
ECOCRITICISM ANALYSIS IN *EATING OUR WAY TO EXTINCTION* (2021) DOCUMENTARY FILM

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to analyze how ecological crises are categorized and interpreted through the element of setting in the documentary *Eating Our Way to Extinction* (2021). The film is selected as the object of study because it emphasizes the urgency of environmental destruction driven by the global food system, particularly practices of animal agriculture that have wide-ranging impacts. This research applies Greg Garrard's ecocriticism within a qualitative descriptive method, employing categories such as pollution, wilderness, apocalypse, dwelling, animals, and the earth as analytical indicators. Through this framework, the analysis explores how ecological issues are represented not only as scientific facts but also as cultural narratives that shape audience perception. The findings reveal that ecological phenomena including deforestation, biodiversity loss, overfishing, water and air pollution, greenhouse gas emissions, and climate change are interpreted through story, narrative, atmospheric, temporal, and symbolic settings that structure the film's message. These results demonstrate that setting is not merely a background but a central device that conveys the interconnectedness between human activity and ecological damage, thereby strengthening the persuasive force of the documentary. The study highlights how the use of setting contributes significantly to the film's ecological discourse and offers a valuable perspective for ecocritical studies of visual media.

Keywords: Animal Agriculture, Climate Change, Documentary Film, Ecocriticism, Environmental Crisis

ABSTRAK

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis bagaimana krisis ekologis dikategorikan dan dimaknai melalui elemen setting dalam film dokumenter *Eating Our Way to Extinction* (2021). Film ini dipilih sebagai objek kajian karena menyoroti urgensi kerusakan lingkungan yang disebabkan oleh sistem pangan global, khususnya praktik peternakan hewan yang memiliki dampak luas. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan ekokritisisme Greg Garrard dengan metode deskriptif kualitatif, menerapkan kategori seperti *pollution*, *wilderness*, *apocalypse*, *dwelling*, *animals*, dan *the earth* sebagai indikator analisis. Melalui kerangka ini,

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analisis mengeksplorasi bagaimana isu-isu ekologis direpresentasikan tidak hanya sebagai fakta ilmiah, tetapi juga sebagai narasi budaya yang membentuk persepsi audiens. Temuan penelitian menunjukkan bahwa fenomena ekologis seperti deforestasi, hilangnya keanekaragaman hayati, penangkapan ikan berlebihan, polusi air dan udara, emisi gas rumah kaca, serta perubahan iklim dimaknai melalui setting cerita, naratif, atmosferik, temporal, dan simbolik yang membentuk pesan utama film. Hasil tersebut menunjukkan bahwa setting bukan sekadar latar belakang, melainkan perangkat utama yang menyampaikan keterkaitan antara aktivitas manusia dan kerusakan ekologis, sehingga memperkuat daya persuasif film dokumenter ini. Penelitian ini menegaskan bahwa penggunaan setting berkontribusi signifikan terhadap wacana ekologis film dan memberikan perspektif berharga bagi kajian ekokritik dalam media visual.

Kata kunci: Ekokritisisme, Film Dokumenter, Krisis Lingkungan, Perubahan Iklim, Peternakan Hewan

A. INTRODUCTION

The urgency of today's environmental crises has intensified, with 2023 marking the hottest year on record (UN News, 2023). Issues such as deforestation, climate change, biodiversity loss, and ocean pollution now threaten ecosystems, human health, and socio-economic stability (Robinson, 2025). Unsustainable human activities, particularly overexploitation of natural resources, greenhouse gas emissions, and weak governance, remain the primary drivers. As Dhakane et al. (2024) argue, deforestation reduces rainfall, increases regional temperatures, and degrades soil quality, endangering both food security and ecological balance. This global crisis is evident in Indonesia. The Merauke Integrated Food and Energy Estate (MIFEE) project, framed as a solution for national food security, has instead accelerated ecological destruction in Papua. Massive forest clearing for industrial-scale agriculture has displaced Indigenous communities, released significant methane emissions, and undermined biodiversity (LDPI, 2023). The MIFEE case underscores how development initiatives often sacrifice ecological resilience and social justice for short-term gains.

