tasks that take place behind the scenes. Framing this information as conservation gives Georgia Aquarium an opportunity to share its mission of saving wildlife.

Framing Theory

Framing theory is used to examine how a particular topic is portrayed or what ideas are actually being portrayed, such as in a television scene. Framing is often applied to television programs to analyze content creation and receptivity. Scheufele (1999) states “Viewing the media or news frames as necessary turns meaningless and non-recognizable happenings into a discernible event” (p. 106). This is what takes a television program and keeps it from being just another show but gives it importance in the world. Scheufele (1999) notes, “Media frames also serve as working routines for journalists that allow the journalists to quickly identify and classify information” (p.106). In that same way, this theory is used to analyze frames presented in *The Aquarium*. The framing of the episodes give ways for viewers to perceive conservation and Georgia Aquarium.

Media frames make a more lasting impact based on how well each frame is stored by a viewer before the next frame is presented (Baden & Lecheler, 2012). If the first

frame really clicks with the audience, once the second frame is presented, the first frame is still making an impact. If too similar or competing frames are presented one after the other, the viewer might get them confused (Baden & Lecheler, 2012). In the case of *The Aquarium* television series, this concept can be seen in the order of scenes on the shows. For instance, instead of doing entire episodes over one species, or even doing two back-to-back scenes of the same species, each is mixed with a variety of species. This can help viewers retain more information on each of the different animals.

In addition to the way the scenes are framed, language use can further help edutain viewers to help information retention. Figurative language like metaphors and irony used in framing adds flair to the frame and makes it more appealing to the audience (Burgers et al., 2016). This can also be accomplished by putting the frame and what is to be learned from it in language that most people can understand. In the case of *The Aquarium*, this would be using simpler words rather than scientific. When scientific words provide more accurate description, Georgia Aquarium tends to go into detail to explain the scientific wording in lay terms. Ultimately, Burgers et al. (2016) suggest that figurative frames boost salience and importance of a topic. People can more easily understand any topic when the explanation is in simplified wording.

The language used in addition to the presentation of frames can impact the message receiver. Bullock and Shulman (2021) studied the framing of health messages to college women who tan. They noted that the longer one frame is with adequate space between frames in a sequence, the larger the impact on attitudes and behaviors triggered by the frames. Similar to the findings from Baden and Lecheler (2012) and Burgers et al. (2016), there is a way to present frames that will make a more lasting impact on viewers.

Bullock and Shulman (2021) found if frames used difficult language, perceived influence increased processing fluency but when easier language was used, processing fluency went down. Thus, it is likely Georgia Aquarium's focus on simplicity over complex scientific language facilitates message processing.

Wildlife conservation related to zoos and aquariums paired with framing theory has been studied previously. Maynard's (2017) content analysis of zoological industry articles found frames that included animal welfare, business and revenue, entertainment and recreation, educational opportunities, conservation and science, technology, employment opportunities, and news. While all of these frames are important to the aquarium and their business, viewers might perceive animal welfare, educational opportunities, and conservation and science as more important than the other business-themed frames. Yocco et al. (2015) studied zoo visitors over a weekend and asked various visitors about their concern for the environment. Their results showed that people prefer messages framed about conserving the earth as a whole. The visitors in this study also indicated that they preferred zoo facilities motivated by environmentally responsible behaviors. Frames that are important to a company might vary based on what they promote and what they present (Maynard, 2017). Animal Planet's presentation of *The Aquarium* presents an opportunity to identify frames purposely chosen to edutain a broad audience.

Georgia Aquarium has a unique advantage in framing conservation at their facility and through television viewership. They are giving visitors a look at animals that thrive in the depths of the oceans that visitors would not normally have the opportunity to

see. With such a large part of the surface area of the Earth being underwater, visitors are able to learn about conserving a larger portion of the Earth as well.

Research Question

Animal Planet is bringing new attention to aquariums as many are converting to conservation aquariums. Edutainment programs such as *The Aquarium* are showing people new species and beginning to create a sense of caring in the people for these species.

RQ: How are conservation efforts on the television series *The Aquarium* framed?

This study used framing theory as the lens for analyzing how *The Aquarium* uses its edutainment format to inform and educate on conservation efforts for aquatic and oceanic wildlife.

