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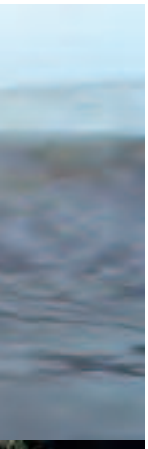


DAVID ATTENBOROUGH

Naturalist and pioneer of nature and wildlife documentaries

by Bienvenido León

Sir David Attenborough's (London, 1926) passion for his work, televising nature, has not faded one bit after over half a century travelling round the world. At 84 he remains fully active, seeking new nature stories to bring to the screen. In-between trips, which are still regular, he writes scripts for projects, at his home in the quiet suburb of Richmond, just outside London.

Though not on display, countless trophies and diplomas are secreted in a cupboard in this house, witness to the fact that Sir David has received major recognition for promoting public awareness of nature. The most recent of these was the Prince of Asturias Award in 2009. «An amazing experience» he recalls, «especially the way the city celebrates the event. With those wonderful local music bands I knew nothing about. We had a great time. It was marvellous!».

«PEOPLE MUST KNOW ABOUT SCIENCE, BECAUSE IT IS THE VERY BASIS OF OUR CIVILIZATION»

On the left, frames taken from the documentary *The Private Life of Plants* (BBC, 1995) and *The Blue Planet* (BBC, 2002), both presented by David Attenborough.

David Attenborough conveys vitality, energy and passion. His conversation, fluent and jovial, gives us a glimpse of the huge curiosity he feels for everything around him, probably the same that led him to television in the early fifties. After his application to work on radio was turned down in 1952, he began his wildlife film-making career as producer, presenter and scriptwriter on the then fledgling BBC television. Since then, viewers in Britain and in many other countries have come to associate his image with the most amazing wildlife footage, shot in every corner of the world.

Can you remember any particular scene that has had significant public impact?

There was one I shot with gorillas in central Africa that probably had more impact than any other. Not because I said anything particularly interesting about wildlife but because it was quite an adventure. The gorilla is an animal we deem powerful, perhaps even dangerous, but it proved to be very gentle.

This memorable sequence is part of the series *Life on Earth* (1979), which represented a mini-revolution in terms of how nature documentaries were made.

Yes, really *Life on Earth* was the beginning of a new documentary style. By 1976-77, for the first time, it was possible to fly anywhere in the world more or less reliably. So, one started to think «I'll shoot a sequence in northern Australia or in Canada» and you knew you could. The fact that we moved from the Sahara desert to the coral reefs of Australia mid-sentence caused a public sensation. It created the novel impression that you could see the Earth as a globe, as the world itself, for the first time.

Over these five decades, a great deal has changed in how documentaries are made, beginning with new technology.

Technology has changed things a great deal. In the fifties it wasn't possible to record synchronous sound and image, also the image was in black and white, televisions had a 405 –instead of a 625– line system, and the light sensitivity of film was so low it was impossible to shoot in a tropical forest, unless you cut back the vegetation a bit to let in more light. And now we can shoot at night, we have mobile cameras and tiny cameras to film inside holes... There are several technological advances that have had a major impact in filming nature documentaries, for instance, you can film from the air, from a high altitude, and get a very stable image. But among all these developments I consider the colour image to be the most important leap forward. Nowadays it's hard to imagine anything technically impossible. Right now I'm writing a script for a 3D movie about nature. Therefore, we have evolved from black and white to colour in three dimensions. So I feel very fortunate to have witnessed these huge changes in my lifetime.

