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Ecological Representation of the Mekong River in the WocomoTRAVEL Documentary: Human-Nature Relations and Development in Southeast Asia

Anisa Anggun Septia[1,*] and Anggoro Abiyyu Ristio Cahyo[2]

[1]Undergraduate Program in Indonesian Language and Literature Education, Faculty of Languages and Arts, Universitas Negeri Surabaya, Surabaya 60213, Indonesia
[2]Doctoral Program in Language and Literature Education, Faculty of Languages and Arts, Universitas Negeri Surabaya, Surabaya 60213, Indonesia

([*]Corresponding author's e-mail: anisa.22033@mhs.unesa.ac.id)

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Abstract

This study analyzes the ecological representation of the Mekong River in the WocomoTRAVEL documentary *The Mekong: Southeast Asia's Nourishing River that Flows through Its Most Beautiful Cities* (2025). This study employed a descriptive-interpretive qualitative approach using Greg Garrard's ecocritical framework. The data consisted of verbal narratives and visual scenes depicting the river, communities, animals, landscapes, tourism, and development. The analysis was conducted through Garrard's six ecocritical concepts: *Pollution*, *wilderness*, *apocalypse*, *dwelling*, *animals*, and *earth*. The findings showed four main results. First, the Mekong was represented as a living space for river communities, shaping ways of dwelling, working, moving, and adapting. Second, the Mekong appeared as a habitat for humans and nonhumans that sustains fish, birds, dolphins, plants, flooded forests, and swamp forests. Third, the Mekong was depicted as an ecological space under pressure from destructive fishing, hydropower dams, altered water flows, and threats to food security. Fourth, the Mekong was represented as a transboundary ecological system that requires shared responsibility. This study demonstrates that digital travel documentaries can serve as ecological texts that develop critiques of human-nature relations and Southeast Asian development.

Keywords: Ecocriticism, Digital documentary, Ecological representation, Human-nature relations, Multispecies habitat, Environmental sustainability

Introduction

The Mekong River is one of the important ecological spaces in Southeast Asia. It flows across several countries and sustains the lives of communities along its course (Caffe, 2023; Kura et al., 2023; Middleton, 2022). For river communities, the Mekong functions as a source of food, a route for mobility, an economic space, a place of dwelling, and a marker of cultural relationships with nature. The WocomoTRAVEL documentary depicts the Mekong as a river that sustains fishermen, farmers, merchants, tourists, and local communities. This representation shows that the Mekong has an important social and ecological role in the life of the region.

Tran et al. (2022) showed that the lives of communities around the Mekong are shaped through close relationships with water, fish, flooded forests, floating villages, and river landscapes. Communities adapt their ways of life to changes in water flows and the ecological rhythms of the river (Käkönen et al., 2023; Tran et al., 2025). Mekong communities build floating houses, catch fish, process aquatic plants, develop local crafts, and use nature-based tourism as a source of livelihood. In the WocomoTRAVEL documentary, these forms of life appear through narratives about Tonle Sap, Prek Toal, Champasak, Si Phan Don, and other areas connected to the Mekong. This portrayal shows that the river does not appear

merely as a natural background. The Mekong appears as a living space that binds humans, animals, plants, culture, and the local economy.

The Mekong currently faces increasingly strong socio- ecological pressures. Hydropower dam development, changes in water flows, resource exploitation, the commercialization of fisheries, and the expansion of tourism affect the balance of the river (Baird & Hogan, 2023; Okesiji et al., 2025; Opperman et al., 2023; Tegegne et al., 2025). These pressures influence fish migration, food security, biodiversity, and the lives of river communities. The WocomoTRAVEL documentary presents this tension through narratives about declining catches, threats to river species, changes in water rhythms, and development risks to the Mekong ecosystem. Therefore, the Mekong becomes an important space for examining the relationship among development, sustainability, and ecological life in Southeast Asia.

Ausat (2023) showed that digital media have an important role in shaping how the public understands environmental issues. Travel documentaries can present natural landscapes, human activities, cultural narratives, and ecological messages in an accessible form. YouTube expands the reach of such documentaries to transnational audiences (Coronel, 2023; Rieder et al., 2023; Salles et al., 2023). In this context, the WocomoTRAVEL documentary can be read as a digital media text that constructs an understanding of the Mekong as an ecological living space. Reading this documentary is important because environmental issues often appear through visuals, travel narratives, community experiences, and representations of natural change.

Taken together, the Mekong- focused studies reviewed above clarify the river as a socio-ecological system shaped by community adaptation, biodiversity, hydropower politics, and transboundary governance. However, they have not yet explained how a digital travel documentary constructs the Mekong ecologically through the interaction of narration, images, sound, and scene sequencing. Studies on Asian environmental governance, sustainability, qualitative environmental inquiry, and environmental documentaries are used here to situate the article within broader regional debates rather than as the main foundation of the study (Alavi, 2026; Boonyasukha, 2025; Kuensman & Visesprapa, 2026; Suranatthakul & Intanon, 2024; Wangchuk & Dendup, 2023). This study addresses that representational gap by examining how the WocomoTRAVEL documentary frames the Mekong as a community living space, a multispecies habitat, a river under development pressure, and a transboundary ecological system.

To address this gap, this study analyzes the ecological representation of the Mekong River in the WocomoTRAVEL documentary. It examines how the documentary frames the Mekong as a living space for human and nonhuman life in Southeast Asia and how verbal narration and visual scenes construct ecological meanings through Garrard's six ecocritical concepts. The analysis focuses on the relationships among river communities, animals, natural landscapes, culture, tourism, and development. This focus is important because travel documentaries may function not only as tourism media but also as spaces where broader ecological concerns are articulated.

