



A RAIA profile on: **Climate Activist**

Sir David Attenborough

Third part of a six part series on climate leaders ahead of the 2025 United Nations Climate Change Conference

**School of Politics, Economics & Global Affairs and RAIA
NOW gUG's Summer Research Programme 2025**

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Sponsorship: This report is a collaboration between IE University' IE School of Politics, Economics and Global Affairs and RAIA NOW gUG. The funding for this project solely comes from the IE School of Politics, Economics and Global Affairs.

List of Abbreviations

1. CO₂ – Carbon Dioxide.
2. COP – Conference of the Parties.
3. CSR – Corporate Social Responsibility.
4. IPCC – Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change.
5. NGO – Non-Governmental Organization.
6. RSPB – Royal Society for the Protection of Birds.
7. SDGs – Sustainable Development Goals.
8. UN – United Nations.
9. UNFCCC – United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change.
10. WWF – World Wide Fund for Nature.

Introduction

David Attenborough is widely regarded as one of the world's most influential environmental communicators. A British natural historian and documentary filmmaker, he has dedicated over 70 years to educating the public about the natural world.¹ His first wildlife series, Zoo Quest, aired nearly seven decades ago and introduced audiences to remote ecosystems and species.² Over time, his work has shifted from documenting nature to advocating for its protection, using his global platform to raise awareness about biodiversity loss, environmental degradation, and climate change.³ Due to his decades-long career and consistent advocacy, Attenborough has become one of the most trusted public figures in the UK.⁴ This trust lends his documentaries' influence over public opinion and environmental discourse worldwide.

From a young age, Attenborough demonstrated a deep fascination with the natural world. Growing up in Leicester,⁵ he spent much of his time exploring the British countryside, nurturing a sense of wonder that later led him to study natural sciences and anthropology at university.⁶ After the Second World War, he joined the BBC as a trainee and made his first wildlife television series.⁷ This marked the beginning of his long career in environmental broadcasting.

For much of his profession, Attenborough's documentaries focused on showcasing wildlife and ecosystems with scientific neutrality. However, after attending a pivotal climate lecture in 2004,⁸ he began to shift his approach. Convinced of the urgency of global warming, which he later called 'our greatest threat in thousands of years,'⁹ he shifted from observation to advocacy. He began

¹ The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica., 'David Attenborough' (Britannica Kids2025) <<https://kids.britannica.com/kids/article/David-Attenborough/633494>> accessed 10 June 2025.

² Bianculli, D. (2021). 'Attenborough's journey' salutes the broadcaster with a passion for nature. NPR. NPR.<<https://www.npr.org/2021/05/07/994596345/attenboroughs-journey-salutes-the-broadcaster-with-a-passion-for-nature>> accessed June 8 2025.

³ Citation: Attenborough D, 'Attenborough: Climate Change Is the Major Challenge Facing the World - Environment - the Independent' (The Independent, 24 May 2006) <<https://web.archive.org/web/20080516005117/http://news.independent.co.uk/environment/article570935.ece>> accessed June 6 2025.

⁴ Smith M, 'David Attenborough Is the Most Popular Person in Britain | YouGov' (yougov.co.uk7 November 2018) <<https://yougov.co.uk/entertainment/articles/21862-david-attenborough-most-popular-person-britain>> accessed 7 June 2025

⁵ Attenborough, D., & Hughes, J. (2022). A life on our planet: My witness statement and a vision for the future. London: Witness Books. (Attenborough & Hughes, 2022)

⁶ White House TO, 'Sir David Attenborough and President Obama: The Full Interview' <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NZtJ2ZGyvBI>> accessed 12 June 2025

⁷ Attenborough & Hughes, 2022

⁸ Leo Hickman, 'The 2004 Lecture That Finally Convinced David Attenborough about Global Warming' (Carbon Brief13 August 2018) <<https://www.carbonbrief.org/the-2004-lecture-that-finally-convinced-david-attenborough-about-global-warming/>> accessed 5 June 2025.

⁹ Cop24, 'Transcript of the Speech by Sir David Attenborough' (2018) <https://unfccc.int/sites/default/files/resource/The%20People%27s%20Address%202.11.18_FINAL.pdf>.

using his films to raise awareness about the climate crisis and the need for immediate action.

However, his role as a climate activist is not limited to his documentaries. He also actively collaborates with several organizations dedicated to protecting nature and conserving biodiversity. For example, he works closely with the World Wildlife Fund as an ambassador, a face for their campaigns and produces documentaries for the organization.¹⁰ Moreover, he is an official partner of the UN as a champion of the earth, using his authority and presence to raise awareness for the environment.¹¹ He also holds leadership positions in various organizations like The Conservation Volunteers and Fauna and Flora International.¹² Through these roles, he expands his advocacy beyond the medium of film.

Attenborough's advocacy is shaped by both personal experience and external factors. At nearly 100 years old, his long career and firsthand witnessing of environmental degradation give him a perspective that few others can offer, as well as credibility with audiences. Externally, international organizations, lobbying groups, and political interests both enable and limit the reach of his message. Despite challenges like political resistance and divided public opinion on climate change, he continues to use his media presence to advocate for environmental action and influence millions worldwide.

As an environmental activist, David Attenborough plays three main roles. First, his documentaries raise awareness about environmental concerns such as overconsumption, the need for sustainable energy, and the importance of conservation. By providing accessible explanations of climate change and environmental issues, he helps turn public indifference into real concern for the planet's future.

Second, he motivates action by combining scientific data with vivid imagery while calling for behavioral change at both individual and international levels. This shift from concern to taking action is often referred to as the "Attenborough effect."¹³ The term describes the visible changes in public behavior, such as reduced plastic use and greater support for conservation, after his documentaries are released.

Third, he influences the global climate agenda without ever holding political office. His ability to engage with world leaders and cultural figures increases both his visibility and impact. He has participated in major events like the COP

¹⁰ World Wildlife Forum , 'Sir David Attenborough and WWF' (WWF17 February 2021) <<https://www.wwf.org.uk/about/ambassador/sir-david-attenborough>>.

¹¹ Georgina Rannard, 'Sir David Attenborough Named Champion of the Earth by UN' BBC News (20 April 2022) <<https://www.bbc.com/news/science-environment-61167925>> accessed 5 June 2025.

¹² Flora & fauna, 'Sir David Attenborough – Landmarks on Our Journey with Fauna & Flora's Greatest Ambassador' (Fauna & Flora7 May 2025) <<https://www.fauna-flora.org/sir-david-attenborough/>> accessed 4 June 2025.

¹³ Flash Pack, 'The Attenborough Effect: The Familiar Voice Rallying Us to Save Our Oceans' (Flash Pack21 May 2019) <<https://www.flashpack.com/solo/travel/the-attenborough-effect-oceans/>> accessed 9 June 2025.

conferences¹⁴ and regularly speaks with political leaders, while public figures such as Barack Obama and Greta Thunberg¹⁵ have credited him as a key inspiration in their own environmental advocacy. This recognition is what allows him to reach both policymakers and the general public, leading him to adopt a position as an intermediary between the public and those in positions of power.

David Attenborough's Stake

David Attenborough's stake in climate change stems from a lifetime of witnessing environmental transformation firsthand. As a natural historian and documentarian, he has spent over seventy years observing ecosystems around the world.¹⁶ Through his travels around eighty countries and three hundred locations,¹⁷ he has seen changes in biodiversity, climate patterns, and habitat health.

Decades of sustained observation lead him to concentrate on three key aspects of anthropogenic climate change. First, he condemns human overconsumption, affirming that there can be no infinite growth in a finite environment.¹⁸ Second, he expresses concern about the increasing environmental degradation that is destroying protected natural areas, with particular focus on the UK.¹⁹ He argues that nature is not just beautiful but essential for slowing global warming. Protected nature can heal itself, and when it does, it helps both the planet and people. Finally, Attenborough sees the ongoing reliance on fossil fuels as a major problem. He criticizes the continued emission of greenhouse gases generated by coal, oil and natural gas, calling for an urgent transition to renewable energy.

Overconsumption

Across his major documentaries, including the Truth about Climate Change, A Life On Our Planet, The Blue Planet and A Perfect Planet,²⁰ one consistent theme David Attenborough highlights is the global overconsumption of resources.

In this context, the term "overconsumption" is defined as the use of resources at a level that exceeds sustainable thresholds.²¹ Attenborough explains that this leads

¹⁴ UN Climate Change, 'David Attenborough at the Opening of the #COP26 World Leaders Summit' <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MTkm19hvHio>> accessed 10 June 2025.

¹⁵ Patrick Barkham and others, 'Happy Birthday, David Attenborough! 99 Ways He Has Inspired Us, by Barack Obama, Billie Eilish, Morgan Freeman – and Many More' (the Guardian 3 May 2025) <<https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2025/may/03/david-attenborough-birthday-99-by-barack-obama-billie-eilish-morgan-freeman>> accessed 7 June 2025.

¹⁶ Britannica, 2025.

¹⁷ DRIFT Staff, 'Compare Your Travel History to David Attenborough's with New Interactive Map' (Drift Travel Magazine 18 April 2023) <<https://drifttravel.com/compare-your-travel-to-david-attenborough/>> accessed 7 June 2025.

¹⁸ Attenborough & Hughes, 2022

¹⁹ WWF, 'About | Save Our Wild Isles' (Saveourwildisles.org.uk 2019) <<https://www.saveourwildisles.org.uk/about>> accessed 18 June 2025

²⁰ IMDb, 'David Attenborough' (IMDb 14 April 2024) <<https://www.imdb.com/name/nm0041003/>> accessed 11 June 2025.

²¹ Gintautas Andriuška, 'Overconsumption and Climate Change: Correlation and Consequences' (overconsumption.org 3 September 2024)

to harmful consequences such as pollution, deforestation, and, most importantly, rising global temperatures. Humanity currently uses Earth's resources 1.6 times faster than they can be regenerated.²² This excessive use is reflected in emissions as well. A 2015 study titled "Environmental Impact Assessment of Household Consumption" found that household consumption alone is responsible for approximately 60% of global greenhouse gas emissions.²³

The impact of overconsumption also extends to water. Currently, around 70% of the world's freshwater is used for agriculture, much of it to sustain the demands of consumer-driven food systems²⁴. If this trend continues, global water consumption is expected to exceed sustainable supply by as much as 40% by 2030.²⁵ Overconsumption has also caused serious damage to the natural world. Between 2001 and 2019 South-East Asia lost 610,000 square kilometers of rainforest to urban development and timber production.²⁶ Moreover, with the loss of over 90% of the world's fisheries, our oceans could be devoid of fish by 2018.²⁷

In his documentaries, especially *A Life on Our Planet*, Attenborough discusses the impact of overconsumption on the climate in detail. He refers to economist Kate Raworth's interpretation of the nine planetary boundaries, which define safe limits for human activities to keep the Earth stable. These boundaries include limits on how much land can be converted to agriculture, how much fertilizer and chemicals can be used, how much freshwater can be withdrawn, how healthy the oceans remain, the level of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere, the thickness of the ozone layer, the amount of air pollution, and the rate of species extinction. According to the model, staying within these boundaries helps prevent environmental collapse, while exceeding them causes serious damage.²⁸ These boundaries are recurring topics of concern in his documentaries. His films explain how unsustainable resource overuse pushes these limits and illustrate the resulting effects on the environment across the globe, from deserts to the Arctic.²⁹

<<https://overconsumption.org/blogs/news/overconsumption-and-climate-change-correlation-and-consequences>> accessed 14 June 2025.