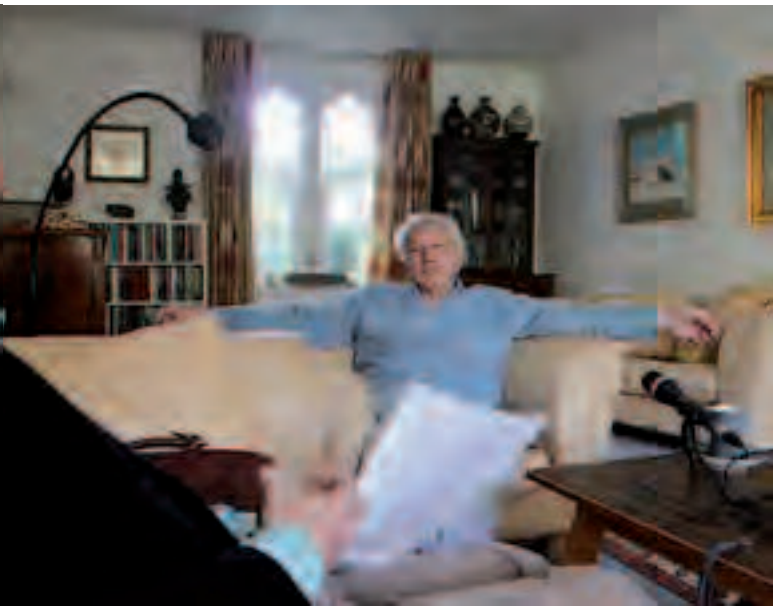
What else has changed, in addition to technology?

The audience has changed. Now audiences are increasingly sophisticated and know much more about nature. In the fifties, you used to show a far-away, half-blurry image of an elephant and people thought it was wonderful. But now you can't do that. People have seen elephants being born, mating, fighting... So there's hardly anything significantly new in an elephant's life for you to imagine, although there will always be details, of course. So footage has to get better and better.

«In the fifties, you used to show a far-away, half-blurry image of an elephant and people thought it was wonderful»

Television is increasingly concerned with providing entertainment. Although this has always been important, in the last two decades an element of entertainment has also crept into informational programmes like news reports and documentaries. In this context, do you think too much emphasis is placed on entertaining the audience in documentaries, nowadays?

It depends on the approach adopted by the television channel. If it's funded by advertising, in other words, if it's trying to draw as many viewers as possible, no matter who or how old they are or their educational level, then, the more spectators they have, the more money they make for their programmes. And whoever directs the channel will earn more money. That being the case, unless the law prevents it, the programmes that don't draw large audiences will disappear slowly. But if we are talking about a public channel, then the government can stop this and prevent them from disappearing.



The BBC is internationally renowned as a public television channel that has always supported the production and broadcasting of science and nature programmes. In other countries, like Spain, those responsible for public television have never done anything like this and tend to justify their decision by saying that these programmes do not attract large audiences. What would you say to those responsible for these channels?

I would tell them, to ask themselves the purpose of their channel. The answer is very clear. If it is to earn money, we know what the result will be. But if it is a channel like TVE or the BBC they should ask what they're there for. Why should they be given money to produce programmes that the other networks can produce? Why do the same as the others? The only justification for their receiving public funding is to do something different, something worthwhile. And if they believe it is important for citizens in their country to receive a good education and to be well informed about political issues, then television is a crucial part of achieving that goal.

«WITHOUT DOUBT IT IS POSSIBLE TO BUILD UP AN AUDIENCE GRADUALLY. FAR MORE PEOPLE CAN WATCH TV THAN AFFORD TO BUY A BOOK OR GO TO A MUSEUM»

Although he has never given up producing and presenting natural history programmes altogether, David Attenborough has held various management positions at the BBC. In 1965 he was appointed Controller of the newly founded BBC2. In the four years he spent in this position, the programmes he launched were as innovative as they were varied. His management of BBC2 was described by his successor in office, Robin Scott, as «a great Renaissance mind in action», which introduced a wealth of «new and dynamic ideas to the institution».

Its aim was to launch a pilot programme to complement BBC1, trying to establish a portfolio of programmes which, while not catering for the majority, endeavoured not to focus on the country's intellectual stratum alone. Naturally, programming included a slot for nature. Initially, these programmes were not necessarily conceived for large audiences; however, over time they grew to reach the millions of viewers that nature documentaries draw in the UK nowadays.

