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Making sustainability visible: character storytelling and advocacy strategies in micro-documentaries

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Abstract. The UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) matter, but to many people they still feel too abstract to hold attention. Micro-documentaries are short and centred on real people, so they can connect public audiences with large social issues more directly. This study examines a social practice project called The Loop of the Wilderness and asks how micro-documentaries can make broad ideas easier to grasp through one person's story. The research suggests that a single personal narrative can lower the threshold for understanding, build emotional engagement, and help viewers connect large issues to their own lives. In this project, the leather-carving Ayis it met in Kashgar, the local customs, and the direct experience of picking up trash on the plateau gave the story a stronger sense of reality. Even so, one person's story cannot speak for everyone, and it does not replace systematic evidence. Effective communication needs to keep "telling a good story" and "being trustworthy with facts" in balance.

Keywords: sustainability communication, micro-documentary, character storytelling, social advocacy, The Loop of the Wilderness

1. Introduction: how far are big ideas from us

With only three years left until the UN SDGs deadline in 2025, the goals still feel distant to many people. Terms such as "Zero Poverty", "Gender Equality", and "Climate Action" are widely repeated, yet they often come across as abstract language rather than practical concerns. If the public does not clearly understand what these goals mean, it is difficult to expect meaningful action.

Sustainability messages are often hard to spread because the issues involved are large and distant from everyday experience. Climate change, species loss, and inequality can feel abstract, even when their effects are real [1]. A phrase like "keep global warming within 1.5°C" is scientifically accurate, but for many people it remains only a number. It does not give a human face, a concrete situation, or a story. People usually respond more easily to stories than to data alone [2].

This is where micro-documentaries become useful. They are short, usually running from a few minutes to just over ten, and tend to focus on one person, one event, or one scene. That format suits the idea of seeing the bigger picture through a small, specific case. Recent works like Walking with Elephants and Deep in the

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Qilian Mountains do this by following one person's point of view to present a wider world[1].

For the social practice project, a micro-documentary called The Loop of the Wilderness was made in Kashgar, Xinjiang. In this film, the present study focuses on three questions: how micro-documentaries use individual stories to explain larger social issues, why this kind of storytelling tends to move viewers, and where its limits lie.

2. Why is storytelling more effective than facts

2.1. The "story turn" in sustainability communication

Earlier views treated environmentally unfriendly behaviour as a knowledge problem: if people understood the science, they would make better choices [3]. Later research suggests the gap between knowledge and action is much harder to close [4]. Many people know that plastic pollutes the ocean. They still use disposable cups.

This helps explain why recent research has paid more attention to "storytelling". Stories usually do not confront the audience directly. Instead, they draw people into a situation through "experience" and create the response, "what would I do if that were me?" In Human, French director Yann Arthus-Bertrand included the personal accounts of over 2,000 ordinary people[2]. That choice brings large issues such as war, poverty, and environment down to the level of individual human experience.

Chinese eco-documentaries are changing as well. Many earlier films focused on "pure nature", keeping people off screen and showing only animals and landscapes. More recent works, such as Qinghai: Our National Parks, place people back within these environments and focus on how humans and nature affect each other [5]. This change aligns with China's idea of a "shared community of life".

2.2. What makes micro-documentaries special

Micro-documentaries have a few features that make them good for sustainability topics:

Focused storytelling stands out first. The short format pushes creators to center the story on one issue and one person, which helps avoid a common problem: trying to cover everything and not examining any part in much depth [6].

Second, the human element matters. These stories are relatively low-cost to produce and flexible in form, which makes them well suited to tracking the everyday lives of ordinary people. In many cases, audiences respond first to what happened to a specific person and only later begin to care about the larger issue involved. The person becomes the entry point [7].

Third, they are easy to share. On short-video platforms, micro-documentaries tend to spread well because they rely more on "emotional impact" than on "complete information". A moving two-minute clip may reach far more people than a twenty-minute full film.

2.3. How do character stories create advocacy

Character stories work through three paths in sustainability communication:

Lower the barrier—Stories turn abstract ideas into concrete scenes, so audiences don't need prior knowledge—they can just understand directly.

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[1] Walking with Elephants and Deep in the Qilian Mountains are documentary films used as research materials in this study.

