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GREENING WILDLIFE DOCUMENTARY

MORGAN RICHARDS

The loss of wilderness is a truth so sad, so overwhelming that, to reflect reality, it would need to be the subject of every wildlife film. That, of course, would be neither entertaining nor ultimately dramatic. So it seems that as filmmakers we are doomed either to fail our audience or fail our cause.

- Stephen Mills (1997)

Five years before the BBC's Frozen Planet was first broadcast in 2011, Sir David Attenborough publically announced his belief in human-induced global warming. "My message is that the world is warming, and that it's our fault," he declared on the BBC's Ten O'Clock News in May 2006. This was the first statement, both in the media and in his numerous wildlife series, in which he didn't hedge his opinion, choosing to focus on slowly accruing scientific data rather than ruling definitively on the causes and likely environmental impacts of climate change. Frozen Planet, a seven-part landmark documentary series, produced by the BBC Natural History Unit and largely co-financed by the Discovery Channel, was heralded by many as Attenborough's definitive take on climate change. It followed a string of big budget, multipart wildlife documentaries, known in the industry as landmarks¹, which broke with convention to incorporate narratives on complex environmental issues such as habitat destruction, species extinction and atmospheric pollution. David Attenborough's The State of the Planet (2000), a smaller three-part series, was the first wildlife documentary to deal comprehensively with environmental issues on a global scale. A few years later, BBC series such as The Truth About Climate Change (2006), Saving Planet Earth (2007) and Frozen Planet (2011) finally gave environmental issues the mainstream prominence and high production values they were lacking.

For over fifty years the BBC Natural History Unit has produced some of the most powerful and iconic visions of wildlife and nature. But the blue chip programmes for which it is renowned, named for their ability to sell well in international television marketplaces, have been largely untroubled by the consequences of climate change and other environmental issues. Instead these issues have been relegated to the margins of the genre, while spectacular or action-packed visions of animal behaviour have taken centre-stage. In 2004, Simon Cottle suggested the wildlife genre's "failure to produce programmes informed by environmental and political issues relates to the shelf-life, and hence longevity, of these programmes as a commodity, as well at their potential international appeal" (2004: 96-97). Whilst acknowledging that occasional series dealing with themes of global environmental threat have been produced, he criticises the genre's "chronic lack of engagement" with ecological politics as "inexcusable" within the context of the rise of environmental social movements and a growing environmental consciousness (2004: 97). It is a central argument of this essay that wildlife documentary has more recently undergone a green transformation. Since the new millennium wildlife documentaries have incorporated environmental politics and issues in new ways, allowing them to gain a greater level of prominence, thus countering the view that the dynamics of international television have rendered environmental messages incompatible with big budget documentary series.

The emergence of what I call "green chip" programming represents a key turning point in the wildlife genre's engagement with the science of climate change and environmentalism. But the rise of green chip programming has been accompanied by a shift in how environmental issues are produced and framed. Images of catastrophic landscapes and poignant stories of gorillas and tigers on the verge of extinction are now accompanied by narratives that stress the audience's potential to enact change by donating to individual conservation projects, and engaging in waste reduction schemes, renewable technologies and adaption to global warming. This shift in wildlife documentary's engagement with these issues – from the condemnatory "lectures" on environmental degradation and species extinction, which began to appear in the margins of the genre in the 1980s, to the construction of aware consumers in programmes like *Saving Planet Earth* and *The Truth About Climate Change* – has been shaped by wider environmental politics and other media representations of climate change.

The greening of wildlife documentary coincided with the release of a report by the International Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) in early 2007, based on a near consensus of scientific opinion on the causes and probable impacts of anthropogenic global warming. This report, which included grim forecasts about rising sea levels, extreme global weather patterns and soaring temperatures, marked a shift in the wildlife genre's treatment of environmental issues, much as it "proved to be a transformative moment in the news career of climate change" (Cottle 2009: 506). The near consensus of the world's climate scientists saw climate change gain recognition as a "global crisis", shifting the news values of balance and impartiality which had allowed a small but media-savvy contingent of climate change sceptics and deniers to cast doubt on the science of global warming. As news media embraced climate change as a global concern and began deploying spectacular images in their reports (Cottle 2009, Lester and Cottle 2009), wildlife documentary's long-standing avoidance of controversial issues began to give way to more nuanced, if upbeat, explorations of climate change and other environmental issues. As I will demonstrate, the exclusion of environmental issues from wildlife documentary stems in part from the wildlife genre's presentation of uncontroversial science.