Without doubt it is possible to build up an audience gradually. For example, if someone in Spain was interested in, say, archaeology, and thought, «I will find out about this subject» what would they do? Surely not go and switch on the TV, rather they would go to a museum or buy a book. The reality is that far more people can watch TV than afford to buy a book or go to a museum. And if you think it is important for people to know about archaeology or a country's natural history, then you should try to convince them that the first place to look is on television, without having to spend 30 Euros on a book.

What does the future hold for TV documentaries?

I do not think documentaries will disappear. The problem is funding. It is much, much more expensive to produce a good TV series than to publish a book. The series I'm working on now may cost about ten million pounds. It is a series on the poles. Travelling there is very expensive, you have to shoot for long

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periods of time, use helicopters, and it isn't easy to take the material up there... We have been working for three years now and we need up to eight film crews working all year round in Antarctica. And all this costs money –much more than just producing a book about Antarctica–. It is likely that these high-budget programmes will start to disappear, as audiences become more fragmented. The only way to make such productions viable is to sell them afterwards worldwide, like the BBC does.

What criteria do you follow when choosing the subject for a documentary? What are the characteristics of the ideal subject matter for a programme about nature?

There are many possible answers to that question. For me, the ideal subject is one that has not been done before. For example, after making programmes for over twenty years I thought «no one had done a programme on plants yet». There was lots about gardening but none focused on the plants themselves,

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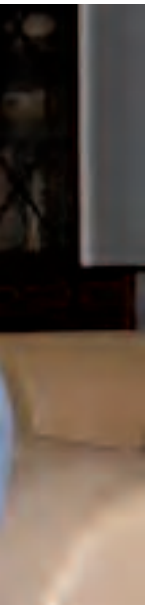

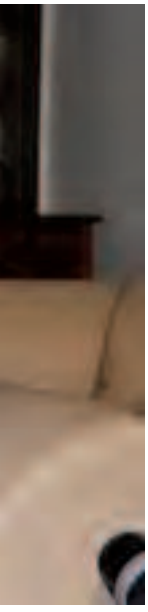

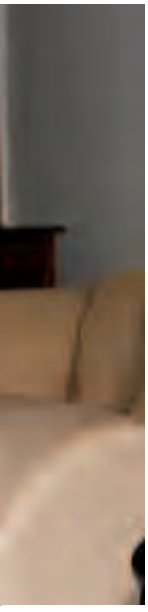

explaining, for example, photosynthesis, which is the very basis of life. And so we did *The Private Life of Plants*. That can be one reason. Another could be that, suddenly, a new technical device becomes available. For example, I remember very well when cameras arrived that enabled you to see in the dark. And then it occurred to me that footage filmed in Africa is always shot during the day. And so you have the impression that lions are lazy, they spend the whole day sleeping. But really, we know they are nocturnal animals, something which hadn't been portrayed before. And I thought we could make a different series about mammals, thanks to this new device.

You have participated in several campaigns that support broadcasting science on television. Why is it important for science to have a place on television?

You and I are fortunate enough to live in democratic societies, in which public opinion governs what politicians do, at least to a certain extent. And citizens must take decisions on all kinds of essential issues and express them by voting. For example, whether to vaccinate their children or not. So, how do they decide whether to do so or not? Must people simply go along with what the government says? Or, conversely, should the government concern themselves with informing the public, at least a little, about medical issues? And not just issues related to medicine but also, for example, about wind energy or pollution? And therefore, give citizens the knowledge on which to base their decisions. If a government believes it is not important what people think, it will give them «bread and circuses» and do whatever it wants. But, if it considers that a democratic society must receive adequate education, then people must know about science, because it is the very basis of our civilization.

But it is not easy to convey science on television.

The problem is that television sets its own pace, which is neither yours nor mine. If you're reading a book about a complex scientific question, you can read a passage over again until you understand it. But on television that is not possible. Therefore, you either set a very elementary educational level, or ensure that the TV makes a scientific issue so interesting that the viewer says afterwards «ok, I'm going to look for a book on that topic». Therefore, the television sparks the enthusiasm to discover something, which books will have to satisfy. So, though the presence of science on TV is really important, television in itself is not enough.

