



"THE NATURAL WORLD
IS THE GREATEST
SOURCE . . . OF SO
MUCH IN LIFE THAT
MAKES LIFE
WORTH LIVING."

SIR DAVID ATTENBOROUGH

A NATURALIST'S LIFE ON EARTH

David was mesmerised. The reef looked like an underwater city. The coral was teeming with life. Thousands of fish of every colour swam in brightly coloured shoals – metallic blues, vivid yellows and glowing pinks. Behind him, the pilot carefully steered their three-person submarine. David pressed his face closer to the window. Around the coral he spotted sea anemones and orange and white clown fish browsing for food. Beside him, the cameraman was filming a large green turtle swimming slowly towards them. This place was just as David remembered: the most magical on the planet.

It was 2015, and 88-year-old TV presenter and writer David Attenborough was visiting the Great Barrier Reef. The reef stretches for 2,300 kilometres off the north-eastern coast of Australia, and is actually over 2,500 individual coral reefs and 900 coral islands. It is the largest living structure on Earth, a unique ecosystem – or natural environment – that is home to thousands of species of marine life. It had been almost 60 years since his first visit, in 1957, when he had dived in parts of the reef never before seen on television. But his return here was tinged with sadness. This special place was under threat.

David was born in 1926. He was full of curiosity as a boy and loved to ride his bike into the countryside near his home in Leicester to search for fossils. He always hoped to crack open a rock to reveal a creature no one else had seen in 140 million years. His dad – the head of a university – nurtured his curiosity by encouraging him to find things out from books. His mum was a specialist in languages and a suffragette who had campaigned for women to be allowed to vote. David had two brothers and when he was 14, just before the Second World War broke out, two Jewish refugee sisters from Germany also joined their family.

David was always fascinated by how the natural

world works. After the war, he studied natural sciences at university, specialising in zoology – the branch of biology that studies the animal kingdom. He then spent two years in the navy, hoping to travel around the world, but only got as far as Wales and Scotland. When he returned to civilian life, he got married and started working for a publisher of science books. He found this boring, so he applied for a job making radio programmes for the BBC. He was turned down, but offered a position as a producer making TV programmes instead. Most people then, including David, did not even own a TV set, but he accepted the job.

As a producer, David made all sorts of programmes, from dramas to quiz shows. Inspired by his love of wildlife, he created a series called *Zoo Quest*, where he travelled around the world with experts to film and capture animals for London Zoo, an idea that feels shocking today but which was very popular at that time. David's on-screen career began when the presenter of the programme fell ill and he stepped in. By this time, David and his wife, Jane, had a son and daughter. David's work sometimes made things hard for the family as he spent a lot of time away filming.

In 1962, inspired by the animals he had seen and the people he had met, David returned to university

to study social anthropology. He learned about human societies, what people believe and how they live together. But in 1965, before he had finished his studies, he was offered a job running a new TV channel, BBC Two, and soon he was in charge of all BBC programmes. Although he was good at his job he was no longer doing what he loved best, so in 1972 he returned to making wildlife films.

For a long time, David had dreamed of making a series about how life developed on our planet. And in 1979, after three years of filming, *Life on Earth* was screened. 500 million people around the world watched its 13 episodes. Attitudes had changed to wildlife programmes and instead of capturing animals they were now filmed in their natural environments. One of the most memorable moments was when David sat amongst a group of mountain gorillas in Rwanda. The female gorilla put her hands on his head and opened his mouth to look inside. Meanwhile one of her baby gorillas sat on his lap while another tried to take off his boots. As David looked into the female gorilla's eyes, he felt a deep connection with her and sensed how similar these wonderful animals are to humans. It was one of the most important moments of his life.

Over the 40 years that followed, David continued

to bring the wonders of nature into people's homes. Viewers saw rare snow leopards high in the Himalayan mountains, millions of red crabs marching from the forest to the sea, a baby iguana chased by snakes, an Australian Lyrebird mimicking the sound of a camera shutter, chainsaw and car alarm, and an enormous rainforest flower that smelled of rotting fish.