Summary

This chapter looks into the problem of extinction that affects many species in the wild. The review also covers conservation efforts through many means but more focused on conservation through zoos and aquariums. The next chapter discusses the means of collecting the data and analyzing *The Aquarium* to answer the research question.

CHAPTER III

METHOD

A content analysis was conducted of the wildlife conservation efforts framed in the first season of Animal Planet's *The Aquarium* to answer the research question. This started with an interview with Georgia Aquarium that aided in development of the codebook used for the content analysis. This content analysis looked at framing, edutainment, and conservation efforts. This chapter focuses on the method of research based on framing theory. Framing theory (Scheufele, 1999) was applied to the series presented on Animal Planet to analyze how the program uses edutainment to educate the audience on conservation issues.

After reaching out to a few zoos and aquariums featured on Animal Planet, a representative from Georgia Aquarium was willing to interview and became the focus of this study. After the interview was complete, the responses given were used to create a codebook to guide the coding process of season one of *The Aquarium*. This content analysis was done by coding episodes of season one. Season one was chosen because it shows the conservation efforts while the television aspect was still new. Season one consists of nine episodes with about 12 scenes in each episode for a total of 110 scenes coded.

Procedure

To gather data, the researcher reached out to Georgia Aquarium via email about the possibility of conducting interviews. Then, the researcher created a codebook based on previous research and some categories based on communication messaging strategies.

The researcher obtained approval from the IRB before the interview was conducted. There was one interview at Georgia Aquarium conducted via email. The interview protocol was sent to the communications and events department in order to allow the interviewee to answer in their own time. The questions were open-ended to encourage description and more honest feedback. The questions determined how familiar the participant was with the show, how attendance has been affected, and the participant's attitudes about the potential effects in the wild. The interview responses are not part of the overall analysis.

Answers to the interview questions guided the codebook creation. Research was done to aid in finding categories already created. While there was not much, articles such as Bir et al.'s (2019) on edutainment at Disney World and at SeaWorld also analyzed conservation and edutainment. One article by Learmonth et al. (2006), helped to create the coding for how the animal was treated based on the population status in the wild. The next step was taking the first season of *The Aquarium* and coding each scene in each episode using Qualtrics to allow for more efficient coding. For intercoder reliability, a secondary coder was trained on coding based on the codebook using an episode in season two and then was able to code scenes in the first episode of season one.

Intercoder Reliability

Intercoder reliability was determined by having a secondary coder trained on the coding process. The secondary coder coded 10% of the scenes which equaled one episode in order to assure the original coding was accurate. A secondary coder ensures an accurate depiction of the frames presented on *The Aquarium*.

Variables of Interest

The codes that were used included: scenes, educational tools, species conservation, training techniques, and message portrayal. Each scene was coded based on the animal presented. Scenes changed when the featured animal switched for another. Educational tools that were coded were breeding programs, presence of ambassador animals, scenes of animals being released into the wild, and animal presentations to aquarium visitors. Ambassador animals are animals that have been injured or have serious medical issues that prevent them from being released back into the wild. The animal, then, is similar to a spokesperson on behalf of the species.

The species conservation codes included coding for endangered or threatened animals and how they were treated compared to animals that were neither endangered or threatened. Endangered animals are nearest to extinction while threatened animals are likely to become endangered in the future (Bruskotter &ENZler, 2009). The special treatment could have appeared in the form of additional enrichment treats, companionship with a keeper, or more specialized vet visits based on abnormal sicknesses. Training techniques included coding for what reason the animals were trained: whether feeding, vet visits, or for a visitor experience.

Coding for edutainment in message portrayal including coding a scene based on if it was informative, entertaining, persuasive, or a combination. Message portrayal also included codes based on who was presenting the information about the animal to the viewers. Each message was presented by either the aquarium director, a veterinarian, or an animal keeper. Ultimately, each frame was looking at how the code categories was presented, if at all, and who it was presenting the information.

Summary

This chapter focused on the method of data collection and use of framing theory. The data were collected by coding an entire season of *The Aquarium*. Framing theory combined with the data collected from coding answers the research question posed by the researcher in chapter two. The next chapter explains the results of the coding.