How important is storytelling as a strategy to popularize science? Is there always a story to tell?

It depends on how you define a story. If you focus on answering questions, then I think it is absolutely necessary. Many stories answer questions. For example, «boy meets girl», and the question is «will they stay together?». A story always asks questions. And there are questions in science: How do dolphins communicate with each other? How can we discover how they communicate? And once we know what sounds they make, how can we decipher their meaning? So, good science and good programmes follow a narrative structure formed by questions and answers.

«SO THE TV IS FUNDAMENTAL IN BRIDGING THE GAP BETWEEN THE WORLD'S POPULATION AND THE NATURAL WORLD THEY INHABIT»

David Attenborough belongs to several conservation organizations and has worked tirelessly in the defence of environmental issues, ranging from the protection of the Borneo jungle to the royal albatross. But probably his greatest contribution to promoting awareness and respect for nature has been through his television programmes. What role have programmes like his played in raising public awareness and respect for nature?

Natural history television programmes –not just mine but in general– have played an important role. According to recent UN data, over 50% of the world's population lives in cities. And that means more than half the people in the world have very little contact with nature and have probably never seen a wild animal, besides a pigeon or a rat. But they must take decisions about what they eat, about medical or environmental issues. However, they cannot decide unless they understand the natural world. So the TV is fundamental in bridging the gap between the world's population and the natural world they inhabit. And if they disconnect, they will not understand and cannot take the right decisions. After all, many things they do cost both them and the state money. And if they don't understand what is going on they cannot make informed decisions on political issues.

THE DEDICATION OF A LIFETIME TO POPULARISING NATURE

MIQUEL FRANCÉS

David Attenborough was born in London in 1926, at a time when Robert Flaherty had managed to consolidate the documentary genre as a means of expression in its own right. At a very young age, Attenborough read Natural Sciences at Cambridge and shortly after, in 1952, began working at the BBC, where he was to spend much of his professional career. In 1954 he launched his popular series, *Zoo Quest*, which would take us round the world for the next decade. It was not until the mid-sixties that he took on a managerial job at BBC2 but by 1969 he was promoted to Director of Programmes, a post he held for several years. He is currently president of the Royal Society for Nature Conservation, a member of the Royal Society of London and a board member of the British Museum and Royal Botanic Gardens at Kew.

His creative audiovisual work resumed in 1973 with a series of nature programmes: *Eastwards with Attenborough* and *The Tribal Eye*. In 1979 he wrote the script and started filming the most ambitious series produced by the BBC Natural History Unit hitherto: *Life on Earth*. This is the wildlife series holding the record for maximum audience in the history of television, making Attenborough a name as a great science communicator on the small screen. It would be a golden age he would share with other scientists like Carl Sagan, Gerald Durrell or Jacques Cousteau, establishing a whole new television format. Since then, he has brought to our television screens several series including: *The Living Planet* (1984), *The Trials of Life* (1990), *Life in the Freezer* (1993), *The Private Life of Plants* (1995) and *Wildlife Specials* (1997). To this day he continues to work untiringly on creative productions for the television industry: *The Life of Birds* (1998), *State of the Planet* (2000), *The Blue Planet* (2001), *The Life of Mammals* (2002), *Life in the Undergrowth* (2005), *Planet Earth* (2006) or *Life in Cold Blood* (2008). The dedication of a lifetime to popularising nature for the huge audiences that watch his documentaries

«'LIFE ON EARTH' (1979) IS THE WILDLIFE SERIES HOLDING THE RECORD FOR MAXIMUM AUDIENCE IN THE HISTORY OF TELEVISION, MAKING ATTENBOROUGH A NAME AS A GREAT SCIENCE COMMUNICATOR ON THE SMALL SCREEN»

His audiovisual and written productions have gone hand in hand, with the latter including titles like: *Zoo Quest to Guyana* (1956), *Quest in Paradise* (1960), *The Tribal Eye* (1976), *Life on Earth* (1979), *The Living Planet* (1984), *The First Eden* (1987), *The Trials of Life* (1990), *The Private Life of Plants* (1994), *The Life of Mammals* (2002) or *Life in the Undergrowth* (2005). The year 2005 brought us *Life on Air,* which ends up making an autobiographical tour of his long career spent observing the natural world.