Alongside governance and policy, media and communication significantly influence environmental awareness. Rust et al. (2013) note that visual representations transform scientific data into emotionally resonant symbols, while Novitasari and Rohmah (2023) emphasize that videos, from social media to documentaries, shape public perception and behavior. Cultural works such as Carson's *Silent Spring*, *The Lorax* (2012), and *Seaspiracy* (2021) exemplify how literature and audiovisual media inspire ecological reflection. As Glotfelty and Fromm (1996) argue, cultural narratives can shape environmental ethics and mobilize collective engagement.

Among recent works, *Eating Our Way to Extinction* (2021) stands out for its sharp critique of industrial food systems, particularly animal agriculture, as a driver of deforestation, methane emissions, and marine degradation (Pointing, 2021). The film challenges the focus on individual responsibility by exposing

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systemic harms within global food production. Its influence is reinforced by multiple awards, including the Environmental Media Award (2022) and the International Green Film Award (IMDb, n.d.), cementing its role in both ecological discourse and popular culture. Despite growing ecocritical studies, the representation of environmental crises in documentary films has rarely been analyzed through the lens of setting. This research addresses that gap by examining *Eating Our Way to Extinction* using Garrard's (2004) ecocriticism framework, particularly its six ecological aspects. Through narrative, symbolic, temporal, and atmospheric dimensions of setting, the study highlights how the film frames ecological crises and situates human–nature relations within a broader environmental discourse.

B. LITERATURE REVIEW

1. Setting in Film

In film studies, the setting functions as a central narrative device that shapes meaning and audience interpretation. Klarer (2004) identifies narrative, symbolic, temporal, and atmospheric settings, while Monaco (2000) introduces story setting as part of a film's *mise-en-scène*. Narrative setting organizes the plot and situates events within a coherent storyline, whereas story setting emphasizes the spatial and cultural environments that ground the narrative in recognizable realities. Symbolic setting extends beyond literal representation by assigning metaphorical meanings to places and landscapes, enabling abstract ecological ideas to be communicated visually. Temporal setting situates narratives within particular time frames, framing how audiences perceive ecological transformation. Atmospheric setting, meanwhile, conveys mood and tone through lighting, sound, and imagery, intensifying the emotional impact of the film's message. Collectively, these five dimensions highlight that setting in film is not merely descriptive but an essential element in shaping ideological positions and ecological narratives.

2. Ecocriticism Theory

Ecocriticism is a branch of literary and cultural criticism that investigates the relationship between humans and the natural environment as represented in texts. Emerging in the late twentieth century through the works of scholars such as Rueckert and later systematized by Glotfelty and Fromm (1996), ecocriticism emphasizes that cultural productions are not detached from ecological realities but actively shape environmental understanding and ethics. Buell (2003) further highlights that ecocriticism is not only an interpretive practice but also a political and ethical project, aiming to raise ecological awareness and encourage sustainable engagement with nature. Within the study of film and literature, ecocriticism provides a lens for analyzing how narratives construct human–nature relations, assign value to ecosystems, and frame ecological crises in ways that resonate with audiences. As a major framework in ecocriticism, Garrard's (2004) introduces six

recurring aspects that serve as analytical categories for interpreting environmental discourse.

a. Pollution

In ecocriticism, pollution is understood as both material contamination and a cultural construct shaping perceptions of waste and risk (Garrard, 2004; Caracciolo, 2023). It encompasses chemical, organic, air, light, and noise pollution, as seen in literary analyses by Prabawati (2023) and Nirmala & Basid (2024). Both human and natural sources, from plastic waste to volcanic eruptions, make pollution a lasting ecological burden.

b. Wilderness

Wilderness refers to nature in an uncontaminated state, free from human settlement, offering protection for species and relief from urban pollution (Garrard, 2004). Juanda et al. (2024) illustrate this through narratives of oil palm and rubber plantations that were once dense, untouched forests.