²² Gintautas A., 2024.

²³ Diana Ivanova and others, 'Environmental Impact Assessment of Household Consumption' (2015) 20 *Journal of Industrial Ecology* 526 <<https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/jiec.12371>> accessed 14 June 2025.

²⁴ Khokhar T, 'Chart: Globally, 70% of Freshwater Is Used for Agriculture' (World Bank Blogs 22 March 2017) <<https://blogs.worldbank.org/en/opendata/chart-globally-70-freshwater-used-agriculture>> accessed 9 June 2025

²⁵ Harvey F, 'Global Fresh Water Demand Will Outstrip Supply by 40% by 2030, Say Experts' *The Guardian* (17 March 2023) <<https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2023/mar/17/global-fresh-water-demand-outstrip-supply-by-2030>> accessed 12 June 2025

²⁶ Lai O, 'Deforestation in Southeast Asia' (Earth.org 7 March 2022) <<https://earth.org/deforestation-in-southeast-asia/>> accessed 19 June 2025

²⁷ The World Counts, 'The World Counts' (www.theworldcounts.com 2023) <<https://www.theworldcounts.com/challenges/planet-earth/oceans/overfishing-statistics>> accessed 1 July 2025

²⁸ Attenborough & Hughes, 2022

²⁹ Attenborough & Hughes, 2022

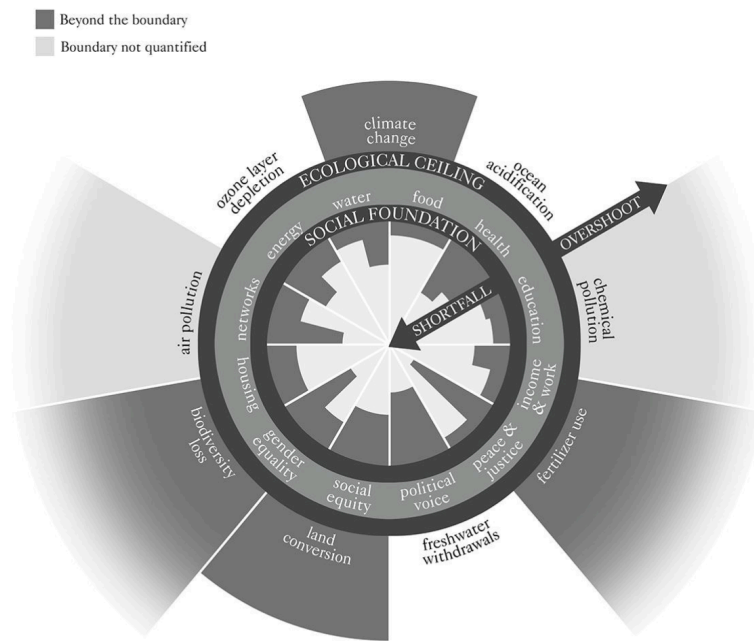


Figure 1: Kate Raworth's nine planetary boundary model.

To understand why overconsumption occurs, Attenborough points to two primary drivers: overpopulation and capitalism. For him, it is the pressure from a growing population combined with the capitalist demand for continuous growth that fuels unsustainable resource use, which leads to ecological harm.³⁰

Central to his critique of capitalism is the unequal distribution of consumption and emissions. The richest one percent emit twice the greenhouse gases of the poorest 50 percent, showing how a small, wealthy segment disproportionately drives environmental degradation.³¹ To him, such unequal consumption patterns are not accidental but deeply linked to the capitalist system.

Capitalism, according to Attenborough, fuels overconsumption by encouraging continuous growth and excess accumulation of wealth. The system's focus on profit and competition promotes consumption beyond sustainable limits, benefiting the wealthy at the expense of the environment and the poor. This creates a cycle where the richest emit far more, while poorer communities suffer the worst environmental impacts without the resources to adapt.

A common value statement in his work is that curbing "capitalist" excesses will leave us more "happy," even if this means living more economically.³² To Attenborough, this reality calls for a socialist redistribution of resources to restrict

³⁰ Citation: McGrath M, 'Attenborough: "Curb Excess Capitalism" to Save Nature' BBC News (8 October 2020) <<https://www.bbc.com/news/science-environment-54268038>>

³¹vanova et al., 2015

³² Citation: McGrath M, 'Attenborough: "Curb Excess Capitalism" to Save Nature' BBC News (8 October 2020) <<https://www.bbc.com/news/science-environment-54268038>>

the unfair "glory and wealth" taken by the "lucky" ones.³³ He attributes the lack of climate consensus and progress to capitalist-generated greed, whose competition comes at the cost of increased carbon emissions.³⁴

This concern has led him to support ecocentric economic models that prioritize environmental sustainability over profit and recognize the economy as dependent on a healthy ecosystem. This circular economy entails the elimination of all human-generated non-degradable waste, including solid waste such as plastics, gas such as toxic emissions or carbon dioxide, and liquid waste such as oil spills.³⁵ It suggests a continuous cycle that could eventually reverse the effects of our past environmental impact.³⁶

Alongside his critique of capitalism, Attenborough also identifies overpopulation as a major driver of overconsumption. Outside of his documentaries, he emphasizes that rapid population growth places immense pressure on the planet's limited resources, including food, water, and energy. He argues that this escalating demand fuels unsustainable resource use, which in turn worsens the climate crisis.³⁷

To Attenborough, this rapid population growth presents a complex dilemma. Less developed nations are obligated to provide their citizens with the same standard of living as their developed counterparts, all without the luxury of emitting large amounts of greenhouse gases or consuming resources unsustainably.³⁸ Developed nations with slower growth, on the other hand, want to maintain their current standard of living while reversing the consequences of decades-long emissions.³⁹ Attenborough acknowledges the difficulty in achieving such growth in a "green direction,"⁴⁰ underlining how the choice between the climate and the population is an increasingly important dilemma for humanity.

However, Attenborough's advocacy on overpopulation is shaped by the controversy surrounding the topic. Overpopulation is regarded as a highly

³³ Citation: Blum J, 'David Attenborough Calls out the "Excesses" of Capitalism in a World Facing Climate Change' (HuffPost 10 October 2020) <https://www.huffpost.com/entry/david-attenborough-covid-19-excesses-capitalism_n_5f81e2f8c5b6e6d033a3302d> accessed 5 June 2025

³⁴ Attenborough & Hughes, 2022.

³⁵ Citation: Department, I. M. Fund. C. (2019). The greatest balancing act: Nature and the global economy. IMF eLibrary. International Monetary Fund. Retrieved June 3, 2025, from <<https://www.elibrary.imf.org/view/journals/022/0056/004/article-A003-en.xml>> (Department, 2019)

³⁶ Attenborough & Hughes, 2022 .

³⁷ Manavis S, 'David Attenborough's Claim That Humans Have Overrun the Planet Is His Most Popular Comment' (New Statesman 4 November 2020) <<https://www.newstatesman.com/science-tech/2020/11/david-attenborough-s-claim-humans-have-overrun-planet-his-most-popular>>

³⁸ Attenborough & Hughes, 2022

³⁹ The big interview: Sir David Attenborough. Time Out London. Time Out. Retrieved June 1, 2025, from <<https://www.timeout.com/london/the-big-interview-sir-david-attenborough>>

⁴⁰ Attenborough & Hughes, 2022

contentious topic amongst environmentalists.⁴¹ He presents this perspective cautiously when engaging with international organizations or lobbying groups, instead choosing less formal platforms such as interviews and social media to express his views more openly.⁴² As a result of this cautious approach, overpopulation remains a subtle undertone rather than a central focus in his work.

Since formal institutions are hesitant to promote this stake, it is the media that plays an enabling role for him to present his position. It allows him to express his views with candor, accordingly allowing audiences to understand his professional opinion on overconsumption and the role that overpopulation plays in it. However, even with this freedom, public polarization on the issue of overpopulation has led him to gradually shift his focus toward the broader issue of overconsumption. This reflects how a mix of public attitudes and lobbying pressure has incentivized him to transform the presentation of overconsumption in his work.

Environmental degradation

Throughout his career, David Attenborough has devoted himself to capturing the beauty and complexity of the natural world. Yet alongside this celebration of nature, he has increasingly documented its decline. A key concern in his work is environmental degradation, which refers to the sustained deterioration of natural ecosystems caused by human activity. This includes the deterioration of global biomes through the destruction of ecosystems and the rapid extinction of wildlife, along with detrimental and undesired changes to the environment.⁴³

Deforestation and inefficient farmland use are leading causes of environmental degradation, a problem that has severely struck the United Kingdom. Reports by the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB) suggest that only 5% of the UK's land area is protected and managed for nature⁴⁴ and over 50% of its flowering plant biodiversity is lost,⁴⁵ with 1 in 6 species facing extinction.⁴⁶

⁴¹Marcus Roberts, 'Overpopulation Is an Environmental Red Herring' (Mercator11 September 2020) <<https://www.mercatornet.com/why-overpopulation-is-not-the-environmental-concern>> accessed 15 June 2025.

⁴² Kate Whiting, 'David Attenborough: The Planet Can't Cope with Overpopulation' (World Economic Forum9 October 2018) <<https://www.weforum.org/stories/2018/10/david-attenborough-warns-planet-cant-cope-with-overpopulation/>> accessed 16 June 2025.

⁴³ United Nations, 'Environmental Degradation' (United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia6 October 2015) <<https://archive.unescwa.org/environmental-degradation>> accessed 13 June 2025

⁴⁴Thomas Starnes and others, 'The Extent and Effectiveness of Protected Areas in the UK' (2021) 30 Global Ecology and Conservation <<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S235198942100295X>> accessed 19 June 2024.

⁴⁵ Nancy Harris and David Gibbs, 'Forests Absorb Twice as Much Carbon as They Emit Each Year' (2021) 2 World Resources Institute <<https://www.wri.org/insights/forests-absorb-twice-much-carbon-they-emit-each-year>> accessed 9 June 2025.

⁴⁶ State of Nature Partnership, 'State of Nature 2023 - Report on the UK's Current Biodiversity' (State of Nature2023) <<https://stateofnature.org.uk/>> accessed 20 June 2025

Environmental degradation has a direct effect on climate change. Forests, which help regulate the climate, sequester nearly 16 billion metric tons of CO₂ each year, while oceans absorb around 30% of all carbon emissions released on the planet.⁴⁷ As these systems decline, their capacity to buffer climate change is weakened, contributing to a destabilizing feedback loop.