This study argues that the WocomoTRAVEL documentary represents the Mekong River as a transboundary ecological living space. The Mekong appears as a source of life that sustains humans, animals, culture, and the local economy. At the same time, this representation reveals the vulnerability of the Mekong to the pressures of modern development and ecological change. Theoretically, this article demonstrates how Garrard's six ecocritical concepts can be used relationally to analyze the verbal and visual dimensions of a digital travel documentary. Contextually, it extends digital media ecocriticism and Southeast Asian environmental studies by connecting representations of the Mekong with regional development pressures and transboundary ecological responsibility.

Theoretical framework

Ecocriticism and ecological representation

Ecocriticism examines the relationship among texts, culture, humans, and the environment. It is understood as the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment (Baniamer & Alhendi, 2026; Cahyo et al., 2024; Mengkow, 2026). Subsequent developments have expanded ecocriticism to various forms of creative media that represent human relationships with the nonhuman world. Mohan and Savithri (2026) explain that ecocriticism can be used to

understand environmental dimensions in literature and creative media. Cahyo and Indarti (2023) also view ecocriticism as a study of the relationship between humans and nonhumans in the history of human culture. This expanded scope is also reflected in Boonyasukha's (2025) ecocritical study of environmental documentaries.

In this study, ecocriticism is used to understand how the documentary constructs meaning about the Mekong River. Ecological representation does not regard nature as a neutral background. It shows how a text presents nature through narrative, images, sound, human activities, and point of view. In the documentary analysis, these elements are examined together to determine how verbal narration, visual framing, sound, and scene sequencing position the Mekong as a lived environment, a multispecies habitat, a threatened ecosystem, and a transboundary ecological system. Thus, ecocriticism helps read the Mekong as a living space that connects humans, animals, landscapes, culture, and development.

Greg Garrard's ecocritical concepts

Garrard (2011) offers six main concepts in ecocriticism: Pollution, wilderness, apocalypse, dwelling, animals, and earth. The concept of pollution is used to examine human pressures on the environment, such as degradation, habitat destruction, and exploitation. The concept of wilderness helps view nature as a landscape that possesses beauty, biodiversity, and vitality. The concept of apocalypse directs attention to ecological threats and imagined environmental crises. The concept of dwelling explains the relationship between humans and their places of residence and living spaces. This concept is important for reading the lives of river communities that adapt to water rhythms and local resources. The concept of animals provides space for reading animals as part of ecosystem balance. The concept of earth extends the analysis to ecological relationships that go beyond territorial boundaries. These six concepts provide a basis for reading the Mekong as a transboundary ecological living space.

In this study, the six concepts operate as analytical lenses for specific verbal and audiovisual evidence. Dwelling guides the reading of floating houses, river-based work, mobility, and adaptation; animals and wilderness guide the analysis of species, habitats, flooded forests, and landscape imagery; pollution and apocalypse guide the interpretation of destructive fishing, hydropower dams, altered river flows, disrupted fish migration, and future ecological threats; and earth guides the reading of cross- border flows, regional interdependence, and shared ecological responsibility. These categories are applied by comparing narration with images, sound, and scene sequencing.

Digital documentary and environmental representation

Environmental documentaries contribute to shaping public conceptions of nature and ecological crises. Wu et al. (2026) argue that environmental documentaries weave interviews, visual and audio footage, and narration into compelling accounts of selected issues. Because documentaries are mediated points of view rather than neutral records, they organize ecological meaning through selection, framing, sequencing, and sound. Kong (2026) argues that environmental documentary films can broaden ecological awareness and encourage audiences to reflect on human relationships with nature.

Digital documentaries open up new avenues for communicating environmental issues to the public. Platforms such as YouTube allow travel documentaries to cross borders and reach audiences in different countries. Environmental meaning in these texts is conveyed through landscape images, travel narration, community activities, and cultural experiences. For the purpose of this study, the WocomoTRAVEL documentary is seen as a communication format that depicts the Mekong River as an ecosystem and living space in Southeast Asia. Garrard's ecocritical framework is used to examine human, natural, animal, and developmental relations within this representation. Operationally, the analysis examines how the narrator's claims interact with visual framing, ambient sound, and the sequencing of scenes involving communities, wildlife, landscapes, and development infrastructure.

Methodology

This study used a descriptive-interpretive qualitative design with Greg Garrard's ecocritical approach. This design was appropriate because the study interpreted the ecological meanings constructed through

verbal narratives and visual scenes in WocomoTRAVEL's the Mekong: Southeast Asia' s Nourishing River that Flows through Its Most Beautiful Cities (2025). Garrard's framework was used to read the Mekong as an ecological living space that connects humans, nature, animals, and development in Southeast Asia.

The data included verbal narratives, visual scenes, river landscapes, community activities, animal appearances, settlement spaces, flooded forests, economic practices, tourism, and development infrastructure. The verbal data were obtained from the video transcript, while the visual data were collected through direct observation of the scenes. The documentary was selected purposively because it met four criteria: It focuses on the Mekong across multiple locations; combines verbal narration with visual representations of human and nonhuman life; addresses ecological change, tourism, and development; and is publicly accessible for repeated examination. The unit of analysis was an audiovisual segment in which verbal narration, visual imagery, or their combination conveyed an identifiable ecological meaning.

Data collection was conducted through documentation. The video was watched repeatedly, the transcript was matched with the visual scenes, and the video was then divided into segments based on location, topic, and ecological issue. Each segment was recorded by noting its time marker, narrative, scene, ecological object, human activity, species appearance, and environmental problem. A segment was included when it represented at least one of the following: Community dependence on or adaptation to the river; nonhuman species or habitats; ecological degradation or resource exploitation; development infrastructure and its environmental consequences; or transboundary ecological relations. Transitional travel footage, repeated material, and information without an identifiable ecological relationship were excluded from the analytical dataset. The 23 segments that met these criteria were numbered sequentially from Data 1 to Data 23 to maintain traceability among evidence, categories, and interpretation.