c. Apocalypse

Apocalypse in ecocriticism signifies environmental catastrophe threatening civilization, from climate change and extinction to natural disasters (Garrard, 2004). It is portrayed in Prabawati's (2023) study as a crisis surpassing military concerns, and in Juanda et al. (2024) through human-caused forest fires that challenge human survival.

d. Dwelling

Dwelling refers to the long-term interconnection of humans with landscapes through memory, ritual, and daily life (Garrard, 2004). It is reflected in community practices such as animal conservation (Juanda & Azis, 2023) and desert farming Nirmala & Basid (2024), showing human–nature interactions shaped by place.

e. Animals

Animal in ecocriticism explores human–animal relations (Garrard, 2004). Nirmala & Basid (2024) highlight this through depictions of humans sharing food with displaced birds and concerns over artificial sounds replacing natural wildlife, reflecting tension between technology and nature.

f. The Earth

Earth in ecocriticism reflects how literature portrays the planet as both habitat and endangered space (Garrard, 2004). Juanda et al. (2024) highlight narratives of forest preservation, while Nirmala & Basid (2024) show the dangers of human reliance on plastics. Such depictions underline ecocriticism's role in raising environmental awareness.

3. Environmental Crises

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Environmental crises refer to interconnected global challenges that threaten the balance of ecosystems and the sustainability of human life. These crises arise primarily from unsustainable human activities, including industrial-scale agriculture, overexploitation of natural resources, pollution, and greenhouse gas emissions. Scholars highlight that the impact of these problems extends beyond ecological degradation, affecting human health, food security, and socio-economic stability (Buell, 2003; Liu et al., 2021; Nunes, 2023). To provide conceptual clarity, this study focuses on six major ecological issues that recur in global discourse and are prominently represented in *Eating Our Way to Extinction* (2021), namely deforestation, biodiversity loss, overfishing, pollution, greenhouse gas emissions, and climate change.

a. Deforestation

Deforestation is the long-term reduction of forest cover driven by land-use change, economic pressure, and weak governance (Indarto & Mutaqin, 2016). Its impacts include biodiversity loss, disrupted water cycles, and rising greenhouse gas emissions, as also depicted in Mustika's (2016) study of *Rio 2*.

b. Biodiversity Loss

Biodiversity loss refers to the decline of species richness and ecological interactions caused by land-use change, deforestation, pollution, and climate change (Gadelha Jr. et al., 2021). Its impacts include impaired ecosystem services such as food, water, and air quality, as illustrated in Maulida & Basid's (2019) study on *Lakardowo Mencari Keadilan*.

c. Overfishing

Overfishing is the excessive exploitation of fish stocks that reduces their capacity to provide sustainable yields and, in extreme cases, may lead to extinction (Hilborn & Hilborn, 2012). It disrupts marine ecosystems and depletes resources, as illustrated in Kizilay's (2023) study on the hunting of Cuvier's whale for industrial purposes.

d. Water Pollution

Water pollution is the contamination of water bodies by organic and inorganic pollutants from both natural and anthropogenic sources, including industrial discharge, agricultural runoff, and residential wastewater (Jaiswal et al., 2021; Abel, 2002). Its impacts range from ecosystem disruption to human health risks, as illustrated in Sartini & Endahati, (2023) study on waterborne diseases in *Dry*.

e. Air Pollution

Air pollution is the release of harmful substances into the atmosphere from natural and human sources, including volcanic eruptions, fuel combustion, and industrial emissions (Al-Taai & Mohammed Al-Dulaimi, 2022). It causes health

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problems, climate change, and ecosystem damage. This is illustrated in Harris's (2024) analysis of *All That Breathes* (2022), which depicts smog in Delhi and its impact on both humans and non-human species.

f. Greenhouse Gas (GHG) Emissions

GHG emissions are heat-trapping gases that drive global warming, mainly CO₂ from fossil fuels and deforestation, and CH₄ from livestock with far higher short-term warming potential (Nunes, 2023; Liu et al., 2021). Their impact is depicted in *Racing Extinction* (2015) through infrared images of methane emissions (Rooney, 2022).

g. Climate Change

Climate change is the long-term alteration of climate patterns, mainly caused by human-driven GHG emissions from fossil fuels and land-use change (Hollander, 2003; (Depledge, 2005). Its impacts include rising seas, extreme weather, and biodiversity loss, as illustrated in *An Inconvenient Sequel: Truth to Power* (Sari et al., 2023).

