

# Do nature documentaries make a difference?

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Credit: CC0 Public Domain

Nature documentaries raise species awareness and promote pro-conservation behaviours, but don't lead to donations to conservation charities, a new Irish study has revealed.

For the study, published in the journal *Conservation Letters*, researchers

examined BBC's popular, six-episode documentary series, *Planet Earth II* (2016), narrated by David Attenborough.

The objective was to track how nature documentaries change attitudes towards nature by measuring audience reactions and engagement on social media.

"Criticism of nature documentaries often highlights that they are misleading, by showing pristine views of nature and portraying environmental problems. We wondered if it would be possible to answer this question using big data," said co-author, Dr. Darío Fernández-Bellon of the School of Biological, Earth and Environmental Sciences and the Environmental Research Institute in University College Cork (UCC).

Using *Planet Earth II* as a [case study](#), the researchers found that, in line with criticism, the show allocated very little time to conservation topics, and those that were mentioned generated little reaction in audiences.

"But we did find that the show generated active interest in the [species](#) it portrayed, and that in some cases this interest lasted up to six months after the initial broadcast," Dr. Fernández-Bellon added.

The research examined how *Planet Earth II* portrayed nature, from what species appeared in the show and how much screen time was dedicated to each, to what group of animals they belonged to. They subsequently searched Twitter for 35,000 tweets with the hashtag #PlanetEarth2, to see if audiences reacted more to some species than others.

By analysing the number of visits to Wikipedia pages of each species, they assessed whether audiences searched for further information on the species featured in the show. Finally, they examined if donations to two nature charities coincided with the broadcast of the show.



Sand grouse quickly take to the wing to get out of the way of these fighting oryx.  
Credit: BBC

## **Public awareness of species previously unheard of lasted for months**

"We expected there would be a bigger reaction to mammals than other species. But audience reactions on Twitter depended on how long each species was on screen," said Dr. Fernández-Bellon.

"The same was true for Wikipedia. You would see peaks in visits to a species page immediately after the broadcast—the species that got more airtime also got bigger peaks," commented fellow co-author Dr. Adam Kane from University College Dublin.

"We didn't expect that people would be more interested in locusts than in lions or giraffes. But the swarm of locusts in *Planet Earth II* got a bigger reaction than many species usually considered 'charismatic' by conservationists."

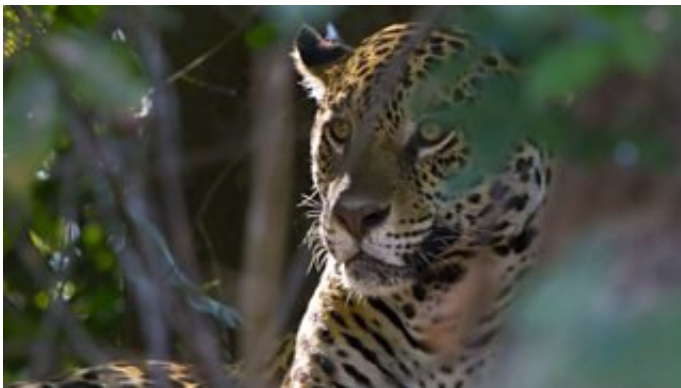
This effect was independent of how well or poorly known the species was beforehand. The researchers found that Wikipedia pages of species

that were less well known, such as the Golden Mole, received little or no attention before the show, but *Planet Earth II* served to put them on the map, generating increases in public awareness which lasted for months.

"The extreme example is the racer snakes from the famous scene where they chase the iguanas. Racer snakes had no Wikipedia page before the show. Two days later, they did!" said Dr. Fernández-Bellon.

## Donations did not follow

Although the research found changes in public awareness of species, the link with proactive conservation actions, such as donations, is not clear.



A jaguar resting in the shade of the riverbank - but always alert for prey that might come past. Credit: BBC

"We tried to see if this spike in interest in the [natural world](#) led to increased donations to nature charities," Dr. Kane said.

"But we found no clear evidence for this. In a way, this is not altogether surprising, because there was no unique charity that was associated with

the show—in the way that the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) was associated with the more recent Netflix series *Our Planet*.

"Also, donations are the result of many factors: education, attitudes, personality, and such a combination of factors makes it tricky to track donations to a single cause."

## **More time should be given to endangered species**

Speaking about the implications of the study, the researchers called for increased attention to how conservation messages—whether in nature documentaries or conservation campaigns—are delivered.

According to UCC's Dr. Fernández-Bellon, who also works as a researcher on nature documentaries: "Our study shows points to specific things filmmakers can do to increase awareness. By giving more airtime to one species over another, you can get more people interested in it."

Awareness is the first step towards changing people's attitudes, so more time should be given to endangered species, he believes.

"Filmmakers need to pick their battles and know that how they choose to portray nature can make a difference to the [natural](#) world by changing audience attitudes. Analysing [big data](#) can help filmmakers and conservationists figure out how best to get their messages across."

**More information:** Darío Fernández-Bellon et al. Natural history films raise species awareness—A big data approach, *Conservation Letters* (2019). [DOI: 10.1111/conl.12678](https://doi.org/10.1111/conl.12678)

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