Planet Earth II: David Attenborough narrates the dramas of life a second time

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Planet Earth II *aired its sixth and final episode on BBC One on December 11. A compilation episode,* A World of Wonder, *will be aired on January 1. The series will be broadcast internationally by BBC affiliates starting January 28 in the US and Canada, airing on BBC America and BBC Earth respectively.*

Ten years ago the BBC aired the television series *Planet Earth*, which has become one of the most well-known nature documentaries of all time. It is estimated that half a billion people have watched the show since its release, which examined some of the most fascinating aspects of life, from the first steps of newborn polar bears to the massive flooded caverns in the Yucatán Peninsula. This journey is continued in the newly released *Planet Earth II.*

The documentary is a truly spectacular achievement and well worth watching. To complete the series, the production team spent 2,089 man-days filming, collecting 400 terabytes of footage which involved 117 trips to 40 different countries. The entire process took four years. It combines stunning visuals, engaging sound effects and an evocative score by Hans Zimmer (*The Lion King, Pirates of the Caribbean*). As in the previous series, David Attenborough's stimulating and at the same time humane narration is what brings all these elements into a more cohesive whole.

One of the many reasons for the new documentary was to take advantage of technologies developed in the past decade. The entire series was shot in ultra-high-definition (4K) resolution and used improved camera stabilization and aerial drone technology to get shots that would have been much more difficult a decade ago. Some of the most intimate moments in the series, such as scenes of Himalayan snow leopards mere feet from the camera, were only possible thanks to motion sensing and remote recording capabilities.

Planet Earth II is all the more welcome in an environment dominated by television shows that promote the police and military, the vapid and colorless, the occult and mystical, and sometimes all of them at the same time. It is encouraging to know that each of the episodes was watched live by between 11 and 13 million people and by millions more using various methods online. More 16-35 year-olds watched *Planet Earth II* than the *X Factor*, which aired at the same time. These are healthy developments, an expression of the very human need to understand and connect to the world within which we live.

The show consists of six episodes, each covering a different biome on Earth: islands, mountains, jungles, deserts, grasslands and Earth's newest habitat, cities. The episodes are not necessarily put together to tell a single story, but rather to paint a portrait of what life is like in various regions around the globe and to show how versatile different creatures are in surviving. Each also includes a post-episode vignette, *Planet Earth II Diaries*, documenting some of the experiences and extraordinary measures the filming crews went through in order to capture the needed footage. Without these, the quality and thoroughness of every episode makes it is very easy to forget that the broadcasts consisted not of shots from a stage but actual footage of life in the wild.

The show begins by exploring some of the Earth's hundreds of thousands of islands, a habitat not covered in the first series. The episode begins by following a snippet of the life of a male sloth on the island Escudo. Its life is leisured and bountiful and only has the problem of finding a mate. In contrast, a male Komodo dragon is shown fighting a rival—tooth, claw and tail—for the prospect of mating with a receptive female.

In one of the most dramatic moments of the show, a brief segment shows the plight of newly emerging baby marine iguanas as they try and escape a multitude of hungry racer snakes and get to the sea. While many of the newborns are caught and eaten, one that was caught manages to escape. This clip has been shared widely on social media and viewed on BBC Earth's YouTube channel more than seven million times.

The final sequence of the episode visits Zavadovski Island, an active volcano in Antarctica, and one of the most remote places on Earth. It took the crew nine days to cross some of the most treacherous seas on the planet. Then they had to take great care to not lose their equipment climbing the 30-foot rock faces that form the island's perimeter. Yet, it is home to approximately one million breeding pairs of chinstrap penguins. Despite the immense hardships they face—traveling up to 50 miles to locate food for their young, dodge raiding skua birds, and identify their mate amongst a million other calls and occasional volcanic eruptions—the penguins find the island's warmth and isolation to be an ideal place to raise chicks and live life.

Episode two, Mountains, was the subject of some controversy. It revisited the life of Himalayan snow leopards, which were first caught on film on the previous series, and captured a battle of a mother snow leopard protecting her daughter against two males looking to mate, who might kill the cub in favor of their own progeny. The producers were absurdly accused of giving in to "rape-culture" by featuring this material. In fact, it is to the show's credit that the sequence was left in, showing what life is like for these elusive creatures *as it is*, without making ahistorical and unscientific moral judgments. *Planet Earth II* seeks to understand the natural world and share that understanding with as wide an audience as possible.

This episode also featured scenes of golden eagles surviving in the Alps during winter. Though food and water are scarce, the eagles survive on the carcasses of the dead. They often have to fight off other

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eagles to eat, something which was captured on film and aired. To give viewers a taste of what it is like to soar amongst these mountains, the crew both used a trained eagle to gain footage and flew a parachute in tandem, one operating the camera and the other steering the parachute as it approached the speed of a diving eagle, which is 200 miles an hour.