Environmental degradation and climate change reinforce each other, as damaged ecosystems lose their ability to regulate the climate once critical thresholds are crossed. Unpredictable weather patterns thus make it difficult for these same ecosystems to adopt a new equilibrium. This “megatrend” will last for decades even if we were to go carbon neutral.⁴⁸ Preventing further damage to the environment is therefore essential to climate stability and human survival.

Attenborough takes it upon himself to advocate for the preservation of nature, emphasizing that the value of natural habitats far exceeds the value we nominally attach to them.⁴⁹ An emphasis on intrinsic value that extends to his desire to attach accurate monetary value to the goods and services provided by the environment. He claims that we are consuming commodities at a price far below their value, outlining that conservation of the environment would be simpler if humans could accurately quantify and thus assess the impact of their actions in terms of monetary value.⁵⁰

A major source of this degradation, at least through Attenborough's eyes, is the production of meat. On multiple occasions he has demonstrated that humanity needs to change their diets, because the planet cannot maintain “billions of meat-eaters.”⁵¹ He references how the production of meat uses 80% of agricultural land but only 20% of the world's calories, land that can be used for other purposes

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⁴⁷ Nancy Harris and David Gibbs, 'Forests Absorb Twice as Much Carbon as They Emit Each Year' (2021) 2 World Resources Institute <<https://www.wri.org/insights/forests-absorb-twice-much-carbon-they-emit-each-year>> accessed 9 June 2025.

⁴⁸ European Commission, 'Climate Change and Environmental Degradation | Knowledge for Policy' (knowledge4policy.ec.europa.eu) 20 September 2022) <https://knowledge4policy.ec.europa.eu/climate-change-environmental-degradation_en> accessed 23 June 2025.

⁴⁹ Citation: Department, I. M. Fund. C. (2019). The greatest balancing act: Nature and the global economy. IMF eLibrary. International Monetary Fund. Retrieved June 3, 2025, from <<https://www.elibrary.imf.org/view/journals/022/0056/004/article-A003-en.xml>> (Department, 2019)

⁵⁰ Attenborough & Hughes, 2022.

⁵¹ Citation: Dalton J, 'Go Vegetarian to Save Wildlife and the Planet, Sir David Attenborough Urges' (The Independent, 26 August 2020) <<https://www.independent.co.uk/climate-change/news/david-attenborough-vegetarian-vegan-meat-life-on-our-planet-netflix-wildlife-earth-a9689816.html>>

⁵² Hannah Ritchie, 'How Much of the World's Land Would We Need in Order to Feed the Global Population with the Average Diet of a given Country?' (Our World in Data) 3 October 2017) <<https://ourworldindata.org/agricultural-land-by-global-diets>> accessed 12 June 2025.

To him, the global food supply chain is largely inefficient, suggesting that the yield of land could be sufficiently increased if we had a primarily plant-based diet.⁵³ He references the claim that energy decreases between trophic levels of a food chain, as only 10% of energy transfers to the next level between plants and animals, thus building the case for the efficiency of vegetarianism.⁵⁴

Most people, however, are far removed from these realities and do not witness environmental degradation firsthand. Unlike Attenborough, they cannot see the collapse of ecosystems or the disappearance of species with their own eyes. This distance creates a dangerous disconnect. If people do not see the damage, they are less likely to respond to it. That is why Attenborough's documentaries are so vital. By capturing and sharing the changes he observes, from shrinking rainforests to dying coral reefs, he aims to bridge this gap. His films are crafted not just to inform but to move people emotionally, helping them understand the urgency of the crisis and the value of what is being lost.

His passion for conservation is deeply rooted in his lifelong admiration for the natural world, shaped by his childhood experiences and decades of observing environmental change firsthand. Based in the UK, he has seen the significant loss of biodiversity and deterioration of ecosystems that result from human activity. Over his lifetime, he has witnessed the degradation of the environment and carbon in the atmosphere go from 280 parts per million to 415 parts per million.⁵⁵ These experiences have revealed to him how fragile and interconnected life on Earth is and how environmental damage threatens not only wildlife but also human well-being.

This direct exposure to environmental decline, combined with his scientific understanding and personal passion, drives his commitment to protecting nature and encouraging urgent action to prevent further irreversible damage. His stake as a broadcaster is thus deeply influenced by his concern for a reckless degradation of the environment.⁵⁶

Overreliance on fossil fuels

A main policy concern for the UK is facilitating a shift away from nonrenewable resources. As of 2023, 38.68% of all energy comes from oil and 32.89% from gas, with fossil fuels accounting for 74.22% of the energy supplied in the country.⁵⁷ This

⁵³ Attenborough & Hughes, 2022.

⁵⁴ Team TA, 'Energy Flow and the 10% Rule: AP® Environmental Science Review | Albert Resources' (Albert ResourcesMay 2025) <<https://www.albert.io/blog/energy-flow-and-the-10-rule-ap-environmental-science-review/>> accessed 18 June 2025

⁵⁵ Attenborough & Hughes, 2022.

⁵⁶ Attenborough & Hughes, 2022.

⁵⁷ Hannah Ritchie, Max Roser and Pablo Rosado, 'Energy' (Our World in Data27 October 2022) <<https://ourworldindata.org/energy/country/united-kingdom#how-much-of-the-country-s-energy-comes-from-fossil-fuels>> accessed 20 June 2025.

stake has led to many post-2000 climate mitigation policies focused on expanding renewable energy use.

Fossil fuels are defined as a broad class of hydrocarbon material of biological origin occurring within the earth's crust that can be used as a source of energy.⁵⁸ The use of fossil fuels is incredibly widespread and accounts for 80% of the world's energy and over 40% of all energy-related carbon dioxide emissions,⁵⁹ and thus has deep consequences for the planet.⁶⁰ Attenborough is concerned about the wide global usage of fossil fuels both because they are finite, projected to run out by 2060, and more importantly, because they drive climate change.

The usage of fossil fuels has been identified as the primary driver of climate change and causes numerous harmful side effects. The use of oil releases 34 billion tons of CO₂ every year into the atmosphere.⁶¹ The damages to health, agriculture, property and infrastructure will accumulate to an approximate \$1.7-\$3.1 trillion per year by 2050.⁶² Air pollutants released from fossil fuel extraction caused 4.2 million premature deaths in 2019.⁶³ The extraction of these resources exerts a double pressure on marine biodiversity, with noise and light pollution from drilling processes disturbing biological cycles along with physical deterioration of the environment.⁶⁴ In addition, the use of fossil fuels for agriculture has been linked to increased desertification, wildfires and deforestation, especially in the Sahel region of Africa.⁶⁵

As a result, much of the culture surrounding climate change discourse in the UK is focused on renewable energy, an idea that Attenborough himself pushes forward. He emphasizes the importance of energy-efficient practices, believing this to be

⁵⁸ Otto Kopp, 'Fossil Fuel', Encyclopædia Britannica (Britannica 2019) <<https://www.britannica.com/science/fossil-fuel>> accessed 11 June 2025.

⁵⁹World Nuclear Association, 'Carbon Dioxide Emissions from Electricity' (world-nuclear.org 3 September 2024) <<https://world-nuclear.org/information-library/energy-and-the-environment/carbon-dioxide-emissions-from-electricity>> accessed 11 June 2025

⁶⁰Ritchie H and Rosado P, 'Fossil Fuels' (Our World in Data October 2022) <<https://ourworldindata.org/fossil-fuels>> accessed 14 June 2025

⁶¹ IEA, 'CO₂ Emissions – Global Energy Review 2025 – Analysis - IEA' (IEA 2025) <<https://www.iea.org/reports/global-energy-review-2025/co2-emissions>> accessed 7 June 2025.

⁶²Bennett P, 'Climate Change Is Costing the World \$16 Million per Hour' (World Economic Forum 12 October 2023) <<https://www.weforum.org/stories/2023/10/climate-loss-and-damage-cost-16-million-per-hour/>> accessed 13 June 2025

⁶³World Health Organization, 'Ambient (Outdoor) Air Quality and Health' (World Health Organization 24 October 2024) <[https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/ambient-\(outdoor\)-air-quality-and-health](https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/ambient-(outdoor)-air-quality-and-health)> accessed 21 June 2025

⁶⁴Seaside Sustainability, 'Fossil Fuels Ruin Wildlife' (Seaside 15 April 2024) <<https://www.seasidesustainability.org/post/fossil-fuels-ruin-wildlife>> accessed 14 June 2025

⁶⁵Prince J, 'Allan Savory: Desertification's Causes, Problems + Solutions - Real Organic Project' (Real Organic Project 4 April 2024) <<https://realorganicproject.org/allan-savory-desertification-causes-problems-solutions-episode-one-hundred-sixty-five/>> accessed 19 June 2025

the first step in the diversification of energy sources.⁶⁶ Attenborough keeps an optimistic view on the transition towards sustainable energy, strongly defending the idea that progress is being made, especially in the minds of the general public. He strongly believes that ideas are changing and that this is a big step forward in the transition. Attenborough's experience makes him a credible advocate for renewable energy, which allows him to rally support for the cause at the international conferences he partakes in, the UN People's Seat being a vivid example.

Media coverage of fossil fuels is, however, widely influenced by oil/gas companies, political figures, and news outlets, which promote fossil fuels and downplay the urgency of climate change.⁶⁷ This makes the public discourse around renewable energy fragmented and resistant to change. In this environment, Attenborough serves as a credible and accessible voice, helping the public understand the importance of transitioning to cleaner energy through clear and straightforward explanations.

David Attenborough's Defining Moment

Attenborough is a strong advocate in the movement against climate change and holds humans accountable for reducing its effects and preserving nature. However, his firm stance and environmental activism did not begin at the outset of his career but rather stem from a specific moment when he became convinced of the harmful impact of human activity on the environment. This turning point can be traced back to a 2004 lecture he attended, delivered by atmospheric chemist and professor Ralph Cicerone at the University of Liège's Amphithéâtres de l'Europe in Belgium.⁶⁸

Professor Cicerone was visiting the university to receive the annual Albert Einstein "World Award of Science" from the World Cultural Council.⁶⁹ At the same ceremony, Attenborough received the José Vasconcelos "World Award of Education."⁷⁰ It was during this event that Attenborough attended Cicerone's lecture, which provided the conclusive scientific evidence he had been waiting for regarding human-caused climate change.⁷¹ In a later interview, Attenborough explained that he had initially been skeptical about human actions having an effect on climate change but no longer doubts its reality.⁷² He was waiting for

⁶⁶ Attenborough & Hughes, 2022.

⁶⁷ Taft M, 'How Oil Companies Manipulate Journalists' (www.thenation.com 15 May 2024) <<https://www.thenation.com/article/environment/big-oil-fossil-fuel-journalism/>> accessed 17 June 2025

⁶⁸ Hickman L, 2004

⁶⁹ Hickman L, 2004

⁷⁰ Hickman L, 2004

⁷¹ Hickman L, 2004

⁷² Attenborough D, 'Attenborough: Climate Change Is the Major Challenge Facing the World - Environment - the Independent' (The Independent, 24 May 2006) <<https://web.archive.org/web/20080516005117/http://news.independent.co.uk/environment/article570935.ece>>

definitive proof and Cicerone's presentation gave it to him.

