

Planet Earth III: How cookie cutter nature programming could fail to educate, inform audiences

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Credit: BBC Studios

Perhaps nothing embodies the BBC's values of [inform, educate and entertain](#) more than its nature documentaries. [Planet Earth III](#) is the latest in a proud tradition going back to the founding of the BBC [Natural History Unit](#) in 1957 and has everything devoted fans (myself included) expect.

There are sweeping shots, a soaring orchestral soundtrack, and exciting scenes of hunting, courtship and breeding. Tender family relations, desperate chases and amazing survival stories are all narrated in Sir David Attenborough's signature style. Planet Earth III brings us all the beauty and wonder we know and love—which may be a problem when it tries to sound an urgent warning about the future of our world.

In terms of its story, Planet Earth III warns of environmental catastrophe more than any similar BBC show before it. The second episode includes a heartbreaking scene of seals caught screaming in a fishing net and ends with a question: can animals really adapt to survive our changing planet?

Part of this new willingness from the BBC to tackle environmental collapse head-on is due to the climate and ecological crisis that has become increasingly obvious and urgent. But another cause can be found in another crisis the BBC is facing.

What we might call the "planet format" has become so perfected and so popular, that the BBC's competitors are eager to pick it up themselves. The format is a good fit for streaming platforms like Netflix, Amazon and Apple+. But with them all creating similar programs, what effect does that have on their ability to inform, educate or entertain?

Comforting catastrophe

Nature and wildlife stories are universally engaging and are great for showing off high budgets and virtuoso filmmaking. Copyright laws can protect a show's characters or plot, but not a visual, musical or storytelling style.

This has led to many competitors fighting for a slice of this global market with shows that look, feel and sound virtually the same. Netflix has expanded their scope with [Our Planet](#), [Our Planet II](#) and [Our](#)

[Universe](#) (2022). Apple+ came out with [Prehistoric Planet](#) (2022). The format—from the timbre and rhythm of Attenborough's narration to the style of shots—is even now used globally in productions like the Indian [Wild Karnataka](#) (2019).

It's good to have more documentaries tackling the collapse of the natural world. But, I do wonder, what effect their looking and sounding the same might have on their ability to really educate audiences about the climate crisis and communicate the urgency of it. These stories all follow a single format, comforting in its familiarity but should anything that seeks to educate about climate catastrophe be comforting?

The planet formula is not just the stories it tells—it's also how it tells them. Whether Planet Earth or Our Planet, Wild Karnataka or for the BBC's [Wild Isles](#) (2023), the sweeping shots of pristine wilderness, the striking views and the orchestral music are the same. And the main emotion this formula works to inspire is not urgency, but awe.

An [academic report](#) commissioned by the BBC tells us that watching nature documentaries can soothe climate anxiety. This may seem paradoxical when the narration tells us about the loss of precious species and habitats. But consider what the format spends most of its time showing us: untouched landscapes unfolding endlessly from the air, beautiful animals in super high definition, and no humans in sight. Even Attenborough is only present through his calm and grandfatherly tone.

Neither Netflix nor anyone else has attempted to change these features: they are baked too deeply into the successful formula, and keeping to the formula is what keeps audiences coming. The narration in Planet Earth III might be telling us that time is running out to act, but the show invites us to sit back and absorb.

There is also the question of diversity. The climate crisis is a global

problem with many faces, but the BBC's planet format was born out of a particularly British tradition of nature programming. What do we lose when environmental stories are all told through the same lens and speak with the same voice?

Tackling climate change head on

The increase in competition has led to one important change. Produced by the BBC's frequent partner Silverback, [Our Planet](#), which was released in 2019, was shot and edited in the same familiar and beloved style and featured the same type of animal stories. The first season did, however, offer one distinct competitive edge: a clear focus on environmental issues, which the BBC's had been sorely lacking.

The BBC's nature documentaries have come under [considerable criticism](#) over the years for not addressing the climate and ecological crisis. Historically, the BBC had chosen to [stay neutral on the debate about human-caused global heating](#) and this decision affected the Planet shows.

To undermine their rival, Netflix partnered with the [World Wildlife Federation](#) for *Our Planet* and widely promoted the show's environmental message to audiences. The streaming platform presented itself as more progressive and cutting-edge than the staid and conservative BBC.

It was now survival of the fittest in the field of nature documentaries and this was not a bad thing for the BBC who now had to adapt and improve their nature content in the face of competition by explicitly tackling climate.

This one change, while great and urgently needed, has been quickly folded into the planet format and is a feature of all subsequent nature

shows. This one change was not enough.

The popularity of nature documentaries means they can play an important role in making audiences aware of the state of our world. But for the Planet format to survive in the changing media ecosystem, the TV industry must keep an eye on whether and how it can continue to evolve.

We are seeing this happen as Planet Earth III shows the BBC rising to Netflix's challenge by focusing on environmental issues. This is an encouraging sign but more innovative programming is needed.

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