Coding was conducted based on Garrard's six ecocritical concepts: Pollution, wilderness, apocalypse, dwelling, animals, and earth. The concept of dwelling was used to read dwelling spaces, adaptation, work, and community relations with the river. The concepts of animals and wilderness were used to read the presence of animals, flooded forests, swamp forests, and natural landscapes. The concepts of pollution and apocalypse were used to read exploitation, habitat change, disruption of fish migration, food risks, and threats of ecological crisis. The concept of earth was used to read the Mekong as a transboundary ecological system. A segment could receive more than one code when its verbal and visual elements expressed overlapping ecological meanings.

The analysis proceeded in three stages. First, each selected segment was interpreted by comparing the transcript with the corresponding visual scene. Second, the segment was assigned one or more Garrard codes using the operational meanings described above. Third, patterns across the coded segments were compared and grouped into four thematic findings: The Mekong as a living space for river communities, the Mekong as a habitat for humans and nonhumans, the Mekong under development pressure and ecological change, and the Mekong as a transboundary ecological system. To strengthen credibility and control interpretive subjectivity, every claim was checked against its timestamped transcript and corresponding visual evidence. Coding decisions were reviewed across the dataset for consistency, ambiguous cases were re-examined using the operational definitions of Garrard's concepts, and selected classifications and interpretations were discussed with peers. When alternative readings emerged, the interpretation retained in the analysis was the one most directly supported by the documentary evidence and the relevant ecocritical concept. All data were taken from a public YouTube video and were used for academic purposes with clear source acknowledgment.

To improve analytical transparency, Table 1 summarizes the 23 documentary segments according to the four thematic findings, together with the relevant ecocritical concepts, documentary focus, and main interpretation.

Table 1 Summary of documentary data, ecocritical concepts, and thematic interpretations

Thematic finding	Data	Garrard's concept(s)	Documentary focus	Main interpretation
The Mekong as a living space for river communities	Data 1-5	Dwelling	River-based work, floating settlements, intergenerational attachment, and houses adapted to moving water	The Mekong is represented as an ecological home that shapes livelihood, mobility, adaptation, local knowledge, belonging, and community identity.
The Mekong as a habitat for humans and nonhumans	Data 6-10	Animals; Wilderness	Fish, birds, dolphins, plants, biodiversity, flooded forests, swamp forests, and protected habitats	The river is represented as a multispecies habitat in which humans, animals, plants, water, and forests depend on one another for ecological continuity.
The Mekong under development pressure and ecological change	Data 11-17	Pollution; Apocalypse	Destructive fishing, hydropower dams, altered water flows, blocked fish migration, food risks, and ecological threats	Human intervention is represented as functional ecological disruption that threatens biodiversity, food security, river-based livelihoods, and the future sustainability of the Mekong.
The Mekong as a transboundary ecological system	Data 18-23	Earth	Cross-border flows, Tonle Sap, geopolitical boundaries, cultural diversity, human–nature unity, and the need for ecological balance	The Mekong is represented as a shared regional system whose water, species, ecological impacts, and human dependence extend beyond political and cultural boundaries.

Note: The concepts listed in Table 1 indicate the dominant ecocritical concepts associated with each thematic finding. Individual documentary segments could receive more than one code when their verbal and visual elements expressed overlapping ecological meanings.

Table 1 clarifies how the 23 audiovisual segments and Garrard's six ecocritical concepts were organized into four broader thematic findings. The thematic distribution shows that the Mekong is represented as an interconnected socio-ecological system linking community dwelling, multispecies habitats, development pressures, and transboundary responsibility.

Results

The Mekong as a living space for river communities

The visual and verbal elements in *The Mekong: Southeast Asia's Nourishing River that Flows through Its Most Beautiful Cities* (2025) represented the Mekong River as a living space for river communities. This representation appeared through depictions of fishermen, merchants, farmers, floating villages, houses on water, and economic activities that depend on the river flow. In Greg Garrard's concept of *dwelling*, a place of residence is understood as an ecological space that shapes how humans live, work, adapt, and build

relationships with the environment. The representation of the Mekong as a living space for communities appeared in Data 1, which presents the presence of various social groups along the river.

Data 1: "Millions of men, fishermen, merchants, and peasants live all along the churning river's 4200 km course." (WocomoTRAVEL, 2025)

Data 1 showed that the Mekong became the center of social and economic life in Southeast Asia. Fishermen, merchants, and farmers lived through direct relationships with the river. The reference to occupations distributed along the river's 4,200- km course frames dwelling as a regional pattern of dependence rather than a fixed domestic location. Through Garrard's concept of dwelling, the river becomes the material condition for work, food, mobility, and exchange. The phrase " churning river" also emphasizes that these livelihoods are organized around a dynamic environment whose movement shapes everyday life. The integration of communities with the aquatic environment appeared in Data 2, which depicts human life in the lake area.

Data 2: "People live on the lake as well by integrating themselves and blending in the background of this aquatic realm." (WocomoTRAVEL, 2025)

Data 2 showed a unified relationship between communities and the aquatic environment. The phrases "integrating themselves" and "blending in" weaken the conventional separation between humans and nature. Rather than presenting the lake as an external setting, the documentary frames it as a domestic, economic, and social environment in which bodies, routines, and local knowledge are adjusted to water. In Garrard's terms, dwelling therefore emerges as ecological belonging based on adaptation rather than domination. Water-based living space became clearer in Data 3, which presents Prek Toal as a floating settlement.