In his lecture, Professor Cicerone presented graphs that showed the correlation between the increase of CO₂, the rise in temperature, and the growth of human population and industrialization.⁷³ These convinced Attenborough that humanity was responsible for climate change. Cicerone outlined the greenhouse effect and what it implies for temperature control and fluctuations.⁷⁴ Following this, Cicerone presented a series of graphs and diagrams that, for Attenborough, served as the first clear evidence that climate change was real and caused by human activity.⁷⁵

Cicerone's emphasis on the link between rising amounts of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere and human activity is what convinced Attenborough that human activity is the main contributor to climate change. He was motivated by the professor's suggestion that reducing consumption and introducing solar power were the main steps towards mitigating climate change.⁷⁶

After the lecture, Attenborough became increasingly engaged in discussions with the BBC to produce programs dedicated to climate change. Since then, the tone and the messages of his documentaries have shifted and include advocacy and urgency towards the problems that the environment faces due to human-caused climate change.⁷⁷ Attenborough's tone has become more serious, with academics describing that his "voice of nature" has become more somber and desperate over the decades as he witnessed firsthand the destruction humans are causing.⁷⁸

Academic studies^{79 80 81 82} have shown that the tone of his programs has moved from showcasing the "magic of nature" to delivering warnings about what humanity stands to lose if the current course of destruction is not altered. As a result, his documentaries have evolved into powerful tools of advocacy, with

⁷³ Hickman L, 2004

⁷⁴ Dickinson RE and Cicerone RJ, 'Future Global Warming from Atmospheric Trace Gases' (1986) 319 *Nature* 109 <<https://www.nature.com/articles/319109a0>>

⁷⁵ Dickinson RE and Cicerone RJ,

⁷⁶ Hickman L, 2004

⁷⁷ Beck, R. (2010). Costing planet earth. *Film Quarterly*, 63/3: 63–6. DOI: 10.1525/fq.2010.63.3.63 (Beck, 2010)

⁷⁸ Green G, 'How David Attenborough Went from Delighting at the Natural World to Pleading for Its Future' (*Smithsonian Magazine* 4 April 2024) <<https://www.smithsonianmag.com/science-nature/how-david-attenborough-went-from-delighting-at-the-natural-world-to-pleading-for-its-future-180984075/#>> accessed 12 June 2025

⁷⁹ LOISELLE, A., & MACLEAN, J. (2023). INTRODUCTION: CLIMATE CHANGE AND CINEMA. *Revue Canadienne d'Études cinématographiques / Canadian Journal of Film Studies*, 32/2: 1–6. (Bowen & Rydge, 2011)

⁸⁰ Zemanek E, 'Between Fragility and Resilience: Ambivalent Images of Nature in Popular Documentaries with David Attenborough' (2022) 9 *The Anthropocene Review* 139

⁸¹ Baghdasaryan N, 'THE PAST, the FUTURE and the URGENT of Climate Change' (2023) <https://www.hortussemioticus.ut.ee/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/hortus_11_23_3_Baghdasaryan.pdf>

⁸² Robbins, D. (2023). A history of digital environmental journalism at the BBC and the guardian. *Journalism*, 25/5: 1130–47. DOI: 10.1177/14648849231179785

climate change emerging as a central and recurring theme in his work.

Before 2004, David Attenborough's documentaries largely celebrated the complexity and majesty of the natural world. These early works, such as *Zoo Quest* (1954–1963), *Life on Earth* (1979), *The Living Planet* (1984), *The Trials of Life* (1990), and *The Life of Birds* (1998), focused on biology, evolutionary theory, animal behavior, and biodiversity. They served as immersive explorations into the hidden lives of plants, insects, mammals, and birds, driven by a sense of discovery and awe.

While environmental concerns were occasionally mentioned, they were not central to the narrative. In fact, only one documentary prior to 2004, *State of the Planet* (2000), dealt directly with environmental degradation—and even then, it did so in a cautious, more informative than activist tone. His tone in this period was marked by enthusiasm, curiosity, and a neutral scientific lens, aiming primarily to educate and inspire wonder in his audience. The guiding ethos was: look how beautiful and mysterious nature is.

However, after the lecture in 2004, Attenborough, by his own admission,⁸³ began to reckon more directly with the science and politics of climate change. Post-2004, his documentaries not only showcased nature's beauty but also began to emphasize its fragility in the face of human activity. While nature remains a central character, it is increasingly portrayed as threatened and in decline.

This is evident in a growing number of documentaries where climate change is no longer a background concern but the central subject. For example, in *The Truth About Climate Change* (2006), Attenborough explores rising temperatures and their global consequences. This is followed by *Climate Change: Britain Under Threat* (2007), which localizes the issue for a UK audience, and later by global warnings like *Climate Change—The Facts* (2019), *Extinction: The Facts* (2020), and *Breaking Boundaries* (2021). These works are urgent in tone, often directly addressing viewers, featuring scientific data, and including calls to action.

In total, of the 38 documentaries Attenborough produced after 2004, 8 have climate change as a clear, central focus—roughly 21% of his post-2004 output. This figure is even more telling when compared to the pre-2004 era, which contained just 1 such documentary out of 53 (around 2%). This shift cannot be explained merely by increasing scientific awareness; it reflects a personal evolution in Attenborough's messaging. His tone has grown more serious, even grave. Now, rather than simply portraying what exists in the natural world, Attenborough often frames his narratives around what might be lost. The figures below demonstrate the significant increase of environmental focus of his documentaries.

⁸³ Hickman L, 2004

Figure 2: Theme of Documentaries Before 2004

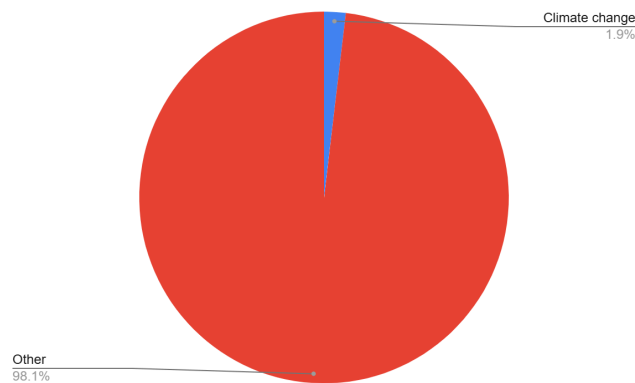
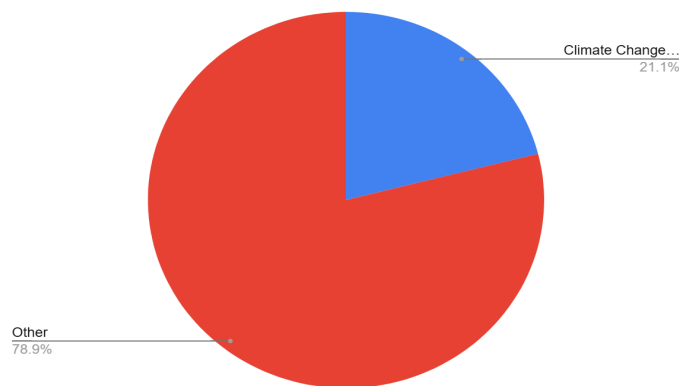


Figure 3: Theme of Documentaries After 2004



Additionally, Attenborough's narrative techniques have evolved. Earlier series were often detached from human politics, whereas recent ones increasingly reference economic systems, deforestation, fossil fuels, and international climate agreements. In his latest release, *Ocean*, Sir David Attenborough delivers a powerful message aimed at saving biodiversity and protecting the planet from the worsening effects of climate change.⁸⁴ He warns that humanity is "almost out of time" to prevent the catastrophic decline in ocean life.⁸⁵

In other recent series such as *Seven Worlds, One Planet* (2019) and *A Perfect Planet* (2021), he blends the visual style of traditional nature documentaries with an urgent environmental message, explicitly confronting issues such as biodiversity loss, global warming, and deforestation—marking a clear departure from the tone of his earlier work in the 1950s.⁸⁶ His acclaimed Netflix documentary *A Life on Our Planet* (2023) further reinforces this shift, directly holding humanity accountable for environmental destruction. He describes the film as his "witness

⁸⁴ Rowlatt J, 'Sir David Attenborough Ocean Film "Greatest Message He's Told"' BBC (5 May 2025) <<https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cn0wjxgoex1o>>

⁸⁵ Rowlat J, 2025

⁸⁶ Alanes MN del P, 'Inside David Attenborough's Journey to the Center of the Climate Movement' (Sentient Media2022) <<https://sentientmedia.org/inside-david-attenboroughs-journey-to-the-center-of-the-climate-movement/>>

statement" to the climate crisis, referring to it as "the crime" that "has [already] been committed."⁸⁷

Alongside raising awareness, Attenborough also offers concrete policy guidelines to address both the climate and biodiversity crises.⁸⁸ He advocates for curbing overconsumption, transitioning to renewable energy, and prioritizing ocean protection. On a personal level, he has taken steps to reduce his environmental footprint by drastically cutting back on meat consumption, arguing that the Earth cannot sustain billions of meat-eaters.⁸⁹ He emphasizes that we are now educated on the threats we create and should do everything in our power to prevent them.⁹⁰ While his public tone remains cautiously hopeful, Attenborough has also privately expressed a more pessimistic outlook, believing that conditions may deteriorate further before they improve—and perhaps not significantly for another 50 to 100 years.⁹¹

Overall, this shift demonstrates how the lecture was a catalyst for Attenborough transition from a wildlife observer into a climate activist—a clear defining moment.

This defining moment highlights the critical role that climate education and research play in driving climate action. It demonstrates how clear scientific evidence can turn skepticism into advocacy, emphasizing the power of data and informed communication. To replicate this shift more widely, increased investment in climate education programs is essential, enabling more people to understand the science behind environmental change. This example also reinforces the credibility and value of climate research in shaping public understanding. For younger climate activists, it may suggest that traditional forms of education and scientific dialogue can be more persuasive to older generations than disruptive forms of protest, offering a more targeted approach to bridging the generational gap in climate awareness.

David Attenborough's Solutions

This section will explore the solutions David Attenborough has proposed to face the aforementioned climate challenges. In his solutions he addresses the adverse effects of climate change both at the local level, with his UK-addressed solutions, and the global level, with his documentaries and UN campaigns.

⁸⁷ Attenborough, D., & Hughes, J. (2022). *A life on our planet: My witness statement and a vision for the future*. London: Witness Books. (Attenborough & Hughes, 2022)

⁸⁸ Alanes MN del P, 2022

⁸⁹ Citation: Dalton J, 'Go Vegetarian to Save Wildlife and the Planet, Sir David Attenborough Urges' (The Independent, 26 August 2020) <<https://www.independent.co.uk/climate-change/news/david-attenborough-vegetarian-vegan-meat-life-on-our-planet-netflix-wildlife-earth-a9689816.html>>

⁹⁰ Green G, 2024

⁹¹ Green G, 2024

Documentaries

One of the most impactful initiatives that David Attenborough brings forward in the battle against climate change is his documentaries. He continuously publishes documentaries with the aim to inspire change in people, guide policymaking, and raise awareness about the problems plaguing the environment.⁹² He strategically uses the medium of film to make his views widely accessible and memorable.

