

BARREN REPORTING: PRINT MEDIA COVERAGE OF ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES

A content analysis by the Philippine Press Institute in partnership with NICKEL ASIA

Regional leg: Luzon

Over the past twenty years, the Philippines suffered at least 270 natural calamities, making it one of the most disaster-prone countries worldwide.

It was only three years ago when Typhoon 'Yolanda', the deadliest typhoon recorded in Philippine history, caused massive destruction in the Visayas, especially in Samar and Leyte. The typhoon affected millions of people, resulted in the loss of thousands of lives and caused billions of pesos in damage. Until now, thousands of families are still left homeless by 'Yolanda'.

In the last few years, the Philippines has suffered from natural disasters and extreme weather events including strong typhoons, floods, and long dry spells. These problems are further worsened by harmful environmental practices such as the destruction of forests and seas, problematic environmental policies, and to a certain extent, neglect and apathy when it comes to taking care of the country's natural resources.

Not surprisingly, disasters, climate change, and other environmental issues are among the top concerns of Filipinos.

In a recent December 2016 Pulse Asia survey, Filipinos say protecting the environment is among their top 10 concerns (11 percent). The survey showed that stopping the destruction and abuse of the environment is a more urgent concern among Filipinos than other issues, such as charter change and terrorism (four both at percent).

A July 2015 study by the US-based Pew Research Center showed that seven out of 10 Filipinos (72 percent) believe that climate change as the world's biggest threat. The study said Filipinos are even more concerned with climate change than the country's territorial dispute with China on the West Philippine Sea. The study, which surveyed citizens in 40 countries, said climate change emerged as the top global concern.

In a March 2013 Social Weather Stations survey, eight out of 10 Filipinos (85 percent) say they have personally felt the impact of climate change in the last three years. But the same survey showed that many Filipinos still do not fully understand the concept of climate change and its impact. Thirty-eight percent of the respondents say they have "only little" understanding of the issue while 14 percent say they have "almost no understanding" of climate change and its effect on their lives.

Thus, intensifying information campaigns on environmental issues remains a major challenge in the country. With a better understanding of the country's environmental concerns, greater participation of the various stakeholders, including policymakers, business and civil society groups, members of the academe and the citizens themselves can be enlisted to better address such challenges.

But how do news media cover stories about the environment? Do they provide ample coverage of environmental issues for the policymakers, other stakeholders, and the public to understand the realities and complexities of the environmental challenges in society?

As part of Philippine Press Institute's duty to improve the quality the newspaper coverage of crucial issues that affect Philippine society, PPI conducted a content analysis of selected member-publications to see how environmental issues are covered in the press.

Content analysis

PPI's content analysis hopes to offer a snapshot of how the print media cover environment-related issues. It also hopes to offer insights and recommendations on how the press can raise the quality of environmental coverage. It is neither a scientific nor exhaustive analysis, but primarily conducted to offer journalists a glimpse of the news media coverage of environmental issues and offer points for discussion.

Methodology

For its study, PPI analyzed issues of randomly selected member-publications for their coverage in 2016. The months were randomly selected to represent the coverage per quarter.

National Capital Region

Daily

- *BusinessWorld* (March, May, July, and October 2016)
- *Malaya Business Insight* (March, May, July, and October 2016)
- *Philippine Daily Inquirer* (May, July, and October 2016)

Luzon

Daily

- *Sun.Star Baguio* (March, May, and July 2016)
- *Sun.Star Pampanga* (March, May, July, and October 2016)

Weekly

- *Boletin Lucentino* (March, May, July, and October 2016)
- *Ilocos Times* (March, May, July, and October 2016)
- *Luzonwide News Correspondent* (March and May 2016)
- *Mabuhay* (March, May, and July 2016)

The analysis looked at the following:

Number of environmental stories versus newshole – Reports and stories, as well as opinion-editorial pieces that discussed environmental issues were covered and compared with the overall newshole of the papers (amount of available space given to news and opinion-editorial pieces) to evaluate the attention given to issues about the environment.

Placement of environmental stories – PPI looked at the placement of these environmental items in the newspapers as a way of assessing prominence given to issues about the environment.

Type of environmental stories – The study categorized the types of environmental items that came out in the coverage—whether they came in the form of news reports, features, special reports, opinion-editorial pieces, photos or illustrations, or as press releases.

Themes of environmental stories – PPI analyzed the themes or issues discussed in the environmental stories.

