

## WATCH THE SERIES

"Blue Planet II" premiered Jan. 20 on BBC America.

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DAVID  
ATTENBOROUGH

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found new things," Attenborough said.

One new discovery was seeing an Anchor tuskfish, from the Great Barrier Reef, using coral tools to open clams.

"You suddenly saw this fish that was more intelligent than you imagined," he said. "It was extraordinary. And that was aided by the fact that the underwater camera technology is now absolutely parallel with what we have on land."

There's breathtaking footage of huge trevally fish snatching seabirds from the air, a Houdini-like octopus using shell fragments to camouflage itself from a hungry shark, dolphins self-medicating with curative corals, and marauding packs of giant Humboldt squid prowling the pitch-black waters off Chile.

It would be hard to pick a favorite part from so much footage, but Attenborough does mention a particular scene that combines epic courage and domestic harmony: a male anemone fish dragging a coconut shell back to his mate, braving the reef's dangers so she has a safe place to lay her eggs. What tickled him about this scene?

"The struggles which he has to bring the coconut shell to (her)," he said, "and the triumph on his little face when he does."

Herein lies Attenborough's appeal: his enduring capacity for awe, an almost childlike delight in the natural world and an enthusiasm that's both infectious and sincere – you know he's not faking it.

While his films never shy away from nature's brutality, there's always humor, too, and he'll gladly indulge in a spot of anthropomorphism if it helps the audience see animals as fellow beings. In one scene, fish and turtles relax on reef-based "cleaning stations," where tiny fish pick parasites off their skin.

"It's difficult not to think that this fish is really enjoying a bit of a facial," intones that famous voice. The analogy's not so far-fetched: for the fish on the receiving end, scientists found, levels of the stress hormone cortisol dropped noticeably.

Over his 60-year career, as he's watched the human population triple and climate change become a frightening reality, Attenborough has become a passionate environmental defender. The final episodes of *Blue Planet II* take a clear-eyed look at humankind's heedless rise to dominance, and the damage our love of fossil fuels and plastics is doing to the world's oceans.

"It's easy to get depressed, very depressed, and I do," Attenborough said in 2016. "But you have to take a longer view. I still don't think we ought to despair. If we can get together, we can find solutions to a lot of problems we face, particularly energy production."

Attenborough said rising sea temperatures and plastic pollution are today's most urgent marine threats. The first problem is harder to reverse, he admitted, but there's no excuse for the 8 million tons of plastic we dump into the oceans every year.

"We could actually do something about plastic right now," he said. "I just wish we would. There are so many sequences that every single one of us have been involved in – even in the most peripheral way – where we have seen tragedies happen because of the plastic in the ocean."