C. METHOD

This study employs a qualitative research design drawing on ecocriticism theory. Qualitative research, as Tracy (2020) explains, encompasses various interpretive approaches such as observation, interviews, and textual analysis, aiming to generate descriptive rather than statistical understanding. Such an approach aligns with the focus of this study, which seeks to interpret representations of environmental crises without reducing them to numerical data. To frame the analysis, the study adopts ecocriticism as defined by Garrard (2004) who views it as the study of human and non-human relationships across cultural history, including a critical reflection on the category of “human” itself. This framework allows the researcher to examine ecological destruction as it is depicted in the documentary *Eating Our Way to Extinction* (2021), directed by Ludo and Otto Brockway.

The data consist of dialogues and visual scenes portraying environmental crises throughout the 81-minute film, accessed via the Netflix streaming platform. These data include words, sentences, and imagery that reveal ecological concerns and were selected based on their relevance to Garrard's ecocritical concepts. The data collection process was conducted in three stages: watching the documentary in full, re-watching while taking detailed notes on relevant content, and organizing the selected material in accordance with the research problem. The analysis follows Tracy's (2020) model of qualitative data interpretation. First, the researcher engaged with the material to identify the actions and depictions contributing to representations of environmental catastrophe. Second, these findings were interpreted through the lens of Garrard's ecocriticism, linking theoretical insights to cinematic evidence. Third, the results were evaluated for consistency with the

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research objectives, ensuring that the interpretations adequately addressed the guiding questions. Finally, the findings were presented to illustrate how the documentary visualizes ecological crisis and positions human activity within global environmental decline.

D. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

1. Pollution



Figure 1. Forest burning smoke from land clearing (*Eating Our Way to Extinction*, 00:13:30)

The concept of pollution in Garrard’s ecocriticism refers to environmental degradation caused by human activities, encompassing soil, water, and air contamination as well as a rupture in human–nature relations. In *Eating Our Way to Extinction* (2021), this aspect is visualized most strikingly through the smog from large-scale forest burning, where thick smoke blankets the sky and entire landscapes, turning air into a medium of suffocation and reflecting how agricultural expansion endangers both ecosystems and human health. Beyond this display, the film also presents six other depictions of pollution, including discarded fishing nets that entangle marine life for decades, soil degradation from pig farm waste, chemical residues from plantation spraying, water contamination from agricultural runoff, waste from fish farms that settles on the seabed, and chemical treatments given to farmed fish to prevent parasites, which introduce toxins into surrounding waters. Together, these scenes highlight how the food industry spreads contamination across land, air, and sea, underscoring pollution as a systemic rather than isolated problem. Such portrayals echo earlier studies that frame pollution as a marker of crisis, whether symbolically in literary works (Prabawati, 2023; Nirmala & Basid 2024) or in urban contexts such as the smog of Delhi in *All That Breathes* (Harris 2024). By foregrounding agricultural and industrial practices, however, *Eating Our Way to Extinction* expands the discussion by situating pollution within the infrastructures of global food production.

2. Wilderness

The concept of wilderness in Garrard’s ecocriticism refers to natural spaces imagined as ecologically pure and free from human interference, yet in *Eating Our Way to Extinction* (2021) the film presents wilderness as fragile and already infiltrated by human activity. This is made clear in a dialogue by Professor Pennie

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Lindeque, who states that microplastics are now found everywhere, from polar regions to remote islands and even the seabed, dismantling the idea that any wilderness remains untouched.