Data 3: "In recent years in Prek Toal, a floating village of 800 dwellings secluded toward the western part of the lake." (WocomoTRAVEL, 2025)

Data 3 confirmed that the aquatic environment became a real settlement space for the community. Prek Toal was described as a floating village with hundreds of houses. The scale of the settlement shifts floating habitation from an exceptional practice to an organized social system. Homes, families, work, and community interaction are built within a landscape that changes with water levels. Through dwelling, the documentary represents adaptation not as a temporary response but as a collective form of ecological knowledge embedded in settlement design and daily practice. The affective dimension of the community' s relationship with the river appeared in Data 4, which contains the personal experience of a figure who lives in the aquatic area.

Data 4: "Whereas I have no idea how to go about living on solid ground. I'm not used to it. We've been living on the river ever since my grandparents generation." (WocomoTRAVEL, 2025)

Data 4 showed that the river shaped familiarity, belonging, and life knowledge. The contrast between the familiar river and the unfamiliar "solid ground" shows that dwelling is also psychological and intergenerational. The river is represented as a source of memory and identity because knowledge of living with water has been transmitted from the speaker's grandparents. This extends Garrard's concept beyond physical residence: The Mekong becomes a place through which the community recognizes itself. The material adaptation of communities to the aquatic environment appeared in Data 5, which describes the form of houses in the river area.

Data 5: "Whether floating or resting on stakes, their homes must sway to the rhythm of moving water." (WocomoTRAVEL, 2025)

Data 5 showed that floating houses and houses on stakes became ways for communities to respond to changes in water levels and river movement. The metaphor "sway to the rhythm of moving water" gives the river an active organizing role. The houses do not overcome or immobilize water; they accommodate its movement. Through dwelling, the documentary therefore presents architecture as a negotiated relationship with ecological processes and as evidence of knowledge developed through long experience with the Mekong.

Overall, the first five data showed that WocomoTRAVEL framed the Mekong as a living space that shaped the social, economic, cultural, and ecological life of river communities. Read together, the data show that dwelling is not merely residence beside water. It is a relational practice in which livelihood, mobility, architecture, memory, and identity are continually formed through the river's rhythms. The

Mekong is thus represented as an ecological home that actively organizes community life.

The Mekong as a habitat for humans and nonhumans

The visual and verbal elements in the WocomoTRAVEL documentary also represented the Mekong as a shared habitat for humans and nonhumans. This representation appeared through depictions of fish, birds, reptiles, insects, plants, flooded forests, and iconic river species. In Greg Garrard's concepts of *animals* and *wilderness*, animals and natural landscapes are understood as important elements in the ecosystem. The interconnection among species in the river space appeared in Data 6.

Data 6: "It's an added benefit to the hundreds of fish, bird, reptile, insect, and plant species growing within this inconspicuous ecosystem. " (WocomoTRAVEL, 2025)

Data 6 showed that the Mekong appeared as an ecosystem inhabited by diverse species. Fish, birds, reptiles, insects, and plants form a network of life that supports one another. The documentary's enumeration of species shifts attention away from a human-centered view of the river and toward a multispecies community. Through Garrard's concept of animals, nonhuman life acquires ecological significance beyond its usefulness to people. The description of an "inconspicuous ecosystem" also supports a wilderness reading by suggesting that much of the river's vitality depends on processes that remain visually understated or easily overlooked. The ecological value of the Mekong became stronger when the text positioned Tonle Sap as a conservation area in Data 7.

Data 7: "The Tonle Sap is classified as one of UNESCO's biosphere reserves, a title in part attributed to its flooded forests." (WocomoTRAVEL, 2025)

Data 7 showed Tonle Sap as an ecological space with international recognition. Its status as a UNESCO biosphere reserve indicates that this area has an important function in ecosystem conservation. However, the documentary locates the reserve's significance not only in its institutional status but also in the flooded forests that sustain ecological relations. Through wilderness, these forests are represented as living infrastructure that links seasonal water, vegetation, animals, and human life. The scene therefore frames conservation as the protection of ecological processes rather than the preservation of scenery alone. The relationship among ecological elements in this area appeared more concretely in Data 8.

Data 8: "A peculiar world where trees grow partially immersed underwater for half the year. Fish feast on the fruits of their submerged branches while hundreds of birds build nests at their crowns. " (WocomoTRAVEL, 2025)

Data 8 showed nature as a mutually supporting system. Trees submerged in water provide food for fish, while their crowns provide nesting sites for birds. This vertical connection between submerged branches and tree crowns makes ecological interdependence visible across water and land. Garrard's animals and wilderness concepts work together here: Animals are not isolated objects, and the flooded forest is not decorative scenery, but a productive habitat that enables feeding, nesting, and reproduction. The documentary thus represents the Mekong as a multispecies system sustained by reciprocal relationships. The position of birds as markers of regional biodiversity appeared in Data 9.

Data 9: "Thousands of pelican, ibis, stork, and marabou couples build their nests in the swamped forests of Prek Toal. As a protected sanctuary, it is regarded as one of the largest remaining bird colonies of Southeastern Asia." (WocomoTRAVEL, 2025)

Data 9 showed the swamped forests of Prek Toal as an important habitat for various bird species. Pelicans, ibises, storks, and marabous became markers of the Mekong's biodiversity. The emphasis on nesting couples and the size of the colony foregrounds reproduction and ecological continuity rather than the mere presence of wildlife. Under the concept of animals, the birds function as ecological subjects whose survival depends on habitat stability. Under wilderness, the protected forest is represented as a space that maintains the life cycles of species at a regional scale. The vulnerability of this habitat appeared more clearly through the threatened iconic species in Data 10.