My argument will proceed in three parts. First I consider the politics of blue chip programming, examining how the difficulties of filming animals in the wild and the expense of obtaining detailed footage of animal behaviour led to the dominance of the blue chip format. While this format was technically and economically expedient, it meant that environmental issues were routinely excluded from the majority of wildlife documentaries. Next I investigate how the absence of environmental issues in BBC landmark wildlife series, which attract the largest international audiences of any wildlife documentary, is implicated in the very narrow scientific paradigm of "natural history" programming and the international coproduction deals that underwrite the multi-million pound budgets needed to produce these series. Finally, I examine the rise of green chip programming and consider some of its problematic aspects, namely its implications for how environmental issues are constructed on screen and how, and in what form, these issues reach international audiences.

THE POLITICS OF BLUE CHIPS

Wildlife documentary has come to assume a key role in the public understanding of science and environmental issues, generating popular awareness and helping to shape public engagement with environmental politics and conflict. As out contact with the wild has become more remote, wildlife documentary has become the primary frame through which industrialised people view wildlife and nature. To give just one example, 48% of the UK population watched at least 15 minutes of *Frozen Planet* (2011), a remarkable figure considering the fragmentation of audiences brought about by the rise of digital broadcasting and online media. But, prior to the recent greening of wildlife documentary, the rise of the blue chip format meant that environmental programmes remained, for the most part, on the margins of the genre.²

Derek Bousé outlines seven key characteristics of blue chip programming. Blue chip programmes depict charismatic mega-fauna, such as big cats, primates and elephants; they contain spectacular imagery of animals in a "primeval wilderness"; they incorporate dramatic and suspenseful storylines; they generally avoid science, politics and controversial issues, such as wildlife conservation; they are timeless, carefully framing out any historical reference points which might date the programme or effect future rerun sales; and they avoid people, including presenters and all artefacts of human habitation (Bousé 2000:14-15). These elements are not hard and fast, nor have they always coexisted. But the commercial success of this format, which was first realised in Disney's True-Life Adventure films (1948-1960), set the precedent for wildlife documentary's persistent marginalisation of environmental issues.

In the late 1940s Disney hit upon a lucrative formula that brought wildlife documentary to mainstream cinema audiences for the first time. The ten short and four feature-length films in its True-Life Adventure series were influential and innovative; they were also thoroughly anthropomorphic and sentimental. Despite these drawbacks Disney's legacy, even to BBC wildlife programming, is undeniable. Bousé argues that Disney effectively codified the genre, bringing its conventions into focus as "a discrete and recognisable cinematic form" (2000: 62). There was nothing inherently new about this approach. It drew upon earlier forms of wildlife filmmaking, synthesising elements of safari films, scientific-educational films and ethology films, and incorporating them with aspects of other, more popular genres such as cartoons, comedy and Hollywood westerns.³

Disney's breakthrough lay in its ability to dramatize the natural world and bring wild animals and nature to life using full colour cinematography and lavish musical scores – the full theatrical works, designed to bring wildlife into the mainstream. It was their glossy finish and sense of drama, more than anything else, which essentially distinguished Disney's films from other wildlife fare and gave them a commercial edge, an edge that was further honed through Disney's monopoly over distribution. Despite their high production values, the True-Life Adventures had excellent profit margins.⁴ The success of the films, as Cynthia Chris points out, was also directly linked to Disney's "distinctive brand identity", which allowed it to pair a Disney live action short with a Disney animated feature (2006: 29). Films such as *Seal Island* (1948) and *The Living Desert* (1943) were entertaining and exciting, but they also represented nature as an infinitely renewable and abundant resource. In spite of the absence of explicit conservation messages in its wildlife films, Disney won the support of conservation organisations like the Wilderness Society and the Audubon Society in the 1950s. Greg Mitman notes that by bringing beautiful visualisations of nature into people's homes, Disney "established film as an important propaganda tool in the enlisting of public support for environmental causes" (1999: 130). One reviewer in The Wilderness Society's publication, *The Living Wilderness*, praised Disney's portrayal of "the simple beauty of untouched woodlands and their wild inhabitants". The Audubon Society even saw fit to award Walt Disney with the Audubon Medal in 1955, for "distinguished service to the cause of conservation" (quoted in Mitman 1999: 123). Yet the success of Disney's blue chip model proved that making nature entertaining and popular was, by and large, incompatible with the depiction of more complex ecological environments that included people.