It was only in 2002, aged 75 and after decades of filming, that David saw a blue whale for the first time when one of these magnificent creatures – they are the largest on the planet – surfaced next to his boat. With unforgettable moments like this, his career has given him great joy, but more recently he has felt a terrible sense of loss. It has become clear to David that one species is destroying the natural world he cherishes: humans.

Twenty thousand years ago there were fewer than a million people on the planet, all living as hunter-gatherers. When David started his career, the world's human population was 2.5 billion. In his lifetime, he has seen that treble to 7.7 billion, and it is predicted to reach nine billion by around 2030. Humans, through our demand for land and resources, have driven many species to extinction. Today, humans and the animals we raise for food make up 96 per cent of all mammals

and 70 per cent of all birds on Earth.

Because of human actions, climate change threatens the world's ecosystems. David remembers returning to a glacier in South Georgia to find it had disappeared. On his visit to the Great Barrier Reef, he was devastated to see that vast areas were white with 'coral bleaching', which is where the coral dies due to warming oceans and seawater becoming more acidic from pollution. If global temperatures rise by just two degrees Celsius, scientists predict that all the planet's coral reefs will die.

For David, whether it's a coral reef or an English woodland, the loss of biodiversity – or variety in plant and animal life – is both a tragedy and one of the biggest problems faced by humankind. We are part of the natural world and depend on it for every breath of air and every mouthful of food. As we shift the balance of nature, the world no longer works as it should and our own existence is threatened.

Never before has one species been responsible for the fate of the whole planet. Today, according to the United Nations, more than 50 per cent of people live in urban areas. Humans have never been more disconnected from nature, yet never have our actions had more impact upon it. David hopes his programmes show why the natural world should be protected

and how we can do that. He didn't start out to be a campaigner – he was just doing a job he loved – but in recent years this has meant telling everyone about the destruction he witnesses.

Perhaps the most powerful example was from *Blue Planet II*, shown in 2017, which explores the Earth's oceans. This was so popular around the world that it even slowed down internet speeds in China as 80 million people downloaded it. As expected, the series showed incredible marine life, but what people remember most is seeing the devastating impact of plastic in our oceans: a dolphin playing with a plastic bag, an albatross chick that had died after swallowing a plastic toothpick and pilot whales killed by plastic pollution.

Viewers were shocked and countless individuals and organisations were moved to take action. The BBC declared it would ban single-use plastics by 2020 and other businesses followed their example. In 2019, the Glastonbury Festival went plastic-free and, to the delight of festival-goers of all ages, David made a surprise appearance onstage to thank the crowds there.

David has gained global recognition for his achievements and was honoured with a knighthood in 1985. At least 20 species, both living and extinct, have

been named after Sir David (as he can now be called), from grasshoppers and butterflies to lizards and a lion, and in 2017 a new constellation of stars in the shape of a blue whale was named the 'Attenborough'. His many fans include Prince William and Barack Obama, both of whom have interviewed him. And in a recent poll he was voted the most trusted celebrity in the UK. He thinks he is the luckiest man in the world and has never thought of retiring.

Despite the damage inflicted on the natural world, David remains hopeful. Human population growth is slowing and can be stopped if we lift people out of poverty, ensure girls are able to go to school and invest in women's rights. If this can be done, people will naturally start to have smaller families. And, he says, if we focus on four areas – renewable energy, the food we grow and eat, protecting our oceans and nurturing our wild spaces and their plant and animal life – then humans can find a way to live in balance with nature and we can both thrive.

David was encouraged when countries came together in 2015 to sign the Paris Agreement to limit global warming, but the thing that gives him most hope is seeing young people demanding action against climate change, sparked by Greta Thunberg's

protest. It's clear to him that his grandchildren's generation understand the issues and will fight hard for the planet they will inherit.

At heart, David's concern is not about just one species. All the plants and animals that exist today are the result of 3.5 billion years of evolution and he is horrified that one generation of humans could destroy it all. He believes we have no choice but to act to save the natural world – and not just because it's good for humans, but simply because it's the right thing to do. The work and wisdom of this inspirational man has taught us so much through the years, but the need for urgent action must be his most important lesson yet.