Throughout his life, David Attenborough has never lost sight of his bond with society. He has collaborated with the World Land Trust since its foundation in 1989, and been a benefactor since 2003. This conservation charity purchases lands and rainforest areas to contribute to the conservation of wildlife in these habitats. In 1985 he was knighted by Queen Elizabeth II of England, who also awarded him the Order of Merit in 2005. He has received honorary doctorates from numerous universities. He has been awarded the silver medal by the Royal Television Society and the Zoological Society of London, as well as the Philadelphia Academy of Natural Science Hopper Day Medal and the Royal Geographical Society Founder's Gold Medal (United Kingdom). Likewise, he holds the Royal Scottish Geographical Society Livingstone Medal and the Royal Society of Arts Franklin Medal (U.S.A.). He has been awarded the UNESCO Kalinga Prize (1981), the International Emmy Award (1985), the Golden Camera Award (Germany, 1993), the Michael Faraday Prize by the Royal Society of London (2003) and, a year later, the first Descartes prize for outstanding science communication, awarded by the European Commission. In 2007 he was awarded the Institute of Ecology and Environmental Management's Medal (UK) and, a few years later, he received honorary degrees from the universities of Aberdeen, Exeter and Kingston University in London. In 2009 he received the Prince of Asturias Award, Laureate for Social Sciences.

Miquel Francés. Director of Audiovisual Workshop, University of Valencia.

And what role should environmental communication play in our society? How important is it to communicate environmental issues effectively?

It is absolutely essential. And I've spent a lot of time discussing this issue lately. I have no doubt about the environmental deterioration that's taking place, or that the planet's temperature is rising and humans contribute to these processes one way or another. In a democratic society, it's important to have platforms from which to voice opposing opinions, but within certain limits. Out of every 1000 scientists, 999 agree with what I just said. And only one disagrees. This being the case, we should discern who this person is and what their reasons are, to make sure they are responsible. At first, I was very careful when talking about global warming and climate change, but around twelve or fourteen years ago I reached the conclusion that the evidence was so overwhelming I should assume it to be true. Since then I've made programmes based on the assumption that this is the fact.

«I HAVE NO DOUBT ABOUT THE ENVIRONMENTAL DETERIORATION THAT'S TAKING PLACE, OR THAT THE PLANET'S TEMPERATURE IS RISING, AND HUMANS CONTRIBUTE TO THESE PROCESSES ONE WAY OR ANOTHER»

However, despite scientific consensus on this issue, it appears that the opinion of the so-called «sceptics» is overestimated by the mass media. And, according to surveys, this is making more and more people doubt whether climate change is a man-made phenomenon.

That's right. And I'm not surprised because, after all, it is easier not to believe in it. If you don't believe in it you will be happier and maybe even be richer. If you don't believe it, you don't waste time recycling paper and the government won't spend your tax money building wind-power plants. So people say «I don't believe that, to hell with it. I want to keep my big car». What's more, it's very dangerous for the media to suppress minority viewpoints. It's also easier to make programmes and newspaper reports on controversial issues.

Do you think that cases of scientific misconduct, such as the scientist Phil Jones –recently revealed in Britain– have furthered the «sceptics» cause?

I think so. Scientists are human beings, not saints. And this professor is fed up with his results being misrepresented and used for self-interested goals, so he says in a private email «don't send these results». Of course, he is a human being.

The fate of our planet will, undoubtedly, continue to form part of public debates in which Sir David will participate. On the last pages of his biography, *Life on Air* (BBC, 2002), he says that there is still hope that in spite of the huge increase in the numbers of our species and the way we have ravaged the earth, we may still preserve much of its richness for generations to come. Probably his wonderful documentaries will help to achieve this goal, although, as stated in his book, he has dedicated his life to his work because he knows of no pleasure deeper than that which comes from contemplating the natural world and trying to understand it.

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