CHAPTER IV

RESULTS

For this thesis, season one of Animal Planet's *The Aquarium* was coded to discover how conservation efforts were framed on the show. This included nine episodes averaging 12 scenes per episode for a total of 110 scenes. A secondary coder also coded 10% of the scenes in order to validate findings. Cohen's Kappa revealed weak agreement ($\kappa=.57$) between researchers with the biggest discrepancy being over breeding programs. A discussion to resolve inconsistencies took place particularly about breeding as a focus of mated pairs rather than previous breeding efforts. Training as anything supporting the expected behavior of the animal was discussed as well. This helped inform the analysis in describing the data.

Each scene was coded based on educational methods, conservation efforts, and communication techniques. Many scenes were less about education or conservation but instead were about daily routines at the aquarium, moving animals from one exhibit to another, or adding features to an exhibit. Originally, *The Aquarium* was thought to be primarily about the conservation efforts of Georgia Aquarium being presented to viewers. This was not the case as most scenes were informational about the animals at the aquarium and their daily lives and routines behind the scenes of a normal visit to the aquarium. The daily routine that was shown instead was also important for viewers to see. In the past, aquariums and zoos have been seen as imprisonments for animals. An

article from PETA argues, “Zoos teach people that it is acceptable to interfere with animals and keep them locked up in captivity, where they are bored, cramped, lonely, deprived of all control over their lives, and far from their natural homes” (PETA, 2003, para. 1). Giving viewers a look at how the animals actually live and how they are really treated is contradictory to previous beliefs held by many. As routine as the scenes seemed, the scenes all showed the keepers doing something that the animal needed done: for example, an exhibit update or a vet visit versus a casual stroll through to feed an animal for the day. Each scene had something to be taken care of besides basic care.

Education

Out of a total of 110 scenes, 96 of them did not have any educational methods presented. The methods being coded included use of ambassador animals, breeding programs, animal releases, and animal presentations to aquarium visitors. There were no frames featuring breeding programs and the remaining categories were coded ambassador animals (5), animal releases (4), and animal presentations (3). There were fewer educational methods present than originally anticipated. Each scene that was coded for animal releases showed a few Georgia Aquarium team members helping the South African Foundation for the Conservation of Coastal Birds (SANCCOB) rehabilitating and releasing penguins back into their natural habitat. These scenes were all in the same episode and no other episodes showed animals being released back into their natural, wild habitat.

What the episodes showed instead of educational methods was simply a description of the daily routine with a particular animal. One scene in episode 7 showed trainers working with one-year-old sea lion, Scarlet and training her to be able to walk the

aquarium with the other, older sea lions who had been at the aquarium for a while. The trainers talked about Scarlet specifically but not about her species or conservation status. Other episodes showed scenes of Ocean Voyager exhibit renovations or moving animals from one exhibit to another.

Most of the animals presented in the show are not as common as a domestic animal, so even a presentation of a specific animal is going to be teaching viewers something about the species. In the example with Scarlet, while the keepers are primarily talking about her individually, viewers are still given information about sea lions based on Scarlet's behaviors. This happens with many animals at the aquarium for viewers around the world. *The Aquarium*'s discussion of breeding was not always clear and might not communicate conservation well.

Conservation Efforts

The conservation efforts that were coded included special treatment of animals based on if the species was endangered, threatened, or neither. The special treatment coded included additional enrichment (snacks and toys), companionship with their keeper, or more specialized vet visits. Only 23 scenes featured an animal that was endangered while there were not any with threatened animals. Of these 23 scenes, seven showed the animal given additional enrichment, 13 scenes contained companionship between an endangered animal and their keeper, and 15 scenes portrayed endangered animals receiving more specialized vet visits. None of the episodes featured an animal whose conservation status was threatened and minimal scenes featured an endangered animal. In one scene in episode eight, for example, a keeper began to talk about the sea otters that live at Georgia Aquarium. They mention that the sea otters are an endangered

species yet do not mention what can be done to preserve and grow the remaining population.