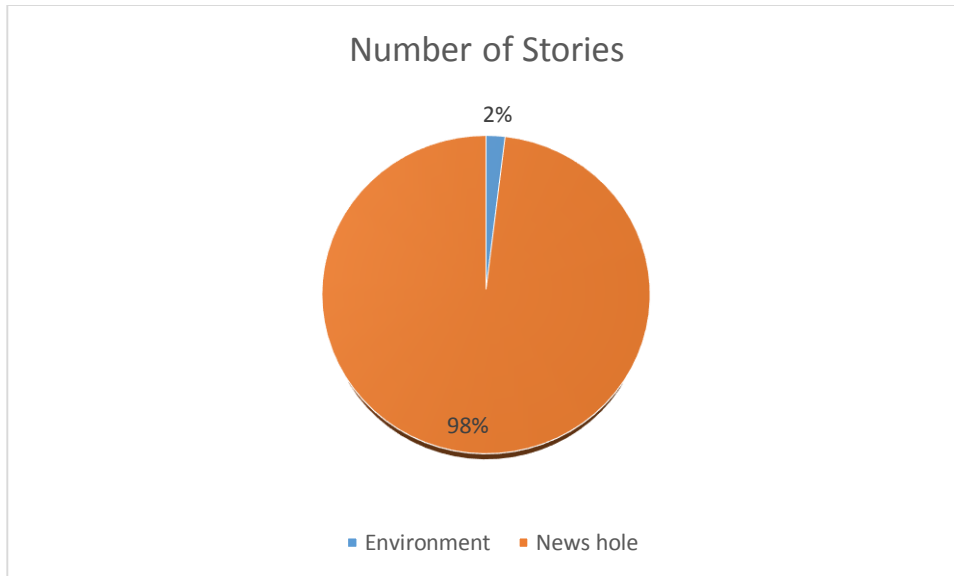
Sources cited in the environmental stories – Sources were also identified and categorized to see which sources were cited and quoted in the stories.

Reporting and research applied in the environmental stories – PPI also analyzed the level of reporting and research in the stories about the environment by looking at the research methods as well as the human, paper, electronic sources used in the reports and commentaries.

Background provided in the environmental stories - The study also looked at whether reports about the environment provided ample background information for the public to better understand the complexities of the issues.

Findings

Number of environmental stories

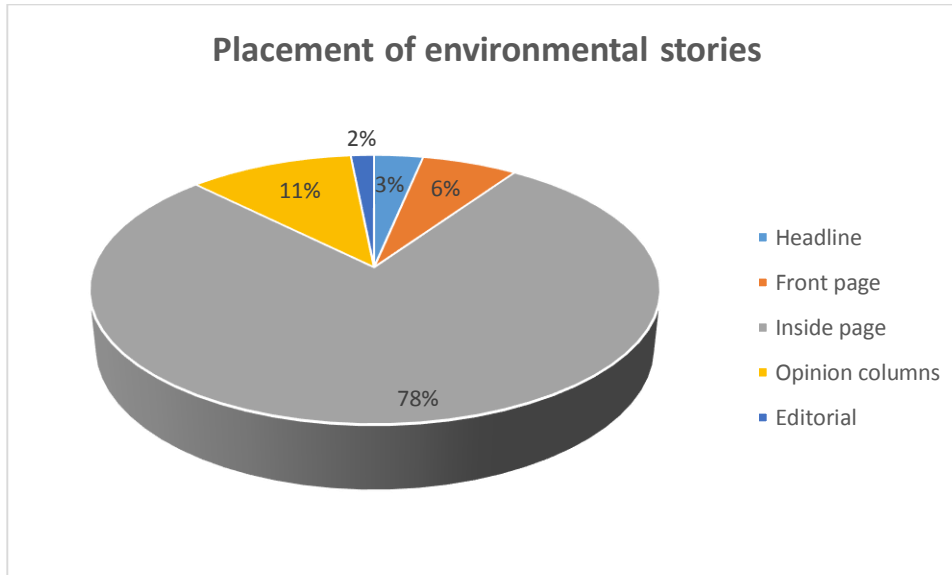


The newshole in the period covered a total of 29,683 items. Out of this number, only 582 items (1.96 percent) tackled environmental stories.

Among the three Manila-based national dailies, *BusinessWorld* had the biggest space allocated to environmental stories with 2.24 percent (148 out of 6,603 items). *Inquirer* devoted 1.25 percent of its coverage to issues about the environment (92 out of 7,368 items). *Malaya* featured environment-related stories in 103 item out of 8,867 (1.16 percent).