Audiences were attracted by The True Life Adventures' presentation of a sentimental and sanitised vision of nature, which, although not always harmonious, could be understood and rationalised in simple terms. They were entertaining and educational, but not too scientific. Disney instinctively favoured filmmakers with an "experiential" connection to nature, based on the craft of the woodsman or that of the amateur naturalist and acquired through time spent in the field, rather than those with a more purely scientific bent (Mitman 1999: 118). Scientists were engaged in making a number of the films but only a few included scientific advisors in their credits. The preferred narratives of many of the films, with their motifs of young animals struggling to survive and of journey's undertaken in harsh and unforgiving environments, were more theological than scientific. This is best demonstrated by Nature's Half-Acre (1951), a tworeel film ostensibly about the origin of species, which manages to make no mention of evolution. Instead, as Mitman observes, the "web of life" is explained in theological terms reminiscent of the nineteenth century Linnaean notion of the balance of nature, in which species vary and keep one another in check (but never explicitly evolve) under "Nature's" watchful eye (1999: 128) As such, they were designed to keep conservationists, scientists and evangelicals onside. And for a time they succeeded.

Disney provided a tried and tested format that was endlessly remodelled on television by different practitioners keen to capitalise on its value as both an entertaining and educational resource. It was some time before documentaries with similarly high production values to those of Disney's wildlife films proved viable in Britain's fledgling television industry. With practically non-existent budgets and acres of broadcast schedules to fill, wildlife television developed its own distinctive forms. The BBC Natural History Unit was established in Bristol in 1957, but producers in the BBC West Region Film Unit had been making wildlife television programmes since the early 1950s. The BBC's first wildlife television series *Look* (1955-1965) was essentially a naturalist's lecture with excerpts of film. The acclaimed naturalist Peter Scott casually chatted with his guests, who included scientists, naturalists and amateur naturalist filmmakers, on a set mocked up to appear like a naturalist's study. The BBC clung doggedly to its naturalist's lecture format throughout the 1960s, and, somewhat predictably it fell behind its competitors in terms of ratings.

Survival Anglia, a production unit that was part of the British commercial network ITV, had begun making wildlife programmes loosely following a blue chip style in 1961. Programmes in the long-running Survival series (1961-2001) on ITV were carefully packaged as family

entertainment and aimed at a mainstream audience, in a similar manner to Disney's True-Life Adventures. When the BBC finally embraced the blue chip format in the late 1960s, it cultivated a more rigorously scientific approach that served to differentiate its programmes from those of Survival Anglia but still retained many of the trademark features that underscored the success of this format. The BBC's blue chips combined spectacular cinematography with scientific narratives that incorporated moments of drama and suspense. This scientific, but still dramatic, formula was built on the NHU's close association with scientists and amateur naturalists, which had been fostered since its outset. In a report on the first five years of the Unit's operation, Desmond Hawkins, then a senior producer in the NHU, argued that science should be the driving force behind the BBC's wildlife programming:

The spirit of scientific enquiry must have pride of place. In handling this subject we expose ourselves to the critical scrutiny of scientists, and their approval is an important endorsement. Moreover, it is their work that throws up the ideas and instances and controversies from which programmes are made. We look to them as contributors, as source material, as consultants and as elite opinion on our efforts. In short, we need their good will. (Hawkins 1962: 7)

By placing scientific narratives at the centre of its programmes and simultaneously capitalising on the dramatic potential of the blue chip format, the BBC were able to craft a unique niche in the international television market. Blue chip programmes produced or commissioned by the NHU for BBC strands such as The World About Us (1967-1983), The Natural World (1984-present), and Wildlife On One (1977-2005) have been sold internationally since the late 1960s, and more recently broadcast on the Discovery Channel and Animal Planet.

David Attenborough's landmark series, beginning with Life on Earth (1979) and continuing through The Living Planet (1984) and The Trials of Life (1990) to his latest series Frozen Planet (2011), constitute the BBC's quintessential variant of the blue chip format. They differed from conventional blue chip programmes in their over-arching scientific narratives and in their use of Attenborough as a trusted guide and presenter. Rather than focusing on a particular species or exploring the ecology of a particular environment, as many blue chip programmes had done before, landmarks had the space to develop and dramatize complex scientific ideas, weaving together footage and narratives from around the globe. Yet in spite of the BBC's "scientific" approach to wildlife programming, the rise of the blue chip format meant that the vision of the natural world that became standardised on television sets worldwide was largely apolitical. In the late 1960s the blue chip format, with its studious avoidance of all aspects of human culture, became the industry standard primarily as it was a format that could be adapted for sale in different television marketplaces. The dominance of blue chip programming in its various forms ensured that the more complex "realities" of environmental politics rarely encroached on the constructed reality of the wildlife genre. In many respects, the BBC's dual focus on science and ever more spectacular visualisations of nature proved just as blind to environmental issues as Disney's sugar-coated and sensationalised True-Life Adventures.

