

David Attenborough at 100, an appreciation

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The outpouring of admiration and popular affection for British broadcaster David Attenborough on his 100th birthday (May 8, 1926) is well deserved. It reflects his seriousness in making science accessible, part of his wider commitment to public broadcasting. He believes in and respects his audience, and they recognise this. His is a significant cultural contribution.

Even at 100, Attenborough continues to work, with *Blue Planet III* imminent. His programmes attract enormous audiences—*Life on Earth* (1979) reached 500 million viewers globally, being sold to 100 countries by the BBC, alongside a best-selling book. *Blue Planet II* (2017) had the highest viewing figures of any UK programme that year. He produces serious popular science broadcasting and has been repaid with huge loyalty.

Attenborough continues to explore new scientific opportunities and discoveries in covering all aspects of the natural world. His series are distinguished by a systematic approach, to groups of organisms or specific eco-systems, grounded in the history of science.

Never patronising, Attenborough has pointed generations of viewers to the complexities of the natural world and the crisis it confronts. His empirical research has led him increasingly to identify capitalism as the cause of this environmental crisis, with scientific observation and investigation forcing him into more critical positions. One commentator recently described Attenborough as “the most radical person on tv,” while a far-right Reform UK MP denounced him as “anti-human.”

His 2017 tackling of oceanic pollution led to what has been called the “*Blue Planet* effect” and moves away from single-use plastic consumption. He continues to explore the impacts of capitalism and, importantly, the possibilities for overcoming them. The final episode of the *Blue Planet III*, “Future Seas,” will focus on marine conservation.

That is striking in such an establishment figure. Attenborough grew up in an affluent, liberal middle-class household. He was fascinated from childhood by science, describing fossil-hunting in local limestone deposits. “You hit a stone, and it suddenly fell open, and there was this amazing coiled shell. Beautiful and extraordinary, and nobody had seen that for 150 million years except you.”

Attenborough described the sensation as “romantic and exciting,” fuelling “the small boy’s instinct of collecting things... I don’t think I’ve really lost [that].” Some of his most memorable footage has been of his awed delight at interactions with the natural world, as in his encounter—originally filmed in 1978—with mountain gorillas in Rwanda.

His parents fostered two Jewish refugees from Nazi Germany.

One of these adoptive sisters, Marianne, gave him a piece of Baltic amber with creatures trapped in it. He used this in a 2004 episode of the series *Natural World*, examining how scientists can identify remains preserved in amber and understand long-extinct ecosystems.

His actor/director brother Richard later played a leading role in *Jurassic Park* (1993), which presents a techno fantasy based on DNA being preserved in amber. Attenborough himself presented a reasoned scientific argument, suggesting some older pieces of amber could contain DNA.

A critical early experience was attending a lecture by controversial conservationist “Grey Owl” (Archibald Belaney), who played an early role in drawing attention to ecological issues. Richard said, “The idea that mankind was endangering nature by recklessly despoiling and plundering its riches was unheard of at the time, but it is one that has remained part of David’s own credo to this day.”

Attenborough read geology and zoology at Cambridge before two years’ national service (conscripted) with the Royal Navy. He started work in publishing but found it boring, so applied for a job as a sound/radio producer.

He was not interviewed but received a letter from another part of the BBC responsible for television. They were trying to overcome resistance to the medium—Attenborough said “no one wanted to be in television because television was regarded as rubbish”—and tested Attenborough by assigning him an interview. They thought his teeth were too big for interviews, so invited him to train as a producer.

At the Talks Department, a general department for non-fiction broadcasts, he did varied work but his aspiration to make natural history programmes was thwarted by budget constraints. To work around such budget issues, he proposed a programme on animal appearance, using zoo animals.

The script was given to the eminent evolutionary biologist Julian Huxley, grandson of Darwin’s collaborator T.H. Huxley. Huxley approved, so Attenborough wrote a script. Huxley narrated it and got credit for the result.

But the success, and Attenborough’s contact with London Zoo’s Jack Lester, had made natural history programming viable. Attenborough and Lester put together *Zoo Quest*, covering animal-collecting expeditions for zoos. Lester, due to present it, fell ill, and Attenborough had to step in.

Attenborough has always recognised the need for popularisation. He praised the significance of the Victorian-era dinosaur models at Crystal Palace Park in south London because, “This is where public outreach of science began.”