“Everywhere we look we found microplastic. Whether it’s at the polar regions, in remote islands. Also, if we’re looking on the surface or the seabed, and everywhere in between we find microplastics.” (Dialog 1. *Eating Our Way to Extinction*, 00:41:01–00:41:13)

The film further reinforces this portrayal through four additional depictions: the deliberate felling of the tallest tree in the forest, the transformation of lush tropical forests into degraded land, the intrusion of bulldozers into once-dense ecosystems, and the act of humans cutting trees with chainsaws. Together, these images and testimonies show how wilderness is no longer autonomous but has been redefined by exploitation, collapsing the boundary between human and nonhuman worlds. Such representations correspond with earlier ecocritical analyses that highlight the tension between pristine nature and industrial encroachment, as in Juanda et al. (2024) who discuss the transformation of dense forests into plantation areas, and Juanda & Azis (2023) who explore conservation as a form of resistance. In this way, the film extends the discussion by illustrating wilderness not only as a symbol of untouched nature but also as a contested space where ecological vulnerability is made visible through both imagery and lived testimony.

3. Apocalypse



Figure 2. Mass exodus of climate refugees crossing the Mediterranean due to conflict and resource scarcity (*Eating Our Way to Extinction*, 01:04:14)

The concept of apocalypse in Garrard’s ecocriticism refers to visions of environmental collapse that dramatize the downfall of ecosystems and human civilization as the result of ecological crises. In *Eating Our Way to Extinction* (2021), this aspect is powerfully conveyed through the image of a crowded boat of refugees crossing the Mediterranean, displaced by the combined pressures of climate change, conflict, and resource scarcity. The vast sea becomes a narrative setting of both survival and desperation, underscoring how ecological breakdown reshapes patterns of human migration and turns instability into lived experience. Beyond this central display, the film presents six additional depictions of apocalyptic conditions: high methane emissions from cattle farming, large-scale overfishing with expansive nets, oceanic dead zones created by unchecked waste

disposal, deforestation that erodes biodiversity, flooding that disrupts livelihoods, and the testimony of scientists who describe animal agriculture as a structural driver of global crises. Together, these representations emphasize that apocalypse is not a distant catastrophe but an ongoing reality rooted in industrial food systems and unsustainable practices. Such portrayals recall earlier ecocritical discussions of environmental collapse as more than natural disaster, highlighting social and structural vulnerabilities as well (Prabawati, 2023; Juanda et al., 2024). By situating apocalyptic imagery within both ecological and humanitarian consequences, the film broadens the discourse, showing that the crisis extends beyond environmental loss to encompass systemic injustice and human survival itself.

4. Dwelling



Figure 3. Indigenous protest defending ancestral land (*Eating Our Way to Extinction*, 00:13:43)

The concept of dwelling in Garrard’s ecocriticism refers to how humans inhabit and find belonging within the natural world, emphasizing balance and continuity between culture and environment. In *Eating Our Way to Extinction* (2021), this aspect is vividly portrayed through a scene of Indigenous people protesting against industrial encroachment to defend their ancestral land. The protest site becomes a contested space where cultural guardianship stands in opposition to capitalist expansion, underscoring dwelling as both resistance and affirmation of ecological belonging. Beyond this display, the film also presents other depictions of dwelling, including partitioned farmland, rural houses that anchor daily life, coastal settlements vulnerable to rising seas, conservation practices that preserve ecological balance, and community-led reforestation along mountain slopes. These varied portrayals suggest that dwelling is not static but constantly negotiated, shaped by both environmental pressures and human choices. Such representations align with earlier ecocritical studies that show how communities sustain long-term ties with landscapes through tradition and practice (Juanda & Azis, 2023; Nirmala & Basid, 2024). By situating resistance, livelihood, and conservation within the same frame, the film reframes dwelling as a

multidimensional relationship in which human survival and cultural identity are inseparable from the fate of the land.

5. Animal

The concept of animals in Garrard’s ecocriticism concerns how humans relate to nonhuman creatures, questioning their representation, treatment, and value beyond human use. In *Eating Our Way to Extinction* (2021), this aspect is poignantly expressed in the testimony of an Indigenous elder who recalls how birds once filled the skies with song and monkeys echoed through the forest, but now both have fallen silent. The forest is defined by absence rather than presence, and silence becomes the marker of ecological loss.