Attenborough creates visually proactive and stimulating narratives that help visualize complex phenomena.⁹³ For example, in many of his climate change-oriented documentaries, Attenborough frames climate change through his personal journey and professional life. This personal approach, relating the planet's transformations over the past 100 years to the evolution of human action and technology, makes the abstract concept of climate change relatable and tangible.⁹⁴

He also uses clear visuals and on-screen text to show key facts, such as the world's population, carbon levels in the atmosphere, and the amount of wilderness left. These numbers update throughout the film as time passes, allowing viewers to see the rapid pace and scale of environmental change over time.⁹⁵ Attenborough directly states, "The natural world is fading. The evidence is all around. It's happened in my lifetime. I've seen it with my own eyes."⁹⁶ By connecting the data to his lived experience, he transforms abstract statistics into a relatable narrative, making the scale of environmental change more tangible for the audience.

Moreover, his documentaries adopt a more direct tone about climate change from the beginning, moving beyond the softer, generic messages often found in similar works.⁹⁷ This includes more detailed scientific explanations of the links between causes, impacts, and solutions to climate change.⁹⁸ By multiplying its messages and stylistic solutions, the film caters to a more heterogeneous audience, offering different "hooks" for engagement.⁹⁹ This use of language engages the viewers, allowing for "unobtrusive issues" to climb up to the forefront of viewers' minds,¹⁰⁰

⁹² Lloyd, K. (2020). The big interview: Sir David Attenborough. Time Out London. Time Out. Retrieved June 1, 2025, from <<https://www.timeout.com/london/the-big-interview-sir-david-attenborough>> (Lloyd, 2020)

⁹³ Cappi, V. (2025). A life to look beyond pristine nature - anthropogenic climate change in Attenborough's netflix documentaries. Green Narratives, Ecology and Sustainability in Contemporary Television - Exploring Narrative Ecosystems. DOI: 10.21428/93b7ef64.1bgbaaab (Bowen & Rydger, 2011)

⁹⁴ Cappi V, 2025

⁹⁵ Cappi V, 2025

⁹⁶ Cappi V, 2025

⁹⁷ Cappi V, 2025

⁹⁸ Cappi V, 2025

⁹⁹ Cappi V, 2025

¹⁰⁰ Lin, S.-J. (2013). Perceived Impact of a Documentary Film: An Investigation of the First-Person Effect and Its Implications for Environmental Issues. *Science Communication*, 35(6), 708-733. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1075547013478204> (Original work published 2013)

elevating their importance in agenda-setting circles. Moreover, the medium allows him to blend multiple communication tools, such as scientific data, visual imagery, and ethos, which contribute to higher viewer engagement and impact, resulting in a product and advocacy that go beyond traditional tools of raising awareness.¹⁰¹

Three of his documentaries particularly stand out for breaking away from the usual neutrality of nature films: *Our Planet*, *Blue Planet II*, and *David Attenborough: A Life on Our Planet*. Unlike other documentaries that focus only on the beauty of nature, these films highlight the harsh realities of climate change. They not only raise awareness but also focus on solutions, encouraging viewers to take action.

Focusing on the environmental disruption, species vulnerability, and habitat loss due to human-driven climate change, the *Our Planet* series was watched by 25 million people in the first month of release. Within the first year (2019), it was played in close to 100 million households.¹⁰² It was subsequently screened to 23,000 businesspeople in 55 different countries with the goal of convincing these private actors to take actions for the environment.¹⁰³

Blue Planet II primarily focused on ocean pollution and warming, delivering a message of urgency and a call to action against the environmental damage caused by human activity. The documentary reached over a billion viewers and sparked a surge in environmental content on streaming platforms like Netflix. This success proved that nature documentaries are commercially viable, encouraging ongoing engagement and action on mitigating climate change.¹⁰⁴ The documentary created the "David Attenborough effect" and resulted in direct policy action: the Barbados Sea Turtle Project.¹⁰⁵ The "David Attenborough effect" will be discussed in the following section of the report, where we analyze the successes of the solutions.

Distinct from the previous two documentaries, *A Life on Our Planet* focused solely on anthropogenic climate change and was made with the explicit goal of raising awareness about human actions on the planet and climate change.¹⁰⁶ The film

¹⁰¹ Abbas, A., & Janjua, F. (2023). Meaning and Mattering: Framing Climate Change in the Documentary "A Life on our Planet" by David Attenborough. *University of Chitral Journal of Linguistics & Literature*, 7/1: 85–9. (Abbas & Janjua, 2023)

¹⁰² Itano N and Harvey P, 'THE FIRST YEAR of the OUR PLANET PROJECT OUR PLANET: OUR IMPACT Written By: WWF ® and World Wide Fund for Nature ® Trademarks And' (2020) <https://www.wwf.org.uk/sites/default/files/2020-09/wwfuk_our%20planet%20impact%20report_final.pdf>

¹⁰³ Itano N and Harvey P, 2020

¹⁰⁴ Males J and Van Aelst P, 'Did the Blue Planet Set the Agenda for Plastic Pollution? An Explorative Study on the Influence of a Documentary on the Public, Media and Political Agendas' (2020) 15 *Environmental Communication* 1

¹⁰⁵ Duell M, 'Planet Earth II Viewers Left Distraught by Plight of Hatchlings Facing Death' (Mail Online) 12 December 2016) <<https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-4024390/Why-no-one-helping-baby-turtles-Planet-Earth-viewers-left-distraught-plight-hatchlings-facing-death-light-pollution-don-t-worry-s-happy-ending.html>>

¹⁰⁶ Attenborough, D., & Hughes, J. (2022). *A life on our planet: My witness statement and a vision for the future*. London: Witness Books. (Attenborough & Hughes, 2022)

focused on Attenborough's life and his vision statement. It was an extremely personal documentary that aimed to connect with viewers at a personal level. This closeness with the viewership allowed Attenborough to directly present his views on overconsumption, environmental degradation, and renewable energy, which is crucial to understanding his stance. The documentary leveraged Attenborough's credibility and authority as one of the most trusted individuals in the UK.¹⁰⁷

Attenborough releases his documentaries to educate the public about climate change and raise awareness of its challenges. By doing so, he wants to encourage viewers to make everyday changes in their lives to mitigate climate change. His ultimate goal is to mobilize public opinion and drive policy change through informed and active citizens.

Collaboration with the World Wildlife Fund (WWF): Save Our Wild Isles Campaign

In addition to his documentaries, Attenborough actively collaborates with international conservation groups such as the WWF, Fauna & Flora, and the World Land Trust, all of which are dedicated to protecting threatened ecosystems and conserving biodiversity. These organizations work to preserve critical habitats, prevent species extinction, and promote sustainable land management around the world.

Attenborough's partnerships with them reflect a cycle of mutual reinforcement. His commitment to stopping environmental degradation draws him to their mission, and in return, they benefit from his public voice, scientific credibility, and global influence. Through these collaborations, he raises awareness, collects funding, and highlights the need to stop environmental decline, strengthening both his message and these organizations' conservation work.

Throughout his career, David Attenborough and the WWF have collaborated closely both in producing films and starting the subsequent climate campaigns linked to specific documentaries.¹⁰⁸ The most recent successful campaign, proposed and started by Attenborough himself in 2023, is the "Save Our Wild Isles Campaign." The campaign has garnered over 1.58 billion media reach, more than

¹⁰⁷ Abbas, A., & Janjua, F. (2023). Meaning and Mattering: Framing Climate Change in the Documentary "A Life on our Planet" by David Attenborough. *University of Chitral Journal of Linguistics & Literature*, 7/1: 85–9. (Abbas & Janjua, 2023)

¹⁰⁸ RSPB, 'Five Stories You Won't Want to Miss' (Rspb.org.uk2023) <<https://www.rspb.org.uk/about-us/annual-report/five-stories-you-wont-want-to-miss>>

12 million views for the TV series, and has resulted in community fund groups raising over £2 million for nature action.¹⁰⁹¹¹⁰

This campaign, which is officially a collaboration with the National Trust, WWF, and RSPB,¹¹¹ aims to protect and restore the few remaining natural environments in the United Kingdom. The UK is now considered one of the most nature-depleted countries,¹¹² with less than half of its original biodiversity remaining. Only around 3% of the UK is effectively protected and managed for nature. The campaign encourages action at home, work, school, and in communities, highlighting inspiring projects and featuring young people sharing stories about protecting nature.¹¹³

The campaign advocates for nature-friendly farming and restoring wooded landscapes.¹¹⁴ It pushes for more sustainable farming practices with the goal of increasing farmland biodiversity and recovering the nature the UK has lost throughout the years by strategically planting more trees.¹¹⁵ It calls for immediate action for the sake of nature, incorporating its advocacy into the daily lives of UK citizens to an extent where leaders cannot ignore the problem.¹¹⁶¹¹⁷ Moreover, the conjoined effort wants to achieve more nature-positive business plans with the incorporation of nature at the heart of decision-making. The campaign aims to implement a nationwide response to the natural emergency, which is deemed crucial to reversing the environmental damage across the UK.¹¹⁸

Within the campaign, Attenborough highlights specific strategies for reviving the countryside. Firstly, he advocates for the diversification of farm animals to create a mix of habitats.¹¹⁹ These diverse animals positively disturb the land, which allows for wildflowers to prosper, helping reverse the land damage after cattle farming. He also emphasizes the importance of reducing pesticide use and limiting how often fields are plowed, as both are crucial steps in protecting old hedgerows and

¹⁰⁹ Collacott E and WWF UK, 'Save Our Wild Isles Campaign by WWF UK for WWF, the RSPB, the National Trust' (Creativepool.com2023) <<https://creativepool.com/wwf-uk/projects/save-our-wild-isles-campaign-for-wwf-the-rspb-the-national-trust>> accessed 3 July 2025

¹¹⁰ National Trust, 'Help Us Save Our Wild Isles' (National Trust2023) <<https://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/who-we-are/news/were-working-with-with-rspb-and-wwf-to-save-our-wild-isles>>

¹¹¹ RSBP, 2023

¹¹² RSBP, 2023

¹¹³ National Trust, 2023

¹¹⁴ Save Our Wild Isles, 2023

¹¹⁵ National Trust, 2023

¹¹⁶ The Wildlife Trusts and Allwright D, '100 Days of Labour – Time to Act for Nature | the Wildlife Trusts' (Wildlifetrusts.org16 October 2024) <<https://www.wildlifetrusts.org/blog/david-allwright/100-days-labour-time-act-nature>>

¹¹⁷ Collacott E and WWF UK, 2023

¹¹⁸ RSBP, 2023

¹¹⁹ The Wildlife Trusts and Allwright D, 2024

restoring ponds and wildflowers.¹²⁰¹²¹ He adds that this process can be aided by manually planting such hedgerows and wildflowers on margins and meadows.