This historical perspective informs his cautious and methodical approach to scientific data. In 2006, he discussed his previous caution over climate change: “But I’m no longer sceptical... I have waited until the proof was conclusive that it was humanity changing the climate.”

His work has expanded boundaries, culturally and technically. In 2003, planning a series on invertebrates, he said filmmakers had hitherto been restricted by technical limitations when filming tiny organisms, but recent technical advances now made it possible to make “films that viewers will find revelatory.”

Each *Blue Planet* series has expanded scientific knowledge by using the latest available filming technology. The first series (2001) followed Blue Whale migration routes for the first time, and developing technology has enabled more species and new behaviour to be documented.

Seeing invertebrates as “the basis of all terrestrial eco-systems,” he saw filming them in appropriate detail as itself a contribution to scientific understanding. “Natural history filmmakers have always been greatly helped by the observations and insights made by scientists,” he wrote. “Today... technological advances... have enabled film makers to make their own contribution to natural history.”

Scientists recognise this, naming species and genera for Attenborough and his programmes. The phytoplankton *Syracosphaera azurea* was named for *The Blue Planet*.

Attenborough has never divorced the natural world from human life, as his continued investigation of both the destructive impacts of capitalism and the countervailing efforts being made by collective humanity show.

After *Zoo Quest* finished in 1963, Attenborough left full-time employment at the BBC. He combined programme-making with a postgraduate course in Anthropology at the London School of Economics, where he planned to write on “the use of film as an ethnographic tool.”

That potentially pioneering study was not completed. Invited to become Controller of BBC2, he realised, “I would be a better broadcaster than... an academic.” Attenborough inserted a clause in his contract to allow him to continue making programmes.

In March 1965, when Attenborough took over, BBC2 was only 10 months old and struggling to make itself attractive but had the most advanced technology available. Of the existing channels, it alone was fully ready to switch to colour broadcasting. Attenborough reorganised the schedule and took the leap into a new format.

Attenborough forged BBC2’s identity with programmes like *The Old Grey Whistle Test*, and gave the go-ahead to *Monty Python’s Flying Circus* (later shown on BBC1) and Kenneth Clark’s history of western art *Civilisation*. Evolution struck him as ideal for such a series. Natural History Unit producer Christopher Parson came up with a title—*Life on Earth*.

Management responsibilities were increasingly preventing his filmmaking. In 1969 he was promoted to director of programmes for both BBC channels, a primarily administrative role, and was suggested as a potential Director-General of the BBC in 1972.

Rather than being sidelined this way, Attenborough stepped down in 1973 so he could make programmes again. During the

funding negotiations before filming on *Life on Earth* could begin three years later, Attenborough made series on art and exploration.

With *Life on Earth* and its successors, Attenborough explored based on science all aspects of the natural world, writing that “Evolution is as solid a historical fact as you could conceive... What is a theory is whether natural selection is the mechanism and the only mechanism. That is a theory. But the historical reality that dinosaurs led to birds and mammals produced whales, that’s not theory.”

Attenborough detailed the development of evolutionary thinking in *Charles Darwin and the Tree of Life* (2009) for the Darwin bicentenary and has determinedly opposed creationism and intelligent design in science education.

Like T.H. Huxley, Attenborough describes himself as an agnostic in religion. Friedrich Engels’s comments on agnosticism ring true of Attenborough’s entire life and career: “The agnostic’s conception of Nature is materialistic throughout. The entire natural world is governed by law, and absolutely excludes the intervention of action from without.”

That “shamefaced materialism,” as Engels called it, has led to some contradictory positions. Tracing environmental despoliation to biblical conceptions of human domination of the world has led him to view the quantitative issue of overpopulation as central to overcoming the threatened environmental destruction. In a 2011 President’s Lecture to the Royal Society for the Encouragement of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce, he declared that “All environmental problems become harder—and ultimately impossible—to solve with ever more people.”

Scrupulous scientific observation and empirical study have forced Attenborough to recognise the social and economic factors of capitalism that pose the threat to humanity, but only to pose things in terms of overpopulation and excessive consumption. In 2020, he told the BBC, “We are going to have to live more economically than we do. And... the excesses the capitalist system has brought us, have got to be curbed somehow... those who have a great deal, perhaps, will have a little bit less, and those that have very little will have a little more.”

Notwithstanding such imitations, people wanting to understand the material world can and must look to Attenborough’s truly monumental body of work. Generations have grown up with him in their lives. And future generations will do well to make his acquaintance.



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