KEEPING IT BLUE: FRAMING SCIENCE AND ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES ON SCREEN

In 2002 environmental campaigner George Monbiot wrote an article in *The Guardian*, in which he criticised the exclusion of environmental issues in wildlife documentaries. "There are two planet earths," he wrote. "One of them is the complex, morally challenging world in which we live, threatened by ecological collapse. The other is the one we see in the wildlife programmes". He singled out David Attenborough for his harshest criticism:

He shows us long loving sequences of animals whose populations are collapsing, without a word about what is happening to them. Indeed, by seeking out those places, tiny as they may be, where the habitat is intact and the population dense, the camera deliberately creates an impression of security and abundance. (Monbiot 2002)

In response, Attenborough defended his programmes by citing *The State of the Planet* (2001), his recent assessment of the "present ecological crisis", and arguing that the main focus of his other series was "zoology", an academic discipline which he clearly viewed as separate from environmental politics and conservation (Attenborough 2002b).

This episode sheds light on one of the central paradoxes of the wildlife genre. BBC wildlife documentaries, particularly those narrated or presented by David Attenborough, are invested with scientific authority. But following the narrow paradigm of zoology or natural history they represent a very particular brand of science: that which is already proven and beyond doubt. Safe science. By focusing on scientific theories from within the branch of biology that relates to the anatomy and classification of animals and plants, wildlife documentaries have remained fixated on scientific theories that are supported by a majority in the scientific community and are subject to uncontroversial media treatment. Attenborough's defence that his programmes cater to an interest in "zoology" serves to emphasise the point that the exclusion of environmental issues from the majority of wildlife documentaries arises in part from the wildlife genre's focus on uncontroversial science.

This view is in keeping with Michael Jeffries assessment that "the science of natural history not only occupies its own broadcasting niche; it works to a different paradigm" (Jeffries 2003: 527). According to Jeffries, the wildlife genre as epitomised by Attenborough's programmes, is stuck in an "old ecology of equilibrium and adaptation combined with romantic awe and wonder", while science documentaries, particularly those in the BBC's flagship science series Horizon (1964-present) "represent the world (and the rest of the universe) as changeable, challenging, contingent" (2003: 543).

Horizon has received praise for its willingness to scrutinise science as a dynamic and contested field shaped by wider social and political processes (Jeffries 2003, Secord 1996, Darley 2004, Silverstone 1984 et.al). Programmes in the Horizon series make use of "talking head" interviews from scientists and other experts to construct the contours of a particular scientific debate, in contrast with the uniform parade of spectacular imagery in blue chip wildlife documentaries. However, as Darley and many others acknowledge, despite its willingness to represent scientific disputes, Horizon still presents viewers "with assured and univocal stories of discovery and progress" (Darley 2004: 232). In other words, the practice of science is still portrayed as a heroic, if contested, struggle that ends in certainty. The sheer breadth of topics

covered by Horizon, theoretical physics, biomedical science, palaeontology and archaeology to name just a few, contrast with the narrow paradigm of natural history, which seems almost risibly Victorian. Jim Secord points out that "within the realm of scientific practice, the term 'natural history' is now itself something of a museum specimen"; he even suggests, "to call someone a 'natural historian' sounds quaintly old-fashioned or even abusive" (1996: 449).

One of the results of the generic and industry-based separation of science and natural history programming is that Horizon programmes have been much better at tackling controversial environmental issues.⁵ David Attenborough's landmark series, by contrast, with their focus on anatomical adaptions and concise explanations of animal behaviour, evoke nature as "balanced and ordered" and deliberately avoid controversy (Jeffries 2003: 529). This is best illustrated by the first landmark wildlife series, Life on Earth (1979), which outlined the story of evolution in thirteen parts. Rather than focusing on new discoveries in the emerging field of ethology (or the study of animal behaviour), for which Konrad Lorenz, Niko Tinbergen and Karl von Frish had won the noble prize a year earlier, this series used living animals to chronologically chart the evolution of life on earth. At the time producers in the BBC Natural History Unit criticised Life on Earth for presenting nineteenth century science. They were critical of the fact that the most expensive wildlife series to date, with a budget of £1 million, disregarded the latest scientific discoveries (Parsons 1982). The landmark format proved to be a hugely popular format. Life on Earth attracted average UK audiences of 15 million - an exceptionally high figure for a documentary at that time on BBC2 – and an even larger global audience. Subsequent landmark series, which retained the sense of awe and wonder at the beauty of the natural world, were routinely broadcast in over one hundred territories.