In addition to farming reform, Attenborough also offers practical advice on restoring the UK's wooded landscapes. He proposes to create organized plans to plant specific types of trees that withstand harsh environments in mountainous areas.¹²² The creation of new and renewed wildlife upstream will then benefit the wildlife and communities living downstream.¹²³

The campaign encompasses 26 actions intended to mitigate widespread environmental degradation. These measures are grounded in policy recommendations advocated by Attenborough throughout his documentary.

The goal of the campaign is to gain media attention and emphasize the importance of awareness and collective action on mitigating climate change. The encouragement of collective steps to protect and grow the UK's wildlife aims to mobilize government entities to take decisive legal action on repopulating the UK with its lost biodiversity.

The campaign is still ongoing, with the website active in showcasing their plans and championing their achievements. Effects are already visible, with the campaign contributing to the return of barn owls at certain farms, which in turn increases mixed habitats.¹²⁴

The People's Seat

Alongside his collaborations with conservation groups, Attenborough has also used his voice to influence global policymaking directly. One of the most notable examples of this was the launch of The People's Seat campaign with the United Nations in 2018, ahead of the COP24 climate conference. While campaigns like Save Our Wild Isles aimed to mobilize communities within the UK, The People's Seat was launched to influence international climate efforts.

The campaign's core idea was that ordinary people should have a say in decisions about climate change, as these decisions will shape their future. To achieve this, the hashtag #TakeYourSeat was launched to invite individuals worldwide to share their personal experiences of climate change, their concerns about its impact on their communities, and their calls for action from leaders.¹²⁵ The online advocacy

¹²⁰ The Wildlife Trusts and Allwright D, 2024

¹²¹ National Trust, 2023

¹²² The Wildlife Trusts and Allwright D, 2024

¹²³ National Trust, 2023

¹²⁴ Save Our Wild Isles, 2023

¹²⁵ Martin, 'United Nations Campaign "the People's Seat" Wins Prestigious Award at Cannes' (United Nations Sustainable Development24 June 2019) <<https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/blog/2019/06/un-campaign-award-cannes/>> accessed 9 June 2025

movement reached 16 million in its first hour on Facebook,¹²⁶ subsequently winning the Cannes Lion Awards for PR in 2019.¹²⁷

Concurrently, the campaign involved the appointment of David Attenborough as the “People’s Representative”/“People’s Advocate,” who took the “People’s Seat” at the COP. His task was to deliver a speech known as The People’s Address directly to the conference’s participants, including world leaders and policymakers. This address drew from the messages collected during the first half of the campaign, presenting them as the unified voice of citizens around the world.¹²⁸ By combining urgency with hope, his address aimed to remind policymakers that climate change is a human-driven crisis, but one that can still be addressed if immediate action is taken. The speech concluded with video messages from people worldwide, reinforcing its goal of bringing ordinary voices into high-level climate negotiations.¹²⁹

To encourage individual action in addition to influencing global policymaking, the campaign also launched the “Act Now Bot,” a personalized chatbot linked to users’ Facebook profiles. This tool provided tailored behavioral recommendations and later evolved into an app that tracked users’ actions and offered ongoing suggestions aligned with the campaign’s goals.¹³⁰ The UN recorded nearly 26 million actions taken by users, all contributing to reduced carbon footprints.¹³¹ This blend of individual behavioral change and global policymaking underscored the campaign’s dual approach.

Attenborough’s decision to lead the People’s Seat campaign was driven by both external opportunities and personal conviction. The campaign was backed by the United Nations, which provided a global platform and access to high-level policymakers. This aligned with his long-standing goal of communicating the urgency of climate action directly to those in power. After decades of documenting environmental change and warning of its consequences, Attenborough saw the campaign as a way to connect public concern with political decision-making.¹³²

From the UN’s perspective, Attenborough was chosen to lead The People’s Seat campaign because of his professional experience as a broadcaster and

¹²⁶UNFCCC, ‘Sir David Attenborough Launches UN Campaign to Promote Climate Action by the People’ (Unfccc.int2022)

<<https://unfccc.int/news/sir-david-attenborough-launches-un-campaign-to-promote-climate-action-by-the-people>> accessed 25 June 2025

¹²⁷ Grey London, ‘IPA | the United Nations: The People’s Seat’ (Ipa.co.uk2024) <<https://ipa.co.uk/knowledge/case-studies/the-united-nations-the-people-s-seat>> accessed 14 June 2025.

¹²⁸ UNFCCC, 2022.

¹²⁹ UNFCCC, 2022.

¹³⁰ —, ‘Act Now’ (United Nations2021) <<https://www.un.org/en/actnow>> accessed 22 June 2025

¹³¹ United Nations, 2021

¹³² UNFCCC, ‘People’s Voices to Be Heard at Critical UN Climate Talks’ (Unfccc.int2018) <<https://unfccc.int/news/people-s-voices-to-be-heard-at-critical-un-climate-talks>> accessed 16 July 2025

environmental advocate, his global reputability, and his ability to communicate complex issues in a personal and relatable way.¹³³

David Attenborough's Impact

Documentaries

As the primary method of his advocacy, Attenborough's nature documentaries have a documented impact on public opinion, attitude, and action. His films have raised awareness about climate change globally and led to short-term behavior changes in viewers, such as reducing plastic use. They have also influenced policy decisions. However, their long-term impact remains limited. While the documentaries capture attention and evoke strong emotions from viewers, there is no evidence they lead to sustained behavior change.

Attenborough's documentaries have reached enormous global audiences. Our Planet was streamed on 45 million Netflix accounts, reaching an estimated 90-180 million viewers in its first month.¹³⁴ Blue Planet II became the most-watched British TV show of 2017,¹³⁵ seen by over 1 billion people.¹³⁶ His following documentary, A Life on Our Planet, was accompanied by a bestselling book featured on both the New York Times and Financial Times lists¹³⁷.

This broad exposure has translated into measurable behavior change. It is known as the "Attenborough effect," a term that describes the influence his documentaries have on public attitudes and behavior toward the environment. An example is the response to Blue Planet II. After watching the series, 88 percent of people in a UK survey said they had changed their behavior.¹³⁸ The same survey suggests that the number of people using renewable water bottles rose by 60%. Among 18- to 24-year-olds, the increase was even higher, at over 70%, which might indicate that younger audiences are more receptive to his messages.¹³⁹

¹³³ UNFCCC, 2018.

¹³⁴ Keith Scholey, 'Case Study: Our Planet' (nesta.shorthandstories.com2021) <<https://nesta.shorthandstories.com/case-study-our-planet/index.html>> accessed 16 June 2025.

¹³⁵ John Aitchison, Rowan Aitchison and Fredi Devas, 'Assessing the Environmental Impacts of Wildlife Television Programmes' (2021) 3 People and Nature.

¹³⁶ John Aitchison, Rowan Aitchison and Fredi Devas, 'Assessing the Environmental Impacts of Wildlife Television Programmes' (2021) 3 People and Nature.

¹³⁷ John Thornhill, Pilita Clark and Clive Cookson, 'Best Books of 2024: Environment, Science and Technology' (@FinancialTimes19 November 2024) <<https://www.ft.com/content/67a33609-ab0d-4e25-b968-19a9605d0ff6>> accessed 8 June 2025.

¹³⁸ Imogen Calderwood, '88% of People Who Saw "Blue Planet II" Have Now Changed Their Lifestyle' (Global Citizen2018) <<https://www.globalcitizen.org/en/content/88-blue-planet-2-changed-david-attenborough/>> accessed 16 June 2025.

¹³⁹ Imogen Calderwood, 2018.

Online interest also surged, with searches for “dangers of plastic in the ocean” doubling and “plastic recycling” increased by 50%.¹⁴⁰

Attenborough's influence has extended beyond behavior to actual policy impact. In the wake of Blue planet 2, the UK underwent a so-called “war on plastics.” This campaign included government bans on single-use plastic items such as straws, stirrers, cotton buds, and bags.¹⁴¹ The society for conservation biology mentions that the media stir created by the film caught the attention of major policymakers like Theresa May, who praised the documentary for “vividly highlighting” the issue of plastic in our oceans. The documentary was even referred to in the speech introducing the 25 year environment plan launched by the UK. This plan involved an increased commitment to tackle legislation surrounding plastic waste and was attributed to an 83% reduction in plastic carrier bags, eventually leading to an ambitious commitment to eliminate all avoidable plastic waste by 2041.¹⁴²

His documentaries' impact can in part be explained by Attenborough's long-standing reputation for trust and credibility, built over 70 years in British culture. According to YouGov polls in 2018, he is the UK's most popular and trusted public figure, which strengthens the impact of his work.

The emotional impact of Attenborough's documentaries also contributes to their effectiveness. A study measuring viewers' emotional responses found a significant increase in motivation to act on climate issues, confirmed by statistical tests. This increase supports Schwartz's norm activation theory, which suggests that people are more likely to engage in pro-environmental behaviors when they feel morally responsible and emotionally connected. Attenborough's films activate this sense of personal responsibility by combining factual information with powerful, emotional storytelling.

Scale	Paired t-test (EG)	Paired t-test (CG)	Independent t-test
Nature Con.	Small Increase*	Small Decrease	Moderate Increase*
Hope	Large Increase***	Small Increase*	Moderate Increase**
Motivation	Moderate Increase***	Small Decrease	Large Increase***
Responsibility	Small Decrease**	Small Decrease*	Small Decrease
Helplessness	Moderate Decrease***	Small Decrease*	Small Decrease*
Animal Agri.	Moderate Increase***	Small Increase*	Moderate Increase**

¹⁴⁰ Frida Bäckman and Annemari Nieminen, 'The Experience of Environmental Documentary Films. A Qualitative Study Examining Millennials Values, Mindsets and Experiences.' (Lub.lu.se2021) <<https://lup.lub.lu.se/student-papers/search/publication/9051187>> accessed 15 June 2025.

¹⁴¹ Matilda Eve Dunn, Morena Mills and Diogo Verissimo, 'Evaluating the Impact of the Documentary Series Blue Planet II on Viewers' Plastic Consumption Behaviors' (2020) 2 Conservation Science and Practice <<https://conbio.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/csp2.280>> accessed 20 June 2025.

¹⁴² Imogen Calderwood, 2018.

Scale	Exp. Group		Control Group		t	df	p	D
	M	SD	M	SD				
Nature Con. (Pre)	78.89	11.27	73.58	17.96	2.28	52.76	.013	0.52
Nature Con. (Post)	82.65	10.70	72.59	17.76				
Hope (Pre)	2.90	0.66	2.88	0.82	2.43	76	.009	0.55
Hope (Post)	3.27	0.70	3.02	0.84				
Motivation (Pre)	4.02	0.70	3.79	0.84	3.94	50.39	<.001	0.91
Motivation (Post)	4.30	0.68	3.74	0.85				
Responsibility (Pre)	2.32	0.67	2.45	0.80	-1.58	55.21	.060	-0.36
Responsibility (Post)	2.07	0.63	2.36	0.79				
Helplessness (Pre)	2.71	0.58	2.75	0.65	-1.79	76	.040	-0.41
Helplessness (Post)	2.42	0.68	2.63	0.68				
Animal Agri. (Pre)	4.03	0.77	3.76	1.08	2.46	58	.008	0.57
Animal Agri. (Post)	4.37	0.66	3.85	1.04				

Table 1 & 2: *t*-Test results.