In terms of coverage of environmental issues, the community-based newspapers were doing much better compared with the national dailies based in Manila. Among the community-based papers, *Luzonwide News Correspondent* featured the most number of environmental stories (31 out of 180 items or 17.22 percent). *Ilocos Times* devoted 13.07 percent of its coverage to environment-related issues (43 out of 329 items). A far third was *Sun.Star Baguio* which had 66 out of 1,526 items about the environment (4.33 percent). *Mabuhay* reported on the environment seven times out of 188 items (3.72 percent). *Boletin Lucentino* tackled environmental issues with 2.33 percent (9 out of 386 items) while *Sun.Star Pampanga* had 1.96 percent of environmental stories (83 out of 4,236 items).

Placement of environmental stories



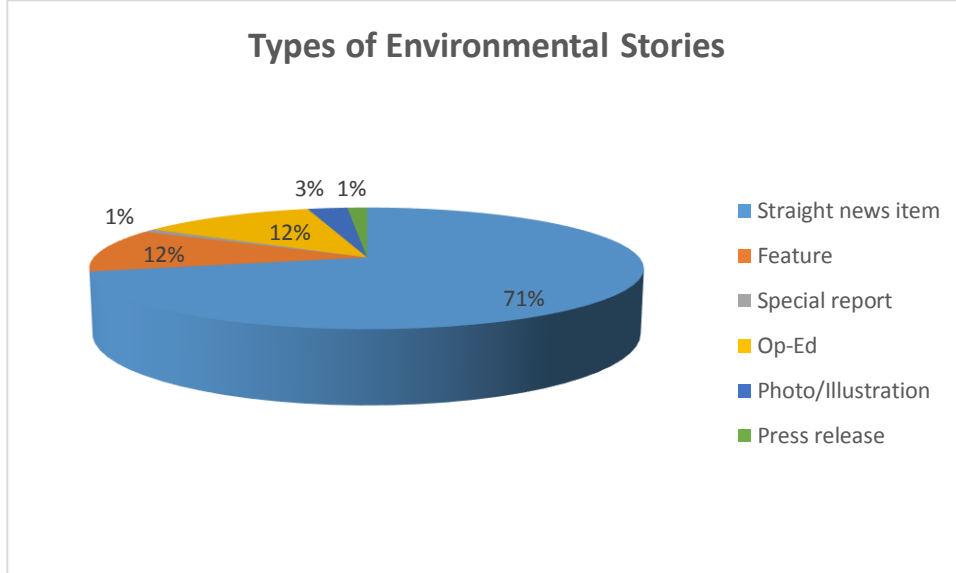
Three out of the four items about the environment were published in the inside pages of the newspapers analyzed (453 out of 582 items or 77.84 percent). Next were opinion/commentary pieces about the environment with 64 or 11 percent. Thirty-seven items were published in the newspapers' front pages (6.36 percent). The newspapers ran environment-related stories as headlines 19 times (3.26 percent). Nine editorials were about the environment (1.55 percent).

Environment stories that became headlines included Mabuhay's item in its March 21-27 issue about an environmental compliance certificate given to a steel bar manufacturing facility in Plaridel, Bulacan despite facing a slew of health and environmental complaints from residents, and environmental advocates. ("ECC para sa planta ng bakal sa Plaridel inilabas ng DENR")

Inside pages usually included short stories about the environment published in papers' regional and international news sections (for example, *Inquirer* ran short news items about a wildfire in Edmonton, Canada on May 6 and May 10). Some were published in the business pages (such as an *Inquirer* May 5 report about crop damage caused by El Niño amounting to P8.6 billion).

Editorials about the environment included a call by *Sun.Star Baguio* on residents living in the Cordillera region to help end illegal logging in the region and promote the area's environment preservation ("Ending illegal logging in the Cordillera", May 20)