Another area of conservation coded was training the animals and the purpose behind the training. Of the 28 scenes that contained training, 12 showed the animal trained for vet visits, 10 for feeding, 10 for visitor experience, and nine for other various activities such as research, survival, and transportation. Most scenes that did not include training featured the animal's keeper feeding the animal while talking to the viewers about that particular animal. Information the keeper gave included telling the animals' names, where they came to the aquarium from, and other seemingly interesting facts pertaining to each animal. Minimal information was presented about the species as a whole.

Another area of conservation that was noticeably missing was a call to action. The scenes show animals but also gave people no ideas of how to help them. One episode featured scenes that encouraged viewers to recycle and not to throw trash into the ocean. That was mentioned in three of 110 scenes and only in one episode out of nine. After discussing the animals, there is an opportunity to invite viewers to visit or to give viewers ideas of how they can make small changes to help wildlife. Even one call to action at the end of each episode would present a chance for viewers to act on what they had just seen and learned.

Communication Techniques

The areas of communication techniques coded included who was giving the information about the animal in the scene and how the message was portrayed. The

animals' keeper presented information in 98 of the scenes. Veterinarians (21 scenes) and the Aquarium Director (9 scenes) made up the remaining scenes.

Due to the show relying heavily on entertainment to teach viewers about conservation, it was clear that the messages portrayed were both entertaining and informative. Only two scenes were coded as persuasive while entertaining had 100 and informative had 99. The communication techniques used were as expected. With the show being informative of the animals and seeing the animals presented, the expectation was that most, if not all, of the scenes would be both informative and entertaining.

Summary

This chapter focused on results and findings of the research done including educational tactics, conservation efforts, and communication techniques. The next chapter covers areas for implications, future research, limitations, and concluding statements.

CHAPTER V

Discussion and Conclusion

Although *The Aquarium* is both entertaining and educational, conservation efforts were not communicated as expected. *The Aquarium* claims to be a show about conservation efforts of Georgia Aquarium thus the expectation was that the frames of the show would include conservation elements. Instead, this thesis found that conservation efforts were only present in 3 frames over the course of the first season.

The research question for this thesis was: how are conservation efforts framed on *The Aquarium*? Surprisingly, the conservation efforts were not really discussed or presented except for a few scenes that showed Georgia Aquarium partnering with South African Foundation for the Conservation of Coastal Birds (SANCCOB). This television series is originally presented to feel like it is all about conservation of species in the wild, when in reality, it is a show about the daily routines of Georgia Aquarium. The promotion around *The Aquarium* indicated that the series would be conservation based yet the first season did not feature these efforts. The frames instead showed the training, feeding, and care of the various species at Georgia Aquarium. The frames also showed that the animals at Georgia Aquarium are well cared for. Breeding was a topic that was not presented clearly in the show and could hinder how conservation is communicated to viewers. Breeding is important to help increase a population of a species and misrepresentation can cause confusion as to the purpose.

Jessica Fontana, the Senior Director of Communications and Marketing Events at Georgia Aquarium says that the areas of her job include finding “creative and engaging ways to reach people in the hopes of inspiring them to visit and learn more about our ocean” (personal communication, February 24, 2021). *The Aquarium* would have been an ideal platform to reach viewers and encourage them to visit Georgia Aquarium. However, this invite or call to action was noticeably missing from the entire first season. Fontana also said that, “the TV show with Animal Planet gave us an opportunity to give viewers an in-depth look at the impact we have on conservation in the field and right here at Georgia Aquarium” (personal communication, February 24, 2021). Again, these efforts were not presented in season one of *The Aquarium*. After coding the first season of *The Aquarium*, the show would not be considered as a representation of the impact on conservation by Georgia Aquarium. This disconnect in stated intention and actual production of the show, indicates a missed opportunity. It is possible that somewhere along the way the goal for the show changed. This means that Georgia Aquarium is not presenting their conservation efforts and limiting the reach of their conservation message even further. If the goal did change, promotional messaging should have reflected that change as to present a clearer picture of what the show would be.

Implications

After researching how conservation efforts were framed in season one of *The Aquarium*, it was clear that this was an area that needed improvement. Intentionality in framing could help aquarium and zoo efforts with conservation messaging using various forms of media. Studying each frame before the episode airs for conservation elements

and lines up with the overall goal for the show could further the reach of each facility's conservation efforts.