[2] Human (2015), directed by Yann Arthus-Bertrand, is a documentary film used as a research example.

Real people, real problems, and real decisions make audiences feel, "I've been through something similar". Once that connection is there, they usually want to know more.

Build connection. Stories give audiences a "reference point" that makes them think, "this has something to do with me too", and that can make action seem possible.

Character stories can offer a useful "window" into an issue, but they do not stand in for the issue as a whole. If a story is polished too heavily, it can stop reading as "advocacy" and start to sound like "propaganda". At that point, audiences are less likely to trust it.

3. The Loop of the Wilderness: how a real story gets told

3.1. What was filmed

The Loop of the Wilderness is a micro-documentary from the "Green Kashgar" project. The filming took place at Muztagh Ata using three linked threads, "One Pair of Hands—One Shop—One Wilderness". The film follows the leather-carving Ayi, volunteers collecting trash, and the way ethical consumption links local livelihoods with environmental protection.

From the beginning, the script focused on people rather than scenery to carry the story. It followed three main threads: how Ayi earns a living (livelihood thread), volunteers collecting trash (ecology thread), and how sales fund environmental projects (connection thread).

3.2. Why was Ayi chosen

Choosing who tells the story matters. The creators did not turn to experts or officials to deliver formal speeches. Instead, they chose an ordinary person, Ayi.

Ayi is not an environmental hero or an NGO leader. She is a rural woman who makes carved leather goods. Each day, she works, waits for orders, and figures out what she has earned. Those ordinary routines give audiences a clear way to understand "sustainable livelihoods". The film does not state that "women's empowerment is important" as a general message. Instead, it shows how a single leather order can increase a family's income and give them more room to choose.

This helps turn large, abstract issues into a story on a human scale. The SDGs can seem distant, while Ayi's life is easier to grasp. Her experience does not stand for everything, but it makes "empowerment" easier to picture.

Seeing Ayi in person made this much clearer. When the team visited, the Ayis put on their most beautiful ethnic clothes to welcome them. That small detail left a deep impression on the team. She is not just "someone who does leather carving". She lives through this craft, and carries real dignity in it. A sustainable livelihood is not only about income. It also depends on keeping cultural identity intact.

3.3. Everyday details that left an impression

During filming, some small things weren't in the plan, but the team later found them really useful.

"Don't shake your hands after washing" came up when the team visited Ayi's home. Local residents told them not to flick the water off their hands. At first, the team did not understand why. Later, the reason became clear: the plateau has little water, so even a small amount should not be wasted. No one seemed to treat this as a formal rule that had to be explained. It had already become part of daily movement, a kind of bodily habit shaped by long-term life in a place where water is scarce. That detail matters. If a documentary records ordinary actions like this, it can say more than a narrator repeating "water is precious" over and over.

At Muztagh Ata, the guide led the team to collect trash, talked with them about environmental protection, and introduced several local animals. Among them, the snow leopard was the one many of the team members liked most. The reason was simple. It was not abstract ideas such as "biodiversity is important" that drew them in, but the fact that snow leopards seemed beautiful and fascinating to them. That reaction matters, because this sense of fascination can turn into a real willingness to protect them.

These seemingly "unrelated" small details were, in practice, very useful. They were not pre-scripted. The team actually encountered them and responded to them on site. Their value comes from that unexpected, lived quality.

3.4. How to ask questions to dig out real stories

During the interviews, the team followed a simple rule. The interviews began with factual questions, then moved to change over time, conflict, and future expectations. When an answer stayed vague, follow-up questions were asked about specific instances. The focus was not on collecting general attitudes, but on documenting events.

Look at the difference in the following Table 1:

Table 1. The difference about asking questions

Question Type	How to Ask	What You Get
Asking about attitude	"Do you think this project has helped you?"	"It's been pretty helpful". That is it.
Asking about specific events	"When was your most recent order? What did you do after you got paid?"	"Last month a tourist ordered a bag for 800 yuan. I bought winter clothes for my kid and saved the rest".

The second answer is better because it gives dates, figures, and clear choices. That lets the reader follow how the money came in and how it was spent. Attitudes are opinions, but particular events provide evidence. Even if a position is correct, people will not accept it without evidence.

