

**coverstory**  
BY GEORGE DICKIE



Will Smith hosts "Welcome to Earth," premiering Wednesday on Disney+.

It may have the title "Welcome to Earth," but the new Disney+ documentary series might well be subtitled, "Phenomena in Nature You Never Considered." Because it's that eye-opening.

Premiering Wednesday, Dec. 8, on the streaming service, the series from National Geographic follows host Will Smith as he embarks on an awe-inspiring journey to reveal the secrets behind some of the most extraordinary and unexplained events in nature.

So in the six episodes, viewers will learn how swarms of hundreds of thousands of birds or honeybees can move as a single unit without any apparent communication; how smell, the most powerful of the senses, leads sea turtles back to an island in the South Pacific to lay eggs; and how deserts move slowly beyond human perception.

Smith, who had previously worked on the NatGeo series "One Strange Rock," acts as the eyes and the ears of the viewer here, taking in the action as it unfolds before him and speaking wide-eyed in narration and to the camera.

"He doesn't pretend to be a scientist or a volcanologist or an expert in anything," explains Jane Root, an executive producer of the series for her production company Nutoxia. "His attitude is, 'I'm the person who's there seeing what you can see about the planet.' And the thing he also

talks about (is) what you can see about the planet on the other side of fear. He says his grandmother always said to him that the best things in life are (discovered) once you get through being scared of them."

Fear certainly played a role in the opening episode "The Silent Roar," in which Smith, explorer Erik Weihenmayer and the crew went to Tanna Island in the South Pacific near Vanuatu to film and listen to the active volcano of Mount Yasur rumble. But the group actually got more than they expected when it erupted, spewing forth lava and boulders.

Needless to say, it was one of those life experiences that all who witnessed it will never forget.

"Some of the boulders were the size of, you know, small cars and they're kind of just exploding out of the ground," Root says. "And you see Will joking about it, like 'I'm wearing this helmet but that's not really going to help, is it?'"

"We had probably at the top of that volcano like 12 different safety people and every safety precaution we could take but this is still really challenging stuff to film," she continues. "You know, there's still a sense of, 'Wow! Am I actually here while this is going on? That's incredible.' And the noise and the intensity of it, I think that's why we put that episode first because it's one of those moments where we just appreciate the awesomeness of it."

# 'Welcome to Earth' spotlights the subtle awesomeness of nature on Disney+

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