Despite having many names, the oceans

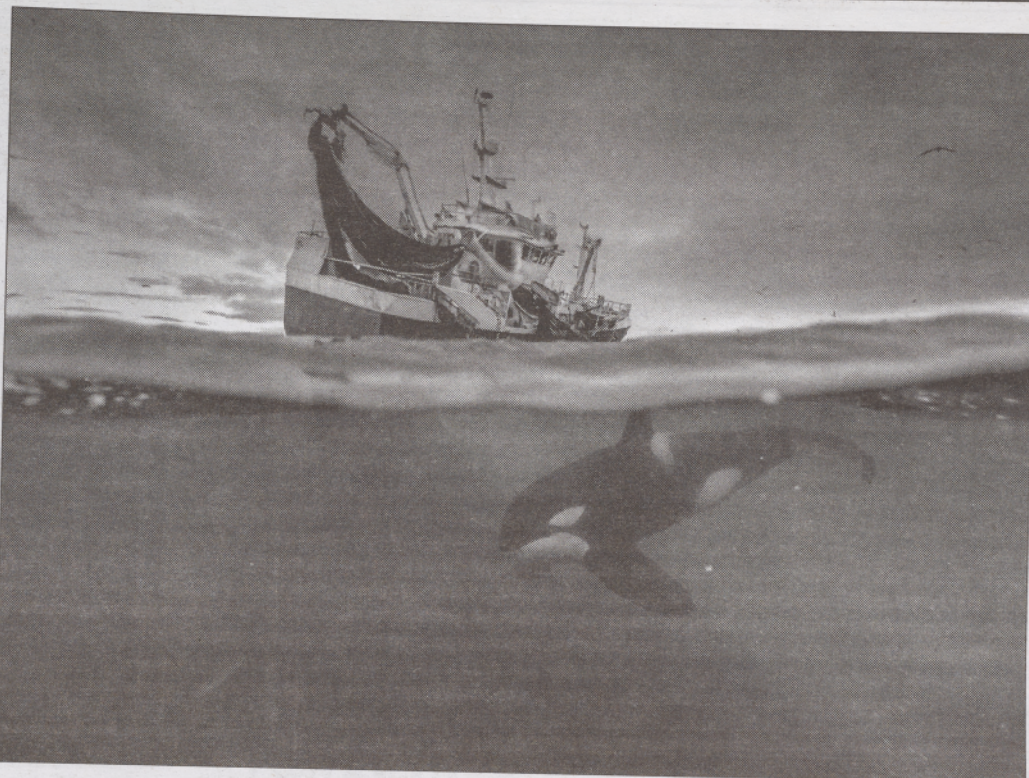


PHOTO BY AUDUN RIKARSEN/COURTESY OF BBC AMERICA  
A herring boat in Norway is shown in "Blue Planet II." Strict management of the country's herring fishery has saved it from collapse. Now, herring numbers are so high, they have drawn huge numbers of humpback whales and orca.



PHOTO BY MATTY SMITH/COURTESY OF BBC AMERICA  
The venomous Portuguese man-of-war, known as "floating terror," has tentacles whose sting is very painful to humans and paralyzes fish.

are in fact a single body of water, Attenborough said.

"They are connected both on the deep level and the atmospheric level," he said. "We have to care for the whole ocean."

His film crew directly witnessed the consequences of plastic in the ocean.

"We've seen albatross come back with their belly full of food for their young, and nothing in it. The albatross parent has been away for three weeks, gathering stuff for her young, and what comes out? What does she give her chick? You think it's going to be squid – but it's plastic. And the chick is going to starve and die."

Beyond its appeal as pure spectacle and ecological wake-up call, the series has also helped advance scientific knowledge. More than a dozen scientific papers have been published from collaborations with marine scientists who advised on the project.

And Attenborough doesn't shy away from controversy over his environmental convictions. He has described humans as "a

plague on the Earth," has called George W. Bush the world's "greatest environmental villain," and in 2016 joked about shooting then-presidential candidate and climate-change cynic Donald Trump. A lifelong agnostic, Attenborough has also lobbied for creationism to be banned from school curriculums, saying the Bible has granted humankind permission to exploit nature. Creationists send him hate mail, demanding he credit God for the planet's natural wonders. When they point to the beauty of hummingbirds, he mentions the African eyeworm, which burrows into children's eyeballs, blinding them: "I find that hard to reconcile with the notion of a divine and benevolent creator."

Hate mail is far outweighed by accolades. Despite receiving sack-loads of fan mail, Attenborough still writes back to kids. When he turned 75, the BBC started booking him on business class flights; until then he always flew economy, refusing upgrades unless his crew got the same treatment. After a health scare in 2013, he had a pacemaker fitted. He plans to work past his 100th birthday, but fans don't like to dwell on his age: a world without Sir David is too daunting to contemplate.

So what does the planet's most influential naturalist hope viewers take from this new series?

"That we have a responsibility, every one of us," he said. "We may think we live a long way from the oceans, but we don't."

Wherever we are, he said, "what we actually do ... has a direct effect on the oceans, and what the oceans do then reflects back on us. It is one world. And it's in our care. For the first time in the history of humanity, for the first time in 500 million years, one species has the future in the palm of its hands."

Ever the optimist, he hopes this truth hits home before it's too late.

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