Jungles were featured in the third episode, revealing the diversity of life that can occur in such small regions. Though they cover only six percent of Earth's surface, they contain half of all the plants and animals found on land. They are, however, some of the least explored places on Earth. One of the more recent discoveries is a new species of river dolphin, a marine mammal that lives more than a thousand miles upstream from the ocean. It was only identified in 2014 and the *Planet Earth II* crew were the first people to get footage of this elusive creature.

Another feature of this episode was a peculiar type of fungus which becomes luminous at night. While it was known that the fungus emitted light at night, the purpose was unclear until days worth of film was collected by low-light cameras. It is now postulated that the fungus's glowing evolved to attract insects that find mates via lights at night. When the insects land, they crawl around searching for a partner who isn't present. In the mean time, they pick up thousands of spores that they disperse when they leave, continuing their search through the forest to find a partner.

The fourth episode, Deserts, demonstrates some of the most extraordinary survival skills on the planet. In Australia, large butcherbirds hang dead prey on the spines of cactii, using the plants as larders to hold food for their young for extended periods of time. In the Namib, a desert that has been dry for 55 million years, lions are often forced to hunt giraffe, an animal that can kill a lion with one kick. In the Kalahari, sandgrouse must fly 120 miles and risk being eaten to soak up water in their feathers to provide for their chicks.

These places are often so arid, the animals are not able to be picky about what they eat. In Israel's Negev desert, the desert long-eared bat was filmed in infrared cameras on the hunt. There are so few insects in this desert, which are a bat's normal prey, that this bat is forced to hunt on the ground. By collaborating with scientists locally and from Bristol, the cameras were able to capture the bat hunting a death stalker scorpion, its most dangerous prey, for the first time.

We learn in the fifth episode, Grasslands, that one quarter of the land on Earth is covered by a single plant, grass. This plant is capable of surviving nearly anywhere and is a key part of the food chain for thousands of species of animals across the planet. It also acts as a key part in the mating ritual of the Jackson's widowbird. Carefully selected and trimmed grass blades are used by males to build nests on the ground to attract a female. The grass is so high, however, that the birds are forced to jump to alert females to the location of their bachelor pad, in the process fluffing out their feathers. The lengths that these birds go through to attract a member of the opposite sex is a reminder that humans are not so different from the other animals inhabiting the world.

This episode was particularly difficult to film. In the grasslands of India, the crew was in constant danger of being mauled by tigers or gored by water buffalos. What puzzled the crew the most though was the consistent vandalizing of the static motion sensing cameras. A separate, more covert series of cameras had to be installed to uncover what was destroying the camera scaffolding. They revealed sloth bears, tigers and elephants all actively taking offense at the artificial intrusions into their world.

Planet Earth II took its audience to Earth's finally, habit cities. It is the first time that a nature documentary has considered the urban environment as a habitat of its own, and reveals a surprising amount of adaptation for those creatures who can keep up with such rapidly changing surroundings. Viewers are shown monkeys in Jaipur stealing food from local markets, French catfish feeding on pigeons, peregrine falcons hunting in New York City, hyenas being fed in Harar and leopards hunting pigs in Mumbai. All of these creatures have formed some sort of bond with city life and have learned to use it to thrive.

The program does of course acknowledge that successful adaptations to city environments are mostly exceptions to the rule. To demonstrate the devastating impact urbanization can have, the cameras turned to hawksbill turtle hatchlings that go towards the city, rather than the sea as a result of the bright city lights. For the most part, these hatchlings die, eaten by predators who wait under lights, or starving when they don't find food. Watching the baby turtles cross roads, disoriented by the lights and run over by cars, is one of the most heart-wrenching sequences in the series.

While the show presents a sobering view of the effect of cities on wildlife, it is not ultimately pessimistic. Attenborough guides the viewers through two different cities, Milan and Singapore, which have on different levels actively built habitats within city limits. In Milan, trees are planted on buildings to create "vertical forests" which take up a tenth of the land area of a normal forest with the same number of trees. Singapore has built a nature park—Gardens by the Bay—in the middle of the city spanning 250 acres, one which was consciously designed and built with other forms of life in mind. This is a refreshing attitude towards a topic that could have easily started casting judgments and aspersions on the world's population.

Ultimately, the show seeks to inspire and to instill awe in us about the complexity and splendor of the natural world. One cannot but feel more connected to even the most far-flung reaches of our planet and to cheer for all types of life as they struggle to survive. It is a powerful reminder that, even in the face of the barbarity that the banks and corporations unleash on this world, humanity and the other living creatures on planet Earth are worth fighting for.

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