

It's great that Blue Planet II is pushing hard on plastic pollution in the oceans – but please use facts, not conjecture

November 24 2017, by Malcolm David Hudson

Must we always talk for victory, and never once for truth, for comfort, and joy – Ralph Waldo Emerson.

On Sunday night we gasped in awe at the latest stunning images of marine life in BBC's marvellous Blue Planet II. Blue sharks dodged great whites to scavenge on oceanic carrion; a baby turtle took its chance to shelter on some remote piece of driftwood; albatrosses sadly caressed one another as their final chick took flight; spinner dolphins, yellowfin tuna and giant rays raced for the spoils of a giant bait ball; sperm whales dozed vertically then plunged to unfathomable depths to feed. For the fourth week running it was jaw dropping stuff.

In the final set piece, narrator David Attenborough's tone changed – as it does when he has bad news. He showed us grim images of a turtle tangled in [plastic debris](#), a beautiful tropical fish sheltering among our waste, and most heartbreaking of all, a mother pilot whale unable to let go of her long-dead infant as the rest of her family grieved.

"Today in the Atlantic waters they have to share the ocean with plastic. A mother is holding her newborn young – it's dead," he said.

Attenborough's wise voiceover described the sadness of the great cetaceans, and the threat of plastic waste to top predators, and showed us more plastic debris. He then returned to the grieving giants: "The

mother's milk may have been contaminated by plastics."

This had a big impact. The Daily Telegraph headline "Shocked Blue Planet viewers vow never to use disposable plastic again after heartbreaking whale scene" [captured the reaction of many](#). And the message boards buzzed on Twitter:

Mother whale carrying her dead pup is just heart rending. And needless. Were it not for us wasteful humans. [#blueplanet](#)
[#plastic](#)

— Emily Griffiths (@Emily_Griff) [November 19, 2017](#)

Conflict

I know the messages – researchers have shown there could already be [over five trillion pieces of plastic](#) in the ocean; that by 2050 there could be [more plastic than fish](#); that our oceanic giants are becoming islands of garbage; that birds are starving as they fill their guts with [plastic waste](#); that microplastic is in our seafood. I wanted to stand up and say "Yes, that's it, that's what we need!" but the scientist in me held me back.

In the whole sequence, there was no direct link made between the death of the baby whale and the plastic debris we saw in parallel footage; no evidence that its mother's milk actually contained contamination from plastics. Nothing.

My inner environmentalist convulsed with frustration at wildlife being killed by unnecessary human waste, but my inner scientist screamed foul at the lack of direct evidence shown on the programme.

BBC Wildlife [has been criticised before](#) for passing off footage of captive animals as hard-won material taken in the wild. I have no

problem with that if the facts are right and it makes striking educational TV, but this time it was fake – the linkages between the dead whale and plastic pollution were at best circumstantial. So I faced a dilemma: should I add to the clamour to restrict our wasteful use for plastic and to clean up our oceans, or call out the questionable editing and lack of facts?

I chose to call it out via a personal tweet and it was picked up by a number of different media (Mailonline, the Daily Telegraph, The Sun). I certainly didn't want to be sucked into any wider agendas that are more about bashing the BBC, but I still had a point.

Paul Jepson, a wildlife population health specialist based at the Institute of Zoology, Zoological Society London, mounted a defence. He said the plastic and toxic chemicals [are capable of killing young whales](#) and added that studies show the UK's orca population, for example, has failed to breed successfully for 25 years, which correlates with that period's high levels of contaminants.

"We already know that some chemical pollutants can cause the death of a new born calf," he said. However, he also added that the camera team were unable to perform an autopsy on the calf featured in the programme. It's a shame Attenborough's voiceover couldn't have articulated the right evidence to cut through the emotive presentation.

In the end, I'd rather not have found myself writing this article as I didn't want exposing the production fakery to become the story. In fact, it seems that it hasn't – the bigger story about plastic pollution has prevailed as the headline. Besides, we really do need emotive images and heart-rending story lines to impress on everybody the urgency of the [plastic pollution](#) issue.

The UK government has at least started to inch forward, but a [promised](#)

[ban on microplastics](#) seems to be in the long grass. Other governments have moved forward, for example [Costa Rica](#) and [Sri Lanka](#), who are already pressing on with restrictions on disposable ("single use") [plastic](#). Meanwhile, at least in his Budget, the chancellor, Philip Hammond, got as far as confirming that the government will launch a call for evidence on a "tax system" for single use plastics, such as food packaging. We are, however, less clear [on the timescales](#) for any action.

So urgent action is needed and we need to keep up the pressure with good evidence. Please BBC, and Attenborough (long may he reign!), keep educating, keep going beyond the brilliant images and story lines into the big issues. Powerful environmental documentaries like Blue planet II can change views on the big environmental issues; just please use truth and scientific evidence.

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