Media is a powerful communicator. If zoos and aquariums are not using media to aid in their goals for communicating wildlife conservation, their reach is severely limited. If people can only hear about a zoo or aquarium and their efforts to protect wildlife by going to that facility, there will be far more people who will never have the opportunity to hear or to act on what they hear.

Leaving out an apparent call to action for viewers means that viewers and visitors will not adequately know about the species or how to help them. There cannot be any personal conservation efforts made without some direction of how or what to do next. If conservation efforts are continually being portrayed poorly, all that has been accomplished is that animals are still being held in captivity for entertainment purposes. Conservation is best with a population to help and if the messaging of conservation is not communicated clearly, people are less likely to be motivated to help the animals that they are seeing. If a person is not guided on beneficial next steps to help animals, they could potentially think that everything they are doing is enough to help but their efforts could be unintentionally harming animals in the process.

Research studies using framing theory to study conservation messages is lacking. Literature on communication through conservation series on television was not found. Although there were conservation studies done, they were not focused on communication or media and the messaging of conservation efforts. Research on this could benefit researchers by creating further understanding on best practices for communicating conservation.

Research conducted could further help practitioners. Finding best practice for conservation messaging would allow practitioners to implement these strategies to be able to better and more thoroughly communicate conservation efforts with people. If presented well, the best-case scenario is that people are incited to make a difference and to help animals in their natural habitats. If communication efforts continue to be lacking or are not well represented, then animals will not get the help they need and will continue to become extinct at a rapid pace.

While the education and conservation efforts were not presented as expected, *The Aquarium* still features elements of edutainment. It is entertaining to see the animals and their distinctive personalities. It is also educational in that viewers can learn about the aquarium and the animals that are living there. Viewers get the chance to see the animals, learn their names, and learn about the exhibits at Georgia Aquarium.

This research has revealed that wildlife conservation communication data is lacking. Framing theory is featured in very little literature on wildlife conservation. If conservation is framed in a way that impacts the receiver, the frames have the potential to make a change for species of all kinds in all places. Maynard (2017) used framing theory to study conservation efforts and found that people care more about the animals' wellbeing than the business end of running a zoological facility. Using this knowledge and framing conservation in this manner could, hypothetically, encourage animals' biggest predator, humans to make beneficial changes in their lives.

Limitations

One area of limitation is that only season one of *The Aquarium* was coded. There are two seasons of the show at the current time. Another area limiting the research is that

only one aquarium was featured and cannot encompass how all aquariums are proceeding with wildlife conservation efforts. If other aquariums were filmed and televised, there could be more data to analyze that would potentially show a more complete picture of conservation efforts of aquatic animals.

Georgia Aquarium and *The Aquarium* can only reach so many people. This limits how many can view, learn from, or be affected by the series. Most people who tune into Animal Planet programming, more than likely, are already interested in animals to some degree. People who have no interest in animals would not be likely to come across television series addressing conservation efforts. This same person is less likely to follow one of the zoos or aquaria on their social media platforms than the person who already likes animals and enjoys watching these shows.

Animal Planet partners with other zoos as well and those zoos could be framing conservation efforts in a way that Georgia Aquarium could learn from or vice versa. Again, those shows also have limited reach if they rely solely on television.

Areas for future research

Future research could be done on season two to see how Georgia Aquarium potentially changed up framing of conservation efforts. Potentially researching how *The Aquarium* promotional content was framed compared to the shows actual content could add to framing of messages like *The Aquarium*.

Another area of research to consider would be to contact Bronx Zoo and San Diego Zoo along with Georgia Aquarium in order to interview and discuss the Animal Planet shows they are using to bring awareness to conservation efforts. This could include analyzing the conservation of wildlife and the efforts that have been framed by

each of these facilities. Research could also benefit from looking into smaller and untelevised zoos and aquariums. Conducting observational research focusing on these other zoos and aquariums' usage of available media to share their message of conservation with people could be beneficial.

Future research could benefit from including a comparison of conservation campaigns advocating for wildlife. For instance, research could be done to analyze multiple campaigns and how much effort is actually being put into conservation of wild species versus making a profit, then taking that information to see how funds are allocated towards wildlife. It would be interesting to research the messaging used by these campaigns and to analyze which tactics are working to get people to donate or to help in conservation efforts.

