

Our Planet

by Bill Herbst

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Recently I binge-watched the eight-episode first season of the current BBC nature documentary series, "*Our Planet*." Aired on British television in 2019 and licensed to Netflix for worldwide streaming, the series is yet another expensive BBC nature production, from the same team that earlier produced the two-season series "*Blue Planet*." Like the previous show, *Our Planet* contains spectacular video and film footage of a wide range of earth's living creatures in their natural habitats, going about the complicated and dangerous business of survival. The cinematography is uniformly superb, of course. With narrative commentary delivered in voice-over by the venerable Sir David Attenborough (who must now be about 200 years old...), the series represents the current state-of-the-art in nature documentaries.

Thankfully, the early days of nature shows are behind us. As a child growing up in the 1950s as part of the first generation of American kids raised on television, I watched crude, black-and-white newsreels from the 1930s — such as Frank Buck on White Hunter Safaris in Africa. I hated those, since they were all about killing animals or capturing them for zoos (not to mention the inherent racism toward Africa, South America, and the South Pacific as "primitive" and "uncivilized"). The whole idea of "sport killing" of lions or elephants as trophies sickened me then, as it still does today. Of course, nowadays we see nature shows detailing the capture of animals to save them from imminent extinction.

I grew up watching Marlin Perkins' hammy performances as the kindly, white-haired granddad on Mutual of Omaha's *Wild Kingdom*. That network show began in 1963, ran for a quarter-century, has since been resuscitated twice, and is still aired today on the cable network Animal Planet. I don't watch it these days, but I trust that it has matured some from its well-intentioned but cheesy early years.

What sets apart this current series of *Our Planet* from its many predecessors are the dire warnings delivered in voice-over by Attenborough concerning human-caused despoiling of the environment and the ongoing and increasing destruction of the intricate and astonishing web of earthly life's interdependence. Even though the warnings are delivered in Attenborough's typically low-key, dulcet tones of understated eloquence, few punches are pulled. The message is terrifyingly direct in confronting us with the reality that the astonishing magnificence of life's organic diversity is vanishing so fast that it takes away

one's breath, not to mention breaking the heart, and that short-sighted human activity is the reason — the *only* reason. On numerous occasions over the past two billion years of life on this planet — in fact, five times previously — the earth has been through the trauma of mass extinctions (where 75-96% of all species vanished). The sixth mass extinction currently underway is the first time that the unbalanced success of a single species is responsible for such a cataclysm. That's why it's been named the Anthropocene Extinction Event, because human beings are causing it.

Since I've largely given up watching the 24/7 news cycle churn on TV or online (based on my cumulative disgust with the profit-driven, corporate-controlled narrative slant, whichever direction it leans), I've turned away from the infotainment industry that masquerades as "news" in favor of more ordinary entertainment through fictional and/or documentary movies and shows. I understand that fiction and documentary are not really separate categories. They are always intertwined, since all visual media are effectively fictional. Right now, though, I find that preferable to the Kabuki Theatre of politics and damn near everything else that passes for news.

I might conceivably feel guilty about my television viewing, but that doesn't seem warranted to me. I'm old (I'll turn 70 later this year), I'm semi-retired (I do about 120 astrological sessions with clients per year, roughly 2-3 per week, which earns me enough money to live frugally and pay the bills, but takes up only about 12 hours a week total), and I'm partially-disabled (an hemorrhagic stroke in 2007 left me physically damaged and limited my mobility).

In addition, I have no family to speak of. Although I had more than my share of often dysfunctional love affairs through mid-life, I never married and had no children, and thus I have no grandchildren. Further, while I have a couple longstanding friends in the town where I reside now, I'm not involved in community activities and spend most of my time alone. Essentially, I'm singular and solitary.

I've always needed a lot of "down time" to process my life. The rat race of constant busyness that seems so fundamental to many people was never attractive to me. I've long wondered what it is in the way others are hard-wired that makes them so committed to seemingly non-stop physical or social activity. I have no doubt that many factors exist, and that no simple or sweeping assumptions are true. Some people may be endlessly busy because their life-circumstances require that from them. Many others, however, actively choose it. Why? Well, busyness must have a payoff. That might be increased productivity in a tangible manner — earning money through work — but it could also be that such people do not like thinking about or feeling the vexing questions about their personal lives that float up from the inner recesses of the psyche. For those people, perpetual activity keeps them occupied, protected from disturbing uncertainties, and thus happier.

For me, however, I care less about external productivity or shielding psychologically and emotionally from inner concerns. I may not be able to answer or address the questions of inner life — Why am I here? What am I supposed to do about who I am? — but I'm built to consider those levels, and I can't live otherwise.

As a result of all these factors, television, books, and online reading constitute my primary windows on the outer world these days. They provide the stimulus that feeds my thinking and writing about who we are and where we're headed. Other than a few phone sessions with clients, weekly shopping trips for food along with daily cooking to serve a disciplined diet, plus the occasional but seemingly interminable cascade of medical appointments that are now a required duty of my elder hood, I have many hours to kill in each day, and television is part of how I get through my days without going crazy — or, perhaps, crazier than I am already... In fairness, I'm a lot saner than I was earlier in my life. Maturity is hard-won, of course, and true wisdom is elusive, but I'm closer to both than I was in my younger years.