Data 10: "Giant catfish as well as Irrawaddy dolphins are two of the Mekong's most iconic species. Although nowadays protected, these two symbolic creatures are endangered after decades of ruthless fishing using electricity or dynamite. " (WocomoTRAVEL, 2025)

Data 10 showed the relationship between biodiversity and ecological damage. The Mekong's natural wealth was represented by giant catfish and Irrawaddy dolphins. Calling them "iconic" and "symbolic" gives these animals public and cultural visibility, but their endangered status interrupts any purely celebratory image of biodiversity. Through animals, the species are positioned as vulnerable participants in the river system; through pollution, destructive fishing is read as a human practice that damages populations and habitats; and through apocalypse, their possible disappearance becomes a warning of wider ecological breakdown. The segment therefore demonstrates how one piece of evidence can activate several Garrard concepts at once.

Overall, Data 6 to Data 10 show that WocomoTRAVEL frames the Mekong as a shared habitat for humans and nonhumans. Garrard's concepts of animals and wilderness are interconnected: Fish, birds, dolphins, reptiles, insects, plants, flooded forests, and swamp forests are represented as parts of one ecological network rather than as separate attractions. This framing challenges the reduction of the Mekong to an economic or touristic resource by emphasizing its nonhuman life, reproductive spaces, and habitat functions. At the same time, the focus on iconic endangered species reveals how ecological value is communicated through both ecosystem relations and emotionally recognizable animals.

The Mekong under development pressure and ecological change

The visual and verbal texts in the WocomoTRAVEL documentary describe the Mekong as an ecological space under pressure from human activity and modern development. These pressures arise through destructive fishing practices, changes in fish migration routes, dam construction plans, changes in river rhythms, and the threat of ecological crisis. Within Garrard's framework, pollution is used here not only for visible contamination but also for forms of functional degradation that disrupt habitats, migration, and hydrological processes. Apocalypse guides the reading of future-oriented warnings about species loss, food insecurity, and the social consequences of ecological disruption. The overlap between these concepts is first evident in Data 11.

Data 11: "Although nowadays protected, these two symbolic creatures are endangered after decades of ruthless fishing using electricity or dynamite." (WocomoTRAVEL, 2025)

Data 11 shows that fishing with electricity and dynamite has threatened important Mekong species. The segment repeats the evidence introduced in Data 10 but reads it through a different analytical emphasis. Under pollution, destructive fishing is represented as degradation because it damages animal populations, aquatic habitats, and ecosystem balance even when no visible residue remains. Under apocalypse, the endangered status of symbolic species turns present damage into a warning about possible ecological loss. This cross-coding demonstrates that the same documentary segment can connect nonhuman vulnerability with human-caused environmental pressure. Threats to fish life also appear in Data 12, which presents migration pathways as an increasingly vulnerable space.

Data 12: "The Hou Sahong channel is the sole passageway for the migrating fish between the waterfalls and other numerous man-made or natural hurdles." (WocomoTRAVEL, 2025)

As indicated in Data 12, the Hou Sahong channel plays a crucial role in the migration of Mekong fish. The channel serves as the only passageway for fish migrating between the waterfalls and other obstacles. This dependence on a single passageway makes the river ecosystem particularly vulnerable to disruption. Through Garrard's concept of apocalypse, the documentary turns this vulnerability into a warning: interference with the route may affect fish reproduction, food availability, and river-based livelihoods. Fish migration therefore represents not only the movement of a species but also an ecological process that sustains the wider socio-ecological system. Data 13 intensifies this concern by locating a planned dam in the same area.

Data 13: "This is where the Laotian authorities have planned a power dam venture." (WocomoTRAVEL, 2025)

Data 13 shows that the proposed hydropower dam is planned near an ecologically sensitive fish-migration route. Dams are more than simply adding concrete to the waterscape. They may alter flows, migratory paths, habitats, and community dependence on fisheries. Through pollution, the dam is read as an intervention

that changes the river's ecological functions; through apocalypse, the planned project introduces a future-oriented risk in which energy development may produce wider ecological consequences. Data 14 provides a summary of environmental and nutritional impacts, highlighting this risk.

Data 14: "The environmental and dietary impact would be of colossal proportions." (WocomoTRAVEL, 2025)

Data 14 emphasizes the scale of the possible consequences of development in the Mekong ecosystem. The phrase "colossal proportions" indicates that the threat extends beyond habitat destruction. The reference to " dietary impact" connects ecological damage to human nutrition and food security. Through apocalypse, the documentary frames disruption to fish populations and river productivity as a potential social crisis, not only an environmental one. Thus, changes in the Mekong ecology cannot be seen as separate from human life. Data 15 makes this projected disruption more concrete by showing that fish are unable to reach upstream areas.

Data 15: "The fish are unable to make it upstream." (WocomoTRAVEL, 2025)

Data 15 makes the disruption of fish migration explicit. Migration in river ecosystems is a crucial ecological process for population perpetuation and support. When upstream movement is blocked, reproduction and other stages of the fish life cycle may be interrupted. This disruption could affect food chains, fish catches, and river- based livelihoods. From the perspective of pollution, this blockage represents functional degradation of the river because altered flows interfere with a basic ecological process. Through apocalypse, migration failure becomes an early warning of declining fish populations and livelihood insecurity. This alteration of river rhythm is reflected in Data 16, which shows the involvement of transnational development actors.

Data 16: "Political authorities alongside engineers from China, Thailand, Cambodia, and Laos have already started altering the river's pace." (WocomoTRAVEL, 2025)

Data 16 shows that changes in the Mekong River resulted from political and technical decisions involving several countries. The phrase "altering the river's pace" presents the Mekong as having an ecological rhythm that is being reorganized through political and engineering intervention. Through pollution, such intervention becomes ecological degradation when it disrupts seasonal flows, fish movement, and human-river relations. Because authorities and engineers from several states are involved, the segment also anticipates Garrard's concept of earth: Ecological consequences may extend beyond the place where decisions are made. This tension between development and ecological security becomes most explicit in Data 17.