“Since the time of my ancestors, you can hear the song of the sky bird. But now, you cannot hear her song anymore. The monkey would sit above us, filling the forest with calls to their young. But now the forest is silent.”
(Dialog 2. *Eating Our Way to Extinction*, 00:44:17-00:44:50)

Beyond this central display, the film includes seven other depictions that highlight different dimensions of human–animal relations: salmon visibly deformed and dying from parasite infestations, farmed fish forced into machines to remove lice, vast tracts of land converted into feed production for livestock, turtles and belugas entangled in nets, an underwater encounter where a scientist swims peacefully among fish, massive cattle industries dominating landscapes, and elephants walking across the savanna as emblems of endangered wilderness. These representations illustrate the duality of human–animal relations, where exploitation and harm coexist with glimpses of coexistence and kinship. Such portrayals resonate with ecocritical scholarship that emphasizes animals as more than resources, framing them as co-inhabitants whose survival is tied to human choices (Nirmala & Basid, 2024; Harris, 2024). By juxtaposing silence, suffering, and fragile moments of connection, the film reframes animals as central indicators of ecological collapse as well as reminders of interspecies belonging.

6. The Earth

The concept of the Earth in Garrard’s ecocriticism views the planet not only as a physical landscape but also as a fragile system supporting all life. In *Eating Our Way to Extinction* (2021), this aspect is conveyed through the warning of Mr. Wedderburn, who predicts that by 2045 species loss may reach a tipping point that leads to ecological collapse.

“Some have predicted that by 2045, the species loss will be so great that we won’t recover. The Earth will suffer ecological collapse.” (Dialog 3. *Eating Our Way to Extinction*, 00:45:53-00:46:00)

The statement frames the Earth not in terms of its present abundance but through the risk of irreversible decline, emphasizing its vulnerability as a shared habitat. Beyond this display, the film also visualizes the Earth from different perspectives: a distant view of the planet contrasted with the sun’s glare, melting ice that signals accelerating climate change, and expansive landscapes accompanied

by the narration that “this planet is our home.” Together, these depictions stress that the Earth is both majestic and endangered, a place of beauty whose continuity depends on human responsibility. Such portrayals recall earlier ecocritical analyses that highlight the planet as simultaneously habitat and threatened space, whether through narratives of forest preservation (Juanda et al., 2024) or reflections on human reliance on destructive materials (Nirmala & Basid, 2024). By combining stark warnings with evocative imagery, the film frames the Earth as an active participant in ecological crises and as the ultimate concern of collective survival.

E. CONCLUSION

Eating Our Way to Extinction (2021) vividly portrays the urgency of global ecological crises, and this study analyzed the film using Garrard’s ecocriticism to examine the interactions between humans and the environment. The research found that environmental issues such as pollution, wilderness degradation, apocalypse, dwelling, animal exploitation, and the fragility of the Earth are represented through both visual and verbal elements. Discarded fishing nets, microplastic pollution, climate refugees, Indigenous land protests, silent forests, and warnings of species loss illustrate human exploitation of nature and the vulnerability of ecosystems, highlighting both immediate damage and projected ecological collapse. Among the six ecocritical categories applied, the animal aspect appears most prominently, showing animals as exploited resources and as species indirectly threatened by habitat destruction, which reinforces the documentary’s critique of industrial food systems. These findings confirm that the film effectively communicates the urgency of ecological crises and aligns with the study’s research objectives. By showing how settings, visuals, and dialogues highlight different aspects of environmental degradation, the research contributes to ecocritical scholarship by illustrating how documentaries can serve as cultural texts that raise awareness of planetary fragility. The study also lays the groundwork for future research that could explore alternative theoretical frameworks, audience reception, or comparative analyses with other environmental documentaries, further expanding understanding of how ecological crises are represented and perceived in visual media.

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