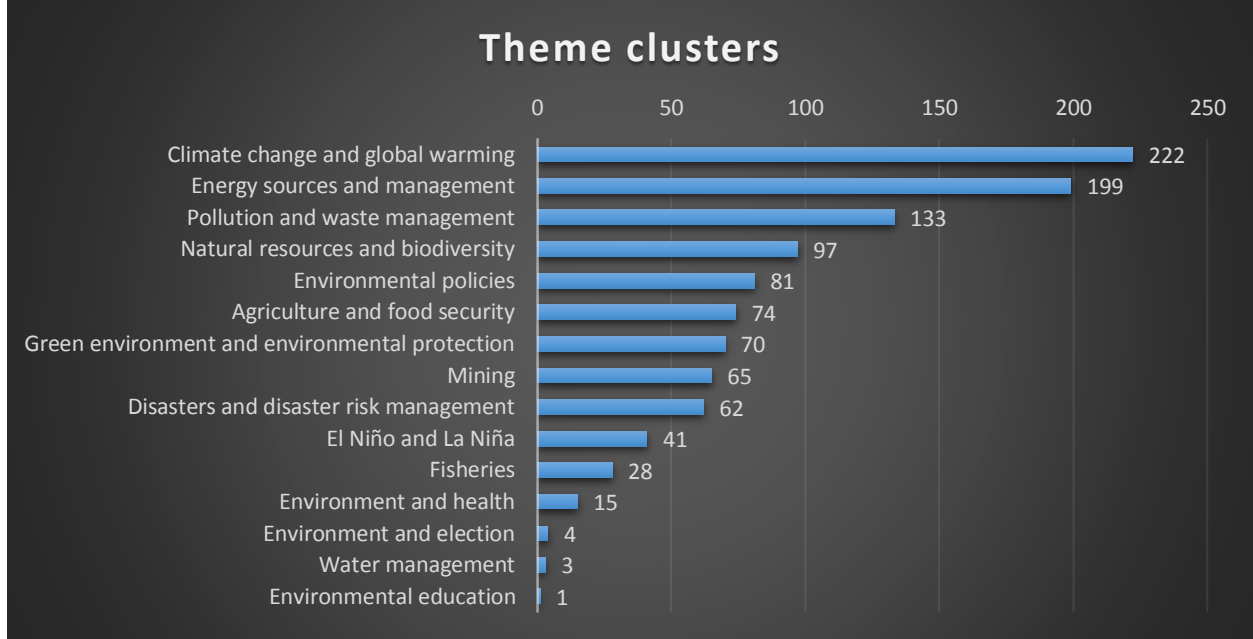
Types of environmental stories



Seven out of 10 items about the environment were straight news reports (415 out of 582 items or 71.31 percent). Seventy-one items were op-ed pieces (12.20 percent) while 67 were features about the environment (11.51 percent). Sixteen items were stand-alone photos and illustrations (2.75 percent). Eight were press releases (1.37 percent) while five were special reports (0.86 percent).

Inquirer and *Luzonwide News Correspondent* were the only ones that devoted special reports about the environment, publishing three and two specials, respectively. For example, *Inquirer* discussed environmental concerns as election agenda (“We’ve seen how easy it is to forget premises” and “Election 2016: Agenda of the Masbate Governor” on May 6). In its March 26-April 1 issue, *Luzonwide News Correspondent* focused on how biotechnology can be used in agriculture in today’s world affected by climate change and other environmental challenges (“The plain truth about biotechnology”). The report culled information and views from scientists and experts, the World Health Organization, and the Department of Agriculture.