Data 17: "This irrefutably necessary machinery could potentially destroy man while taming the river." (WocomoTRAVEL, 2025)

Data 17 presents the paradox of modern development in the Mekong region. The machinery is described as "irrefutably necessary," acknowledging the demand for infrastructure and energy, yet it may "destroy man" while " taming the river." Through pollution, the phrase " taming the river" reflects a human-centered attempt to control ecological processes. Through apocalypse, the possibility of human destruction shows that domination of the river may ultimately threaten the communities that depend on it. The documentary therefore critiques development not simply because infrastructure exists, but because development becomes ecologically dangerous when it ignores the river's rhythms and connectivity.

Taken together, Data 11 to Data 17 show that pollution and apocalypse operate as connected concepts. Destructive fishing, blocked migration, altered flows, and dam construction are represented as present forms of functional ecological degradation, while species decline, food insecurity, and livelihood loss are projected as possible future consequences. This pattern strengthens the documentary's critique of development that treats the Mekong primarily as an energy resource while neglecting the ecological processes that sustain both human and nonhuman life.

The Mekong as a transboundary ecological system

The visual and verbal texts in the WocomoTRAVEL documentary represent the Mekong as a transboundary ecological system. The river connects humans, wildlife, vegetation, culture, food, tourism, and economic development within a wider network of interdependence. Garrard's concept of earth

guides this reading by shifting attention from separate territories to ecological relations that exceed administrative boundaries. Because water, fish, and environmental consequences move across borders, the Mekong cannot be understood as belonging ecologically to only one state. This transboundary perspective is introduced in Data 18.

Data 18: "The Mekong River is one of the last remaining nourishing rivers of the world. At the same time, valued, exploited, and revered. " (WocomoTRAVEL, 2025)

Data 18 represents the Mekong as a river that actively sustains life at a regional scale. Food, water, mobility, and cultural spaces along the river sustain the communities living there. At the same time, the sequence "valued, exploited, and revered" presents an ambivalent human relationship with the river: Dependence and respect coexist with extraction. The documentary frames the Mekong as a river that is economically valued, materially exploited, and culturally revered. Through earth, this contradiction is significant because the Mekong is represented as a shared ecological system whose benefits and pressures extend beyond individual communities. Data 19 makes this interdependence more explicit through the metaphor of the "heart."

Data 19: "The Tonle Sap is considered to be the Mekong's heart." (WocomoTRAVEL, 2025)

Data 19 shows that the Mekong functions as an interconnected ecological system. Tonle Sap does not appear as a separate lake from the river. The metaphor of the "heart" represents Tonle Sap as a functional center of water circulation, fish migration, and biological productivity. As with a body, disturbance to one vital part may affect the functioning of the larger system. Conversely, changes in the Mekong River can alter Tonle Sap's ecological life. Through earth, the documentary therefore makes ecological interdependence visible through a bodily metaphor and shows why locations within the basin cannot be treated as isolated units. Data 20 places this ecological connection beside the political function of the river as a border.

Data 20: "The Mekong defines the limits between Laos, Thailand, and Burma. " (WocomoTRAVEL, 2025)

Data 20 presents the Mekong as a geopolitical boundary among Laos, Thailand, and Burma. Administrative boundaries divide space into states, whereas rivers connect spaces through moving water and living systems. This contrast is central to Garrard's earth concept: States can divide territory, but they cannot contain the movement of water, fish, sediment, or ecological effects. The documentary therefore reframes the Mekong from a line of separation into a shared material system, creating a basis for transboundary responsibility. Data 21 extends this tension from political borders to cultural difference.

Data 21: "Although the Mekong has forever fed men, it has failed to unify them. Civilizations, languages, and traditions remain widely divergent all along its shores." (WocomoTRAVEL, 2025)

Data 21 shows that the Mekong River gives life to many communities, although the people along its banks have different civilizations, languages, and traditions. Through Garrard's concept of *earth*, cultural differences do not negate ecological interdependence. The Mekong brings together human diversity in a single river system. The river provides food and living space for historically and culturally diverse communities. This representation shows that the region's ecology functions beyond national identity, language, and local traditions. The contrast between shared material dependence and continuing cultural difference shows that ecological interdependence does not require cultural uniformity. This ecological unity takes the form of ethics in Data 22, which emphasizes the relationship between humans and nature as one.

Data 22: "What I predominantly want to show the world are people and nature as one. " (WocomoTRAVEL, 2025)

Data 22 expresses an ecological orientation through the statement that " people and nature" are "one." This wording rejects a rigid separation between humans and the environment. The statement positions humans as participants within ecological networks rather than as subjects outside or above the environment. Through earth, the statement becomes an ethical claim that human well- being depends on the continuity of animals, plants, habitats, and river processes. The documentary therefore links ecological interdependence with responsibility: Development should not be pursued independently of ecological balance. This ethical

concern leads to Data 23, which calls for a "new balance."

Data 23: "The Mekong has always welcomed man. Whether they are in search of fish, beautiful scenery, or currently electrical energy, in order to benefit from the strength of the river while preserving the surrounding ecosystems, the people that live off what the Mekong provides will have to quickly find a new balance." (WocomoTRAVEL, 2025)

Data 23 brings together three forms of human interest in the Mekong: Fish, beautiful scenery, and electrical energy. These correspond to livelihood, tourism, and development, showing how the river is simultaneously used, admired, and engineered. The phrase "find a new balance" shifts the documentary from describing ecological dependence to articulating a responsibility for managing competing uses of the river. Through earth, that balance must be understood at a transboundary scale because extraction or disruption in one part of the basin can affect communities and habitats elsewhere. Data 23 shows that the future of the Mekong depends on the ability of humans to manage the relationship between economic needs and ecosystem sustainability.