3.5. How the two threads connect

The Loop of the Wilderness uses two threads—Ayi's story and the wilderness story—and lets them come together.

The logic is:

Ayi makes crafts → Shop sells them → Money goes to environmental projects → Wilderness gets protected

What works well about this structure is its restraint. It does not openly declare that sustainability matters. Instead, it follows one item, a leather bag, from Ayi's hands to the point of sale, then to how the money was used, and finally to the environmental project. As this sequence unfolds, the audience can see the connection for themselves.

The main point is that these two threads cannot just be pushed together, they need to link on their own terms. Audiences need to see for themselves that "buying a leather bag" is actually connected to "trash at Muztagh being cleaned up". Without that connection, the message stays abstract. Once that link registers in their minds, sustainability becomes "visible".

4. Discussion: can storytelling drive change-yes, but with limits

4.1. How stories work

In this film, the three paths all worked:

Lower the barrier—When watching Ayi's story, audiences do not need prior knowledge of SDG #8. They first see a person making something, selling it, earning money, and experiencing a changed life. Only after that might they connect the story to ideas such as "sustainable consumption".

Create empathy by showing Ayi in ordinary moments that people recognize right away. She may get nervous while waiting for orders, or feel pleased when something turns out well. These reactions need little explanation because they are familiar to most readers. That familiarity makes it easier to care about her [8].

The sequence "One Pair of Hands → One Shop → One Wilderness" gives audiences a path they can follow for themselves. By using the snow leopard as an "emotional anchor", this approach makes the wilderness feel less like "a place that needs protection" and more like a living place shaped by a species people can care about.

4.2. Storytelling has pitfalls too

But storytelling can't be done carelessly. Three things to watch out for:

Pitfall 1 is that one person's experience cannot stand for everyone else's. Ayi's higher income improved her own life, but this does not mean leather crafting can address all the problems faced by rural women. Her story works as a "window" into the issue rather than a complete "answer".

Pitfall 2: Do not rely on emotion alone without facts. Volunteers crying in front of the glacier may be moving, but if the film only shows the "emotion" and does not explain where the trash came from, the audience still learns nothing afterward. Advocacy can take a clear stance, but it cannot leave out "what actually happened".

Pitfall 3: Do not treat "we hope this is true" as though it were "actually true". The storyline "Ayi makes crafts → tourists buy → money supports environment" is persuasive, but "Ayi's income directly supports Muztagh protection" should not be presented as fact without solid evidence. A narrative can suggest a connection, but the evidence does not prove it, and it cannot be invented.

4.3. Advice for future filmmakers

From this practice, three lessons were learned:

One well-chosen person can be more useful than ten people the audience only partly understands. What matters is whether that person occupies the issue's "middle position": they are affected by it, they can respond to it, and their life is concrete enough for audiences to grasp. Ayi fits this role exactly.

Second, point the camera at "very small" things. A sustainability story works better in a few minutes when it stays with one hand, one order, one bend to pick up trash, one moment of choosing not to shake water off, instead of trying to pack in too much information. Concrete actions register more strongly than abstract ideas.

Third, problems should not be avoided. When a film shows only "success", it tends to feel more like an advertisement than a documentary. Showing some difficulties makes the film more believable. These "imperfections" are part of reality.

5. Conclusion

In The Loop of the Wilderness, micro-documentaries communicate sustainability through character-based stories. On the cognitive level, they make broad ideas more concrete. On the emotional level, they present

characters in ways that feel familiar and engaging. At the level of meaning, they seem to help audiences connect their own lives with larger social and environmental issues.

What the team ran into on site but not in the script, Ayi's ethnic clothes, the habit of not shaking water off, and everyone's excitement about snow leopards, matters because these details were not deliberately arranged. They were simply there. That is what makes the story feel believable, not just pleasant to hear.

Still, one person's story cannot stand in for a careful argument. A strong character story works as the "door" that brings audiences into a larger issue, but it is not the "destination". Creators need to balance an emotionally engaging narrative with factual accuracy. Both matter. When that balance holds, sustainability communication can support advocacy without distorting the issue.

This case concerns only one project and one film. A later study could examine more cases and ask audiences more directly whether, after watching, they cared more or took any action [2]. That would provide a more direct test of communication effectiveness.

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