Themes of environmental stories

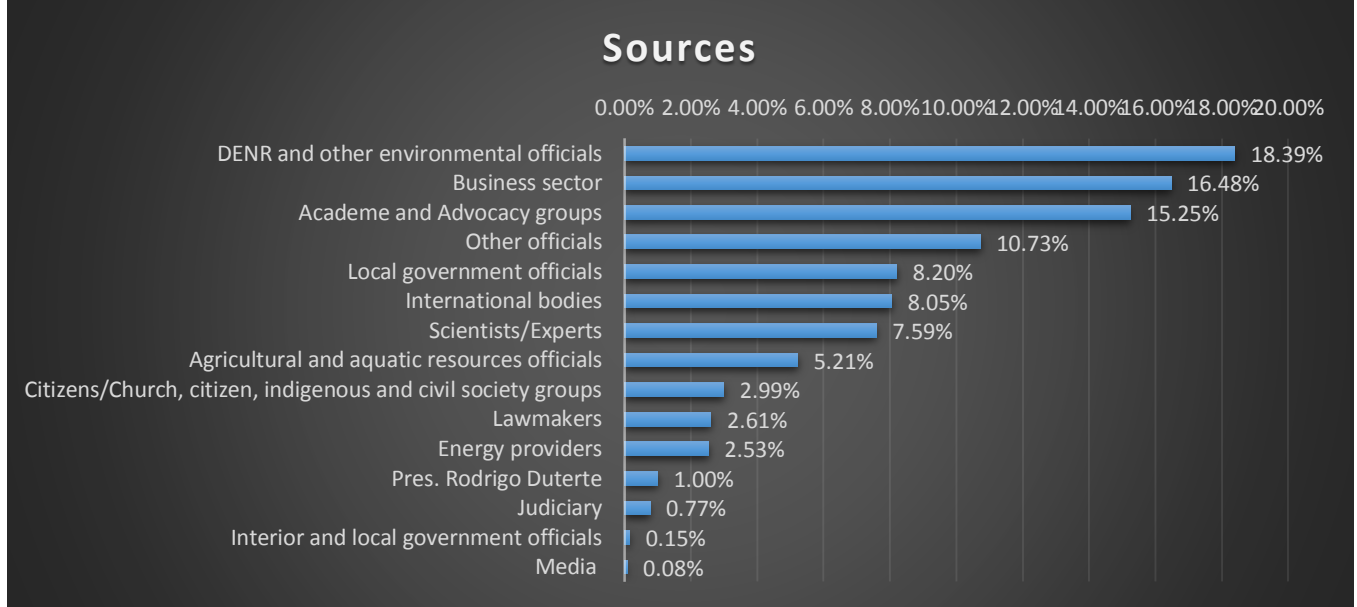


Many reports about the environment tackled several themes. Of the 582 items about the environment, about 1,095 environmental themes were discussed. PPI reviewed the themes that came out of the analysis and categorized similar themes into larger theme groups to give an easier and better grasp of the types of themes discussed in the coverage.

Climate change and global warming was the top theme. The topic was discussed in 222 items (20.27 percent). These included stories about the dangers of global warming, the impact of climate change in the communities, and how the stakeholders are addressing the issue. Next top theme was energy sources and management, where the views, reactions, and positions on the energy policies were tackled in 199 reports (18.17 percent). The third top theme was pollution and waste management (133 reports or 12.15 percent).

Other top themes include natural resources and biodiversity (97 reports or 8.86 percent) and environmental policies (81 or 7.40 percent).

Sources cited in the environmental stories



Of the 582 items about the environment, 1,305 sources were cited and quoted. PPI grouped the sources into similar categories.

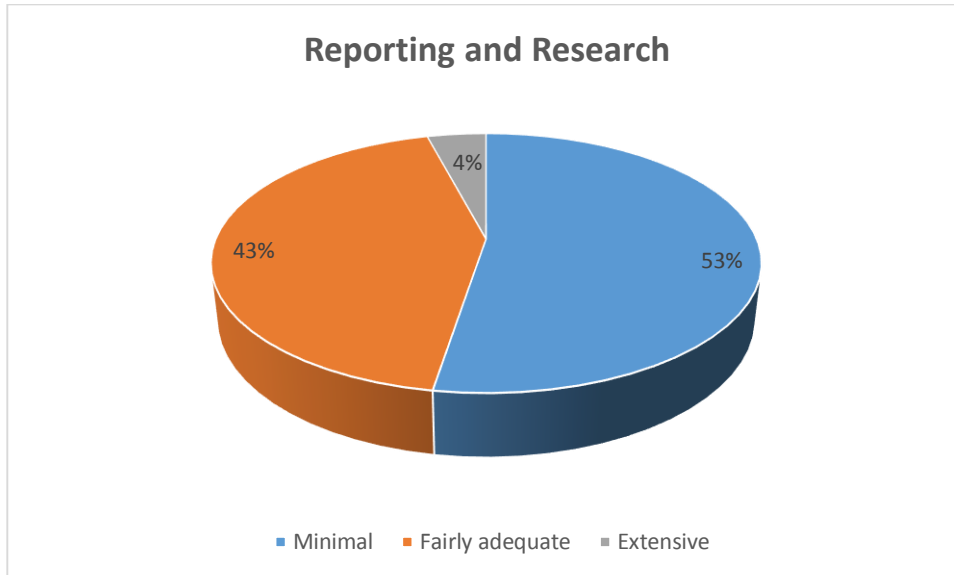
The most quoted sources were environmental officials, especially those from the Department of Environment and Natural Resources (including environment secretary Gina Lopez), Mines and Geosciences Bureau, Environmental Management Bureau, and their local counterparts. They were quoted 240 times (18.39 percent of the total sources cited).

Officials and representatives from the business sector were the next top source (quoted 215 times or 16.48 percent of the total sources cited). These included officials expressing their positions and views about the country's environmental policies as well as their take on various environmental issues, including climate change, environmental destruction, and disaster risk management.

Voices from the local and international environmental advocacy groups as well as those in the academe were the third top source of items about the environment. They were quoted 199 times (15.25 percent of the total sources cited).