The structure of the documentaries is a key reason for this impact. The first half often confronts viewers with the scale and urgency of environmental destruction caused by human activity. This heightens awareness and concern. However, instead of ending on despair, the second half offers hopeful, solution-focused narratives that show positive changes already happening. This shift avoids overwhelming the audience and instead fosters a belief that their actions can contribute to progress. Such an approach increases self-efficacy, a key driver of motivation according to motivation theory, which suggests that people are more likely to act if they believe their efforts will make a difference.¹⁴³

Attenborough's documentaries derive their influence not only from compelling storytelling but also from strong scientific legitimacy. This credibility stems from collaborations with trusted organizations such as UNEP, the British Antarctic Survey, Flora and Fauna International, and WWF, which help ensure the accuracy of the content. These partnerships make viewers more likely to trust the information and respond to it.

Moreover, most of Attenborough's documentaries have been produced in partnership with the BBC, specifically its Natural History Unit. Known globally for its high production standards and factual accuracy, the BBC helps his work reach broad audiences and reinforces its authority. This long-standing collaboration has

¹⁴³ Peter Wessels, 2022.

been central to the documentaries' ability to raise awareness, shift public attitudes, and influence environmental behavior.

Despite these successes, there are limitations to the impact his documentaries make. While *Blue Planet II* and other documentaries capture viewers' attention and evoke strong emotions, there is limited evidence that they lead to sustained long-term behavior change. Analysis of over 2 million tweets about *Our Planet* revealed that while initial responses were positive, public engagement fluctuated and often focused on the featured animals rather than the environmental issues behind their decline. This suggests that, although his documentaries powerfully capture emotional attention, this does not always translate into a deeper understanding or lasting behavioral change. Despite increased motivation immediately after viewing, there is limited evidence showing sustained action, highlighting a key challenge in maintaining impact beyond initial awareness.

The BBC's commitment to impartiality has also constrained the documentaries' ability to make explicit calls to action or advocate specific policies. To overcome these constraints and strengthen his environmental messaging, Attenborough has increasingly turned to global streaming platforms like Netflix. Netflix offers fewer editorial constraints and greater freedom to depict the direct consequences of human activity.¹⁴⁴ Documentaries like *Our Planet* and *A Life on Our Planet* have thus reached over 150 countries, blending science with advocacy and forging partnerships with NGOs to amplify their impact.¹⁴⁵ However, this shift has led to new challenges, such as debates over the psychological impact of graphic imagery and concerns about audience fatigue.

Additionally, political factors shape how his messages are received, with research showing that responses can vary based on political affiliation. For example, audiences aligned with progressive parties tend to be more receptive to his environmental calls than more conservative groups.

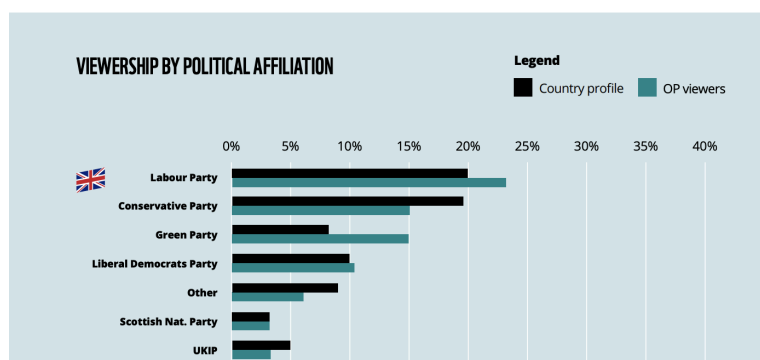


Figure 4. Viewership of *Our Planet* by political affiliation.

¹⁴⁴ John Aitchison et. al, 2021.

¹⁴⁵ Keith Scholey, 2021.

Despite these complexities, Attenborough's blend of scientific rigor, emotional storytelling, and growing advocacy has made his documentaries a powerful force in raising awareness and motivating environmental action worldwide.

In summary, Sir David Attenborough's documentaries have reached vast global audiences and contributed to raising awareness about environmental issues. Evidence suggests they have influenced short-term behavior changes and, in some cases, helped prompt policy responses, such as the UK's measures on plastic waste following Blue Planet II. However, the extent to which these documentaries lead to sustained long-term behavioral change remains uncertain. Overall, they continue to play a significant role in shaping public discourse around climate change.

Collaboration with WWF - Save Our Wild Isles Campaign

David Attenborough's collaboration with the WWF through the Save Our Wild Isles campaign played a pivotal role in drawing public attention to the need for wildlife restoration in the UK. The campaign generated widespread media coverage and public engagement, which directly inspired the UK's three leading environmental organizations—WWF, the RSPB, and the National Trust to unite for the first time. This historic collaboration led to the creation of the People's Plan for Nature, a nationwide initiative aimed at reversing nature loss.¹⁴⁶

Attenborough's campaign to preserve the nature of the UK inspired these organizations to unite and create the People's Plan for Nature - a nationwide initiative focused on restoring the natural environment, launched in 2023. The project created the People's Assembly for Nature, a forum made up of citizens from across the country who come together to discuss and decide on actions to protect and restore nature. This assembly uses an innovative decision-making process called RAPID democracy, which involves three steps: gathering input, making recommendations and agreeing on actions to carry out, and lastly, performing them.¹⁴⁷ Many of the policies entombed in The People's Plan for Nature continue to influence the assembly, and the recommendations within the plan continue to be promoted and acted upon by various organizations and advocacy groups.¹⁴⁸

A study by WWF, RSPB, and the National Trust showed that the assembly had a real impact. By the end of the assembly, there was a 34% increase in participants that felt they knew "a lot" about UK nature, while those that felt they knew "very

¹⁴⁶ The people's assembly for nature., 'The People's P L a N F O R N a T U R E Report on Outcomes of a RAPID Democracy Process.' (People's Plan for Nature.3 July 2023) <<https://peoplesplanfornature.org/sites/default/files/2023-05/PPFN-Report-Final.pdf>> accessed 14 June 2025.

¹⁴⁷ The people's assembly for nature, 2023

¹⁴⁸ Involve, 'Building a Public Mandate for a People's Plan for Nature' (Involve2022) <<https://www.involve.org.uk/our-work/our-projects/building-public-mandate-peoples-plan-nature>> accessed 30 July 2025

little" decreased to 3%.¹⁴⁹ Awareness of UK nature loss also increased, with 67% of participants agreeing that the country had lost too much of its natural land. In addition, 34% more people said they believed they could personally make a difference, and many more felt they had a responsibility to protect nature.¹⁵⁰ The process was also positively received: 90% of participants rated their experience 4 or 5 out of 5, and 98% said they enjoyed it.¹⁵¹ Many participants said the final plan felt like it had been "written by people from all walks of life," which gave it legitimacy and broad public trust.¹⁵²

While there is no definitive study confirming that the 26 actions directly "caused" the People's Plan, the sequence of events and credible reporting strongly suggest that the campaign created widespread awareness and momentum.¹⁵³ This public engagement then shaped the environment in which the People's Plan emerged. The Plan's structure and urgency reflect many of the themes raised by Attenborough's campaign, suggesting that Save Our Wild Isles played an indirect yet influential role in inspiring broader community action and shaping the national conservation agenda.¹⁵⁴

The Save Our Wild Isles campaign also resulted in direct environmental action. It led to the RSPB purchasing a new rainforest reserve in Scotland and restoring it, in tandem with an invasive mice eradication campaign that aimed to increase the number of albatrosses across the island.¹⁵⁵ It further provided £1 million to support community-led¹⁵⁶ projects focused on protecting and restoring local nature. The campaign also inspired Young Voices for Nature, a project involving over 200 young people, who created a 20-minute film to raise awareness among younger audiences.¹⁵⁷ Over 220 businesses and organizations hosted campaign screenings, including Nestlé, PepsiCo, Aviva, PwC, M&S, Premier League, OVO, and BlackRock.¹⁵⁸

The campaign has also influenced political agendas. The cumulative impact of the campaign eventually reached MPs, with the topic of the isles being of concern to policymakers across parties and ensuring nature's presence in election manifestos.¹⁵⁹ In July 2023, a high-profile event called the Save Our Wild Isles Reception was held in Westminster Abbey Gardens. It brought together MPs,

¹⁴⁹ The people's assembly for nature, 2023

¹⁵⁰ The people's assembly for nature, 2023

¹⁵¹ The people's assembly for nature, 2023

¹⁵² The people's assembly for nature, 2023

¹⁵³ Kate Whiting, 2023

¹⁵⁴ Katz E, 'Save Our Wild Isles' (East Anglia Bylines | Powerful Citizen Journalism 7 May 2023) <<https://eastangliabylines.co.uk/environment/save-our-wild-isles/>> accessed 31 July 2025

¹⁵⁵ RSPB, 'RSPB' (www.rspb.org.uk March 2020) <<https://www.rspb.org.uk/helping-nature/what-we-do>> accessed 24 June 2025.