When I consider watching a particular movie or series, I always go online to read reviews. I'm interested to see what the critics have to say (not that I always agree with them), and I also appreciate user reviews on aggregator sites like *Rotten Tomatoes* and *IMdB* (the Internet Movie Database).

Generally, I find the overall average ratings of "professional" critics' reviews to be higher and more positive than my own judgments, but I remind myself that such critics intentionally or unintentionally serve the entertainment industry, whose actual product is not the shows themselves. Shows are just the bait to catch the *real* product of the entertainment industry — viewer eyeballs to sell to advertisers. As a result, some formal critics will inevitably lean from time to time toward the side of helping to cast a wider net. I'm sure the critics would disagree and aggressively defend their integrity, but anyone with a brain knows that the entertainment industry has a long and smarmy history of critics whose "reviews" amount to little more than marketing, advertising, and promotion for particular shows, stage productions, or movies.

For the series *Our Planet*, Rotten Tomatoes gives a critics' rating of 90%, which is quite high. I read a bunch of those and didn't find a single negative review, although some critics found the message of the series a bit harsh and difficult to take, while a few others felt the narration didn't go far enough. It was the viewer reviews that grabbed my attention, however.

My site of first choice for user reviews of TV and movies is IMdB. Whenever I read user reviews on IMdB, I reorder the review list to show lowest rating first. I'm less interested in reading reviews by people who loved the show than I am in seeing what some watchers didn't like about it and why. Not that negative

reviews will necessarily dissuade me from streaming a particular movie or series, but it is nonetheless a benchmark to be noted.

The user rating average on IMDb is currently 9.3, which is extremely high. Of the 145 user reviews currently posted on the site, 103 viewers gave *Our Planet* the top rating — 10 out of 10 stars. 18 others rated the show as either an 8 or 9. There were, however, a small number of negative reviews (as is to be expected). 15 people rated the series 5 stars or less.

What interested me most about the negative reviews was the thematic similarity of why those viewers felt either disappointment or that the series was downright lousy. No one took to task anything about the cinematography or the subject matter of the visuals. Every negative review focused on David Attenborough's running voice-over commentary.

Of the 15 negative reviews, a third or so of those viewers didn't like the depressing content. They apparently wanted to be uplifted by nature's magnificence (as has been almost universally true of nature documentaries over the past 60 years), not bludgeoned (which was how they saw it) by disturbing commentary about how bad things are in the environment and for so many species. Almost two-thirds of the negative reviews, however, took issue with the accuracy or truthfulness of the dire warnings about catastrophic climate change. Some were out-and-out climate change deniers, asserting that it was a hoax perpetrated by the political left. Others felt strongly that things weren't nearly as bad as the series claimed.

I had two very different reactions to reading those 15 negative viewer reviews.

The first leaped right up inside me as gut-level emotion: *Who the hell are these idiots, and what is wrong with them???* *Have they completely succumbed to insanity (which implies that they had some sanity to start with, but I'm not at all sure about that...)?*

Look, I get it that reasonable people can disagree about damn near everything. Such contentious and differing opinions come with the territory of being human. We aren't all going to agree about anything, for a whole host of reasons (more about that in the next paragraph...). What I don't get, however, is unreasonable people saying crap that is just downright crazy.

My second reaction was somewhat more thoughtful and measured, though not so much cerebral as practical in recognizing the bell curve distribution of perspective and opinion in groups: Whether we're talking about two people, a family, a social club, or the entire seven plus billion that comprise humanity, different opinions will be distributed predictably throughout the curve, with a big bunch of nearly identical or at least similar opinions clustered in the center bulge, then a progressively smaller number of more divergent opinions as the

wings extend to either side. As we move out toward the far wings of the curve — four or more standard deviations out — we find the very few most extreme opinions that invariably disagree with the center, often vehemently.

Viewed from that second perspective, the user review results are modestly encouraging. I get it that we're not talking about a scientific survey here, and that the number of reviews is miniscule, far too few for a valid sampling. In addition, the fact that someone had to choose to write and post a review indicates an inherent selection bias. Still, the 15 negative reviews — from a middling "so-so" rating 5 of 10 stars to the ultimate "I hated it" low of 1 of 10 — constituted only about 10% of the total number of reviews and ratings left by users/viewers for *Our Planet* on the IMDb site. That just might be significant.

Netflix estimates that viewership of some or all of the episodes in this first *Our Planet* series will eventually reach *one billion* people. I regard that as positive.

For me personally, as for a few of the professional critics, *Our Planet* didn't go nearly far enough in sounding the alarm. I felt that the cinematography was given too much prominence relative to the information about what we're losing and why. I would have preferred less stunningly beautiful footage (including the series' favorite dramatic scenario, predators stalking their prey — over my lifetime, I've seen enough of the everything-eats-everything-else dance in nature shows) and more hard education about our systematic destruction of the natural world. No doubt the producers of the series considered that balance in the editing considerations and decided that beauty was still more important than scary truth. They probably feared that viewers would recoil from too much harsh reality, but we're long past the point of coddling people with false optimism. If there's a second series to follow, I hope the producers will alter the balance to focus more on the tragedy (for us) of what is being lost and the sweeping, revolutionary changes in how we humans live that absolutely need to occur.

Nevertheless, in an entertainment-heavy social landscape where too little discussion is occurring about the death of the natural world, this first series of *Our Planet* is a step in the right direction. I worry that it may be too little, too late, but we have to try anyway.