Other top sources included officials working for the national government (140 times or 10.73 percent of the total sources cited) and local government units (107 times or 8.20 percent).

Reporting and research applied in the environmental stories

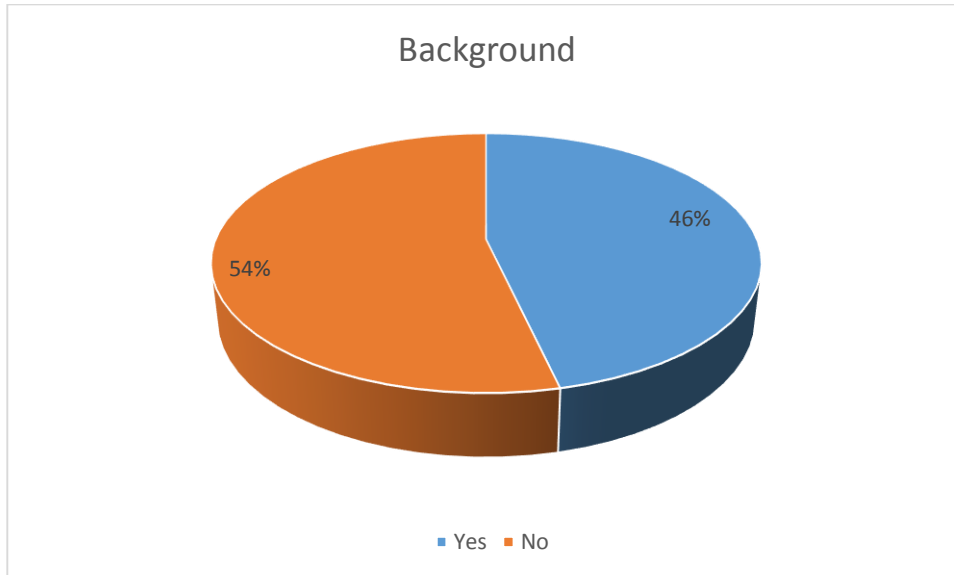


More than half (52.58 percent) suffered from minimal and shallow reporting and research. Environmental issues were not sufficiently discussed for the public to understand. Oftentimes, stories were presented as if environmental issues are impersonal, happening elsewhere, and do not affect the lives of the citizens. The stories fell short in appealing to a larger cross section of a community. In most cases, stories merely stuck with figures and officials.

Many reports also relied on soundbites from interviews with one or two sources. The coverage also neither discussed distorted facts about the environment nor underreported issues. It also did not sufficiently focus on solutions to address environmental challenges.

Out of 582 items, only 24 (4.12) exerted extra effort to provide a more extensive coverage of the issues. The rest (252 or 43.30 percent) provided fairly adequate reporting and research on the stories.

Background provided in the environmental stories



More than half (53.61 percent) did not provide sufficient background.

Conclusions and Recommendations

PPI's content analysis showed a massive dearth in the coverage of environmental stories. Community-based newspapers gave more attention to stories about the environment compared with the Manila-based national dailies, but the coverage was still insufficient.

Three out of the four items about the environment were found in the inside pages of the newspapers. Special reports about the environment were sorely lacking in the coverage.

The scant coverage was also shallow in reporting and research. More often than not, the press discussed environmental stories based on latest events or breaking news. In many cases, environmental issues got coverage when disasters strike or there is a latest pronouncement of an environmental policy. Stories did not usually go beyond statistics and statements from sources. In-depth coverage and context were missing in the stories.

Among the top themes discussed in the coverage were climate change and global warming, energy sources and management, and pollution and waste management.

The top sources in the coverage were environmental officials, representatives from the business sector, and advocacy groups as well as members of the academe.

Covering environmental stories has become more crucial than ever, especially at a time when extreme weather has become the new normal in a disaster-prone country such as the Philippines. Journalists should re-evaluate how they report on stories about the environment and how they can provide background and context for the public to understand the issues. That means going beyond quick quotes and event-based storytelling to provide better and more comprehensive reportage of the environment.

Stories about the environment should also be creative and seek out the people who are facing environmental issues. These may also help the people find answers and solutions to environmental challenges as well as inspire them to act and hold accountability.

Trainings and mentoring sessions in and outside the newsrooms can also help journalists understand the environmental issues they cover and get better guidance on how to do the stories. News organizations can also consider training and honing journalists who can specialize in environmental reporting.

News organizations should also consider tapping new technologies and innovative ideas such as data journalism to improve the coverage of environmental issues.