¹⁵⁶ Collacott E and WWF UK, 2023

¹⁵⁷ Save Our Wild Isles and Young Voices for Nature, 'Young Voices for Nature - Our Beautiful Wild! | Save Our Wild Isles' (Saveourwildisles.org.uk 2023) <<https://www.saveourwildisles.org.uk/community/young-voices-for-nature>> accessed 3 July 2025

¹⁵⁸ Collacott E and WWF UK, 2023

¹⁵⁹ The Wildlife Trusts and Allwright D, 2024

business leaders, and community organizations.¹⁶⁰ Attendees included MPs like Jeff Smith (Labour), who publicly affirmed the plan's legitimacy and committed to championing its recommendations in Parliament. Through this parliamentary event, over hundreds of other MPs across parties publicly pledged support for stronger environmental protections, signaling cross-party engagement.¹⁶¹

In the run-up to the July 2024 general election, key parties, including the Labour, Liberal Democrats, and Green Party, explicitly incorporated commitments focused on nature and biodiversity into their manifestos.¹⁶² The Labour Party pledged a "Countryside Protection Plan" with nine new National River Walks, three new National Forests, and bans on harmful pesticides.¹⁶³ On the other hand, the Liberal Democrats committed to doubling nature by 2050 - protecting at least 30% of land and sea, planting 60 million trees annually, and introducing a new Environmental Rights Act.¹⁶⁴ While the plan has not been adopted into policy,¹⁶⁵ it has been used by multiple parties and MPs as a legitimized public mandate for stronger environmental action.¹⁶⁶

Organizations like RSPB, WWF, Wildlife Trusts, Butterfly Conservation publicly endorsed the People's Plan, using it as a reference in formal consultations and advocating for it in parliamentary and local authority submissions.¹⁶⁷ On social media and through green networks, activists say the campaign raised visibility and awareness of nature-focused local campaigning—though they also note frustration at the slow pace of legally binding reforms without government commitment.^{168,169}

Written evidence submitted by Wildlife and Countryside Link (including WWF, RSPB) to a parliamentary committee in April 2022 praised the campaign's emphasis on integrating nature into strategic policy and planning frameworks. However, no prominent independent economic or environmental think-tank report has specifically measured the campaign's direct causal impact on legislation. While academic studies often highlight the general value of public mobilization on biodiversity policy, attribution to Save Our Wild Isles remains unquantified in peer-reviewed work. Some journals acknowledge the People's plan as a strong

¹⁶⁰ Collacott E and WWF UK, 2023

¹⁶¹ National Trust, 2023

¹⁶² Reeves J, 'What Are the Political Parties Offering for Nature? | CIEEM' (CIEEM21 June 2024) <<https://cieem.net/what-are-the-political-parties-offering-for-nature/>>

¹⁶³ O'Neill R and Campaign for National Parks, 'Party Promises to National Parks' (Campaign for National Parks 18 June 2024) <<https://www.cnp.org.uk/news/party-promises-to-national-parks/>> accessed 3 July 2025

¹⁶⁴ Reeves J, 2024

¹⁶⁵ The Wildlife Trusts and Allwright D, 2024

¹⁶⁶ Save Our Wild Isles, 2023

¹⁶⁷ Save Our Wild Isles, 2023

¹⁶⁸ The Wildlife Trusts and Allwright D, 2024

¹⁶⁹ Save Our Wild Isles and Young Voices for Nature, 2023

model of participatory policymaking but address that its influence is shaped by governmental follow-through, often regarded as fickle.¹⁷⁰¹⁷¹

The People's Seat

The People's Seat campaign had a significant reach in raising public engagement with climate change. It reached over 1.3 billion people and encouraged personal climate action through tools like the ActNow.bot. The campaign was praised for its innovative communication strategy and received a Gold award at the Cannes Lions. However, its influence on concrete policy outcomes was limited. While some linked progress at COP24, such as a global emissions agreement, to the campaign, others saw it as largely symbolic. Structural challenges within COP negotiations, political resistance, and digital exclusion all limited its ability to influence decision-making. Overall, The People's Seat was effective in raising awareness but had limited impact on systemic change.¹⁷²

The campaign raised global climate awareness and boosted public engagement by reaching over 1.3 billion people. It encouraged individuals to take climate action through digital tools like the ActNow.bot, which promoted daily behavior changes grounded in collective impact. As of 2021 (3 years after its implementation), the UN has recorded 26,701,420 actions taken around the world.¹⁷³ However, it is hard to identify if these actions have encouraged permanent behavioral change.

Nevertheless, surveys conducted after the campaign showed that support for the United Nations increased, especially in the United States. This is significant given the US's role as both a major global power and one of the world's largest polluters. While senior US leaders have historically been absent from key climate conferences, growing public approval of the UN could increase pressure on high-level officials to participate more directly in future negotiations. Its innovative communication strategy earned a Cannes Lions Gold award, highlighting its success in mobilizing a broad and diverse audience.¹⁷⁴

The campaign's ability to engage a wide audience stemmed from its effective use of social media and digital platforms, allowing people worldwide to directly share their climate experiences and opinions with global leaders via the hashtag #TakeYourSeat. Sir David Attenborough's involvement amplified the campaign's credibility and reach, with his "People's Seat Address," compiled from public contributions, reaching over 16 million viewers within the first 24 hours. This approach improved perceptions of the United Nations and demonstrated how

¹⁷⁰ Save Our Wild Isles, 2023

¹⁷¹ The Wildlife Trusts and Allwright D, 2024

¹⁷² Onyekwere C, 'Human Rights Pulse' (Human Rights Pulse 29 November 2021) <<https://www.humanrightspulse.com/mastercontentblog/a-seat-at-the-table-how-cop26-failed-to-account-for-its-key-stakeholders>>

¹⁷³ United Nations, 'Act Now' (United Nations 2021) <<https://www.un.org/en/actnow>>

¹⁷⁴ United Nations, 2019

digital engagement can connect everyday individuals to international climate discussions.

However, despite its broad reach and engagement, the initiative did not lead to lasting, measurable behavior change nor did it translate public sentiment into direct, measurable policy outcomes. Even though the ActNow.bot showed strong interest in personal climate action, no data demonstrates widespread or enduring behavioral change attributable to the campaign.

Wider issues with the campaign stem from its focus on a single event, COP24, which limited its potential for long-term impact. By centering around a one-off moment, the campaign risked being seen as a short-term solution rather than a sustained effort to drive climate action. This approach may have fostered a "one-and-done" mindset, where people felt they had contributed enough by simply participating once, rather than understanding the need for continuous climate action. Its reliance on digital communication also may not have reached communities most vulnerable to climate change, particularly those without consistent access to social media or online platforms.

In line with that, skepticism around the COP conference continues, with journalists suggesting the marginalized voices, such as vulnerable voices from the Global South and Indigenous communities, remain sidelined and are often not heard at these conferences.¹⁷⁵ The People's Seat did not help, as the ability to meaningfully participate often requires significant epistemic and material resources, which creates disadvantages for youth from developing countries.¹⁷⁶

As for leading to policy change, the campaign has received some credit for inspiring action, but there is no definitive evidence proving a direct impact. Some commentators credited the campaign with helping inspire the historic agreement at COP24, where 200 countries committed to capping greenhouse gas emissions.¹⁷⁷ It also received credit for inspiring several EU members and developing nations who strengthened their Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) during the conference.¹⁷⁸ However, there is no direct evidence linking these policy changes to the campaign. Many critics viewed the People's Seat as largely symbolic. They argued that, ultimately, actions are determined by delegates, leaving the public with no meaningful input.

Its impact on policy-making was limited by the campaign's reliance on political institutions. As a UN initiative, it depended on the participation of world leaders, yet major polluters like the United States and China were absent from COP24 and

¹⁷⁵ Onyekwere, 2019

¹⁷⁶ Marquardt J, Lövbrand E and Buhre F, 2023

¹⁷⁷ Grey, 2018

¹⁷⁸ Charles A, 'COP24 Climate Talks Had a "People's Voice", but Did Anyone Listen?' (The Conversation19 December 2018)
<<https://theconversation.com/cop24-climate-talks-had-a-peoples-voice-but-did-anyone-listen-108847>>

did not hear the "People's Address." In addition, several countries, including the US, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and Russia, rejected the findings of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC)¹⁷⁹, which provides scientific assessments on climate change for policymakers. This rejection reflects what some describe as the "Trump effect," where climate science became increasingly politicized, leading to mistrust and inaction at international levels¹⁸⁰. These political obstacles undermined the campaign's goal of connecting public voices with policy outcomes and revealed the limits of symbolic engagement when the underlying political will is lacking.

In summary, The People's Seat successfully amplified climate change awareness and public engagement, earning significant acclaim for its communications strategy. However, its effectiveness in directly shaping policy outcomes remains a complex and debated issue among sources, with some attributing a major agreement to it, while others point to the systemic barriers and persistent marginalization of vulnerable voices within the broader COP framework.

Conclusion

Sir David Attenborough's advocacy has evolved over the course of his decades-long career as he transitioned from a trailblazing natural historian to one of the most recognized environmentalists in the world. Through documentaries, public speeches and collaborations with institutions like the BBC, WWF, and UNEP, he has used his extensive media presence to significantly influence the global climate conversation. Using collaborations with advocacy organizations and scientific institutions, his projects, which range from Blue planet, Our Planet to Climate Change: the facts, have acquired legitimacy by integrating scholarly authority into approachable and emotionally stirring stories. Attenborough has been successful at bridging the knowledge gap between the public and scientific evidence over time, raising awareness of climate change, ecological collapse, and biodiversity loss.

The foundation of Attenborough's environmental activism is the idea that climate change stems from excessive consumption and environmental degradation, rather than merely emissions. His criticism of global capitalism highlights how underdeveloped nations bear an unfair burden for ecological degradation. Although his portrayal of overpopulation caused criticism, it is in line with his long-standing worry that unchecked population and economic expansion pose a threat to the planet's ecological boundaries. His larger appeal for equitable

¹⁷⁹ Atkinson K, 'UN Climate Summit Stymied by U.S.-Backed Wording Dispute' (Axios December 2018)

<<https://www.axios.com/2018/12/09/un-climate-summit-poland-welcome-wording-us-russia>> accessed 31 July 2025

¹⁸⁰ Jackson M and Gastelumendi J, 'What the US Withdrawal from the Paris Agreement Means for the Global Fight against Climate Change' (Atlantic Council November 2020) <<https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/what-the-us-withdrawal-from-the-paris-agreement-means-for-the-global-fight-against-climate-change/>>

resource allocation, sustainable development, and global responsibility is consistent with this message.

Likewise, his documentaries have reimagined environmental storytelling. *Blue Planet II* for example, is renowned for having sparked international action on plastic pollution, an influence that has been dubbed the "Attenborough Effect." *A Life on Our Planet* offers a personal "witness statement" connecting his life's work to the rapid decay of Earth's biodiversity. These programs represent a conscious departure from the BBC's long-standing objectivity for the sake of a forthright recognition of humanity's responsibility. However, research indicates that audience behavioral change is often brief, despite high viewership and emotional effect, highlighting the difficulty of converting awareness into long-lasting policy or lifestyle change.

Outside of the film industry, Attenborough has active involvement in policymaking. At the UN Climate Change Conference (COP24) in 2018, he introduced the "People's Seat" initiative, which sent a message, drawn from the public, to world leaders. His more recent participation in the Save Our Wild Isles campaign serves as a testament to his commitment to civic engagement fueled by the media. The program aims to inspire local communities to preserve the natural habitats of the United Kingdom. However, these measures' limited enforcement capabilities and episodic nature hinder their effectiveness, particularly when powerful political interests oppose them.

Attenborough's captivating style, composed, commanding, and emotionally stirring, is another factor contributing to his popularity. In contrast to activists who incite contention, Attenborough encourages contemplation and group accountability. Humility, scientific accuracy, and a sense of duty to take action serve as the foundation for his narratives. Despite not having direct political power, he has been able to indirectly influence government and shape public opinion by his credibility and consistent messaging.

In conclusion, David Attenborough is a distinctive individual in the field of environmental communication. He brings environmental problems to the attention of the world through his documentaries, initiatives, and unwavering public trust. His legacy, however, lies not just in the awareness he has raised but also in the questions that he compels us to think about: How can we balance knowledge with action? And can a system characterized by inertia undergo structural transformation as a result of collective storytelling? Attenborough's message, which calls for us to rethink our connection with nature in the sake of sustainability, justice, and shared existence, is still relevant and encouraging as the climate catastrophe worsens.

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