Taken together, Data 18 to Data 23 represent the Mekong as a transboundary ecological system in which political, linguistic, cultural, and economic differences coexist with material interdependence. Garrard's concept of earth connects the earlier themes by showing that community dwelling, multispecies habitats, and development pressures operate within one shared river system. The documentary therefore frames the future of the Mekong as a regional responsibility that requires balancing livelihood, tourism, energy development, and ecological continuity.

Discussion

The findings show that WocomoTRAVEL's *The Mekong: Southeast Asia's Nourishing River that Flows through Its Most Beautiful Cities* constructs the Mekong not merely as a geographical background but as an integrated socio-ecological system. Community life, nonhuman species, natural landscapes, tourism, energy development, and political decision-making are represented as interdependent elements within this system. Rather than functioning as separate categories, the four themes connect human dwelling, multispecies habitats, ecological disruption, and transboundary responsibility. This interconnection demonstrates that Garrard's ecocritical concepts operate relationally in the documentary's representation of the Mekong.

The representation of the Mekong as an ecological home extends the concept of *dwelling* beyond the physical location of river communities. The concept of *dwelling* helps explain that a place of residence is not merely a physical location. A dwelling shapes how humans work, move, adapt, and recognize themselves through the environment. Communities around the Mekong live through water, fish, floating houses, boat routes, market activities, and local occupations. These relations show that the river shapes the ecological identity of the communities. Houses that follow the movement of water and floating villages in Prek Toal demonstrate local knowledge that emerged from long experience of living with the river. Dwelling therefore functions not only as a thematic category but also as a relational concept connecting material habitation, environmental adaptation, inherited knowledge, and ecological identity. This interpretation is consistent with studies showing that the livelihoods, social memory, and ecological knowledge of Mekong communities are shaped by changing floodscapes and close dependence on river resources (Tran et al., 2022; 2025). The documentary adds a representational dimension to these studies by translating river-based relationships into verbal narration and visual scenes for a transnational audience.

The multispecies representation of the Mekong further develops this relational understanding of dwelling. Fish, birds, reptiles, insects, plants, Irrawaddy dolphins, giant catfish, flooded forests, and swamp forests appear as part of the river's network of life. The concept of *animals* positions animals as ecological subjects that have an important role in ecosystem sustainability. The concept of *wilderness* shows that natural landscapes are not visual decoration. Natural landscapes work as productive spaces that provide food, nesting sites, migration routes, and reproductive spaces for various species. In this way, the Mekong appears as a multispecies ecosystem that cannot be reduced to an economic resource for humans. The concepts of *animals* and *wilderness* therefore do not operate independently. Nonhuman species depend on habitat continuity, while river communities depend on both species diversity and

the ecological functions of those habitats. This relationship challenges an exclusively anthropocentric interpretation of the Mekong by positioning nonhuman life as an active component of regional sustainability.

Kura et al. (2023) similarly demonstrate that fish conservation in the Mekong is closely connected to the sustainability of local livelihoods, reinforcing the documentary' s representation of biodiversity and community survival as mutually dependent. This finding is closely related to Boonyasukha (2025), who showed that environmental documentary films can build pro- environmental messages through human connectedness with nature, empathy for animals and plants, and ecological awareness. This study extends that direction through the context of the Mekong River. WocomoTRAVEL's narrative shows that human life on the river depends on the sustainability of nonhuman life. Birds in Prek Toal, fish in Tonle Sap, and Irrawaddy dolphins show that the sustainability of river communities cannot be separated from habitat quality. At this point, ecocriticism helps read animals and landscapes as part of ecological ethics, rather than as passive objects in travel viewing. At the same time, the documentary's travel-oriented imagery creates a tension between touristic aestheticization and ecological warning. Scenic representations may initially frame the Mekong as an attractive destination, while narratives about endangered species and habitat disruption reposition it as a vulnerable ecological system. This dual function is significant for digital media ecocriticism because it shows that a travel documentary can simultaneously produce visual attraction and encourage environmental reflection.

The concepts of *pollution* and *apocalypse* reveal the documentary's critique of development- driven intervention in the Mekong. Pollution is represented not only as visible contamination but also as functional ecological disruption, including destructive fishing, altered water flows, blocked migration routes, and habitat degradation. Apocalypse operates as an anticipatory mode that links these disturbances with future threats to biodiversity, food security, and river-based livelihoods. The documentary therefore represents ecological crisis as a social crisis because damage to fish populations, habitats, and river connectivity directly affects the communities that depend on them. This reading expands Garrard's concept of pollution beyond physical waste by showing that disruption of ecological processes can also constitute environmental degradation.

This interpretation is consistent with studies showing that hydropower development can disrupt fish biodiversity, river connectivity, and the socio-ecological functions of the Mekong Basin (Baird & Hogan, 2023; Middleton, 2022). Opperman et al. (2023) similarly emphasize the importance of examining river systems rather than assessing energy projects only as isolated infrastructure. The documentary contributes a media perspective to this discussion by framing machinery and dams as both necessary for development and potentially destructive to the river. This contradiction exposes the limitations of a development model that treats the Mekong primarily as an energy resource while overlooking its ecological roles in sustaining species, food systems, and community livelihoods. The documentary consequently does not present development and sustainability as completely separate choices; instead, it reveals the unequal risks produced when development attempts to control the river without respecting its ecological rhythms.