Conservation messaging is an area of research that is deficient. Future research could consist of analyzing methods of communicating conservation efforts to find what is most effective and what best resonates with and elicits a reaction from the receivers of the messaging presented. Beyond conservation, looking at how other messages meant to incite a reaction are being conveyed in order to find an efficient method of portraying that could transfer over to conservation.

Conclusion

In conclusion, while *The Aquarium* is entertaining to watch and viewers may feel like they learn about the animals on the show, conservation efforts are not present or communicated throughout the first season. The website for Georgia Aquarium and the interview with an aquarium representative highlighted conservation yet in the show, conservation is noticeably missing. Ultimately, this show was anticipated to be a series

about conservation featuring education programs yet it contained little of the conservation element. Viewers were able to learn about the specific animals but not about the species as a whole or what viewers can do to help. Framing of the show could improve to include these efforts to further the reach of Georgia Aquarium. There is a great need for expansion on conservation communication including conservation messaging and media portrayal.

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Appendix A

Recruiting Script

Hi, my name is Kasidee Young and I am a graduate student at West Texas A&M University. I am working on my thesis studying the perceived impacts of shows such as *The Zoo*, *The Zoo: San Diego*, and *The Aquarium* on zoos and aquariums on a daily basis. I was wondering if you would be willing to help me with my research and set up a time when I could interview you.

Appendix B

Interview protocol

1. What is your position at the zoo?
2. What is your favorite part of your job?
3. How familiar are you with the Animal Planet show, *The Zoo*?
4. What was attendance at the zoo like before the show aired?
 - a. After?
5. Tell me about some of your interactions with visitors who are fans of the show.
6. What is your opinion on the conservation efforts presented on the show?
7. In your opinion, how have conservation efforts in the wild been effected by the show?
8. Do you think that the show will be able to create long term effects on the wildlife?
9. Is there anything else you'd like to add?

Appendix C

Consent to Participate in Research Form

Thank you for your participation in this study, which will take approximately 1 hour. We are attempting to interview around 9 individuals and your participation helps us to better understand the use of media programming for conservation efforts through zoos and aquariums.

Purpose of the Study, Benefits, & Risks: The purpose of this study is to discover what zoo personnel perceive are the impacts of shows such as *The Zoo*, *The Zoo: San Diego*, and *The Aquarium* on zoos and aquariums on a daily basis. Although there is no direct benefit to you, you will be helping the researcher better understand the role of media partnerships with conservation agencies such as zoos and aquariums. There is no more risk to you to participate than everyday conversation. You are free to decline answering any questions you do not wish to answer. All that will be asked of you is questions regarding the Animal Planet programs and one hour of your time. If I have your permission, I will record our interview to play back later. You can opt out of this at any time.

Voluntary Participation: By agreeing to participate, you acknowledge that you are 18 years of age or older and have volunteered to participate in a research study conducted by Kasidee Young, graduate student at West Texas A&M University, under the direction of Dr. Kristina Drumheller in the department of Communication. You also acknowledge that you can withdraw from the study at any time without penalty or repercussions. Participants may not wish to participate if they have no knowledge of the programs or how they are perceived by visitors.

Confidentiality: Any information that is obtained in connection with this study and that can be identified with you will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with your permission or as required by law. Information that can identify you individually will not be released to anyone outside the study. The sound recording that we make will not be heard by anyone outside the study and will be kept in a separate, secure location from any identifying information with passcode protection. All information collected will be reported in aggregate form using only pseudonyms where appropriate.

Questions & Concerns: The Institutional Review Board at West Texas A&M University has approved this research. If you have any concerns about this study or your rights at any point, you can contact Dr. Angela Spaulding, dean of the graduate school and vice president of research at 806.651.2730 or the thesis advisor, Dr. Drumheller at 806.651.2861.

Kasidee Young, M.A. in Communication candidate, West Texas A&M University

Dr. Kristina Drumheller, Professor of Communication, West Texas A&M University

_____	_____	_____
Signature of Participant	Date	Time