The transboundary dimension of the documentary gives Garrard's concept of *earth* broader theoretical significance. The concept of *earth* helps explain that the river works beyond administrative and political boundaries. States may divide space through territorial borders, but water, fish, sediment, dam impacts, and ecological crises move across those borders. The Mekong connects China, Laos, Thailand, Cambodia, and Vietnam through water flows, fish migration, food, tourism, culture, and energy. In this reading, the river becomes a regional ecological body that demands shared responsibility. The representation therefore exposes the limitations of nation-centered environmental governance: Political boundaries can divide territory, but they cannot contain ecological processes or downstream consequences. This interpretation is consistent with Caffe's (2023) emphasis on regional planning, sustainable development, and transboundary cooperation in the Mekong. It also connects local dwelling with regional governance because changes affecting fish, water, and habitats in one location can influence livelihoods and food systems elsewhere.

Theoretically, this study shows that Garrard's six concepts are interconnected in the representation of the Mekong. *Dwelling* explains how communities inhabit the river as an ecological home. *Animals* and *wilderness* explain the position of animals and landscapes as part of the network of life. *Pollution* and *apocalypse* explain development pressure and the threat of ecological crisis. *Earth* extends the reading to a transboundary scale. This interconnection shows that ecocriticism can be used to read digital audiovisual texts as a space for critiquing human-nature relations and regional development. More specifically, the six concepts function as a relational network rather than as a list of separate analytical categories. Dwelling depends on the continuity of animals and wilderness; pollution disrupts these relationships; apocalypse projects the possible consequences of continued ecological disturbance; and earth extends the analysis from local habitats to the regional scale. This relational application of Garrard's framework demonstrates how ecocriticism can be adapted to audiovisual texts in which ecological meaning is constructed through the interaction of narration, visual framing, sound, and scene sequencing.

In terms of contribution, this study strengthens digital media ecocriticism in the Southeast Asian context. Boonyasukha (2025) showed that environmental films can build ecological awareness. This study continues that direction through a digital travel text that presents the river, communities, animals, tourism, energy, and development within one ecological narrative. Its contribution to digital media ecocriticism lies in demonstrating that travel documentaries can simultaneously aestheticize natural landscapes and criticize the ecological pressures placed upon them. Its contribution to Southeast Asian environmental studies lies in connecting river- based identity, multispecies dependence, hydropower development, food security, tourism, and transboundary governance within a single representational system. The Mekong is therefore represented not merely as a tourism landscape or an economic resource, but as a shared socio-ecological system whose sustainability requires regional responsibility.

Conclusion

This study showed that the WocomoTRAVEL documentary represented the Mekong River as an ecological living space that connects humans, nature, animals, culture, local economies, tourism, and Southeast Asian development. Through Greg Garrard's ecocritical framework, this representation was read through four main findings. First, the Mekong appeared as a living space for river communities. The concept of *dwelling* explained that the river shaped the ways communities lived, worked, moved, adapted, and built ecological identity through close relationships with water.

Second, the Mekong was represented as a habitat for humans and nonhumans. The concepts of *animals* and *wilderness* showed that fish, birds, dolphins, plants, flooded forests, and swamp forests became important parts of the river's network of life. This representation positioned animals and natural landscapes as ecological elements that determined the sustainability of the region. The lives of river communities depended on habitat quality and the balance of the species living within it.

Third, the Mekong was presented as an ecological space under development pressure and environmental change. The concepts of *pollution* and *apocalypse* helped explain that river damage emerged through destructive fishing, altered water flows, hydropower dam plans, disrupted fish migration, and threats to food security. This representation showed that modern development could produce socio-ecological risks when humans ignored the natural rhythms of the river.

Fourth, the Mekong was represented as a transboundary ecological system. The concept of *earth* emphasized that the river operated beyond political boundaries, languages, cultures, and economic interests. Ecological change in one area could affect communities, animals, food systems, and ecosystems in other areas. Therefore, the future of the Mekong will require transboundary ecological awareness and development governance that considers the balance between human needs and river sustainability.

Theoretically, this study showed that Garrard's ecocriticism could be used to read digital travel documentaries as ecological texts that contain critiques of human- nature relations. Contextually, this study contributed to Southeast Asian environmental studies by showing that the Mekong River was not merely a tourism background. It was a socio-ecological space that sustained human and nonhuman life. Thus, the representation of the Mekong in WocomoTRAVEL

emphasized the importance of reading Southeast Asian development through the perspectives of sustainability, ecological justice, and transboundary responsibility.

This study has several limitations. First, it focuses on a single digital travel documentary, so the findings cannot represent the full range of ecological narratives about the Mekong across different media platforms and documentary productions. Second, although the coding process was reviewed for consistency and selected interpretations were discussed with peers, the study did not employ formal inter-coder reliability testing. Third, the analysis focuses on textual and audiovisual representation and does not examine audience responses, production practices, or the broader influence of the YouTube platform. Future research may compare multiple documentaries, investigate audience reception, or examine how different digital platforms construct environmental narratives about the Mekong and other transboundary ecosystems in Southeast Asia.

Declaration of generative AI in scientific writing

During the proofreading revision of this manuscript, the authors used DeepL Translator by DeepL SE through web-based access and Grammarly by Grammarly, Inc. through browser extension access in August 2026. These tools were used only for translation support, grammar checking, spelling correction, punctuation review, language refinement, and readability improvement. They were not used to generate data, conduct analysis, interpret findings, create arguments, or fabricate references. The authors reviewed, verified, and edited all AI-assisted outputs and take full responsibility for the final content of the manuscript.

CRediT author statement

Anisa Anggun Septia: Contributed to conceptualization, data curation, formal analysis, investigation, methodology, visualization, and writing the original draft. **Anggoro Abiyyu Ristio Cahyo:** Contributed to methodology, supervision, validation, review, and editing. All authors have read and approved the final version of the manuscript.

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