The stability of the blue chip format, with its reliable economic returns, meant that BBC landmark series shied away from controversial topics in science and environmental politics. In any case, Attenborough regarded the narrow focus on zoology in his landmark series as entirely justified. When asked in an interview in 1984 about his responsibility to the environment as a filmmaker, he argued:

As a conservationist, I think I would be doing the world a great disservice if I tacked onto the end of every single programme that I did, a little homily to explain yet again that mankind is wrecking the environment that I have been showing. My job as a natural history filmmaker is to convey the reality of the environment so that people will recognise its intrinsic value, its interest, its intrinsic merit and feel some responsibility for it. After that has been done, then the various pressure groups can get at them through their own channels and ask them to send a donation to, let us say, the World Wildlife Fund (Attenborough quoted in Burgess and Unwin 1984: 105-106).

Attenborough's legacy, as a result of the global reach of the landmark format and the programmes he voiced for Wildlife On One (1977-2005), is to have communicated the diversity and uniqueness of wild animals and plants around the globe to countless millions of viewers. "How we treat others," film critic Richard Dyer has pointed out, "is based on how we see them" (1993: 1). In this respect, the idea that an ethic of environmental concern might be distilled from beautiful imagery seems reasonable. It speaks of the role of romanticism and nostalgia in public understandings of nature and a broader public appreciation for the environment. Yet given the urgency that surrounds the current ecological crisis, this perspective has become more difficult to defend.

Nevertheless, in *Life on Earth* Attenborough began the tradition, continued in subsequent landmark series, of addressing human impacts and broader environmental issues in his final to-camera statements. The ethos of environmentalism in these statements tempered the near total avoidance of environmental politics in these series, which prior to *The State of the Planet* (2000) gave very little airtime to controversial and politically challenging topics.⁶ Stripped of environmental concern, save for Attenborough's final statements, these series demonstrate the tension between the representation of environmental issues and the desire to reach large international audiences. This tension has arguably become more pronounced since the BBC's joint-venture partnership with Discovery, first brokered in 1997, which means that Discovery is now the dominant co-producer of BBC wildlife programming, with considerable editorial clout. *The Life of Mammals* (2002), with a budget of £8 million, is a case in point. Vanessa Berlowitz, who produced the last episode, revealed that executives at Discovery objected to Attenborough's final remarks in the series, in which he focused on the need to control the human population:

Perhaps the time has now come to put that process into reverse. Instead of controlling the environment for the benefit of the population, perhaps it's time we control the population to allow the survival of the environment.

Fearing that a veiled reference to contraception might alienate viewers in the American Midwest, the Discovery producers asked for Attenborough's narration to be altered in the US version of the series (Berlowitz 2012). But Attenborough and senior producers at the BBC steadfastly refused, and his remarks on population control remained intact. This example, amusing as it is, demonstrates the pressures that international co-producers now exert on the content of wildlife programmes, in this case seeking to eradicate even the smallest hint of environmental politics from the narration. Alongside the wildlife genre's predilection for uncontroversial science, the need for landmark series to appeal to global television audiences is a key factor shaping the representation of environmental issues.

GREENING WILDLIFE DOCUMENTARY: FROM BLUE CHIPS TO GREEN CHIPS

The turning point in the treatment of environmental issues in BBC wildlife documentary came in 2000 when Attenborough presented *The State of the Planet*, a three part landmark series on the environment. This was a shorter landmark series, entirely financed by the BBC, which used large portions of stock footage and broke with generic convention to feature interviews with scientists and environmentalists. In spite of the use of a Horizon-style "talking head" format it still cleaved to many of the traditional characteristics of landmark wildlife series, including the use of spectacular imagery of untouched natural environments. In a marked departure, however, these more conventional images were interspersed with far more unsettling visions. Images of denuded forests, entire landscapes taken over by the cross-hatched fields of industrial farming, oceans swirling with plastic debris and the smoke-haze of polluted city skylines sat alongside beautifully choreographed footage of gorillas and tigers, whose populations Attenborough now informed us were in crisis.

The State of the Planet looked comprehensively at global environmental issues such as introduced species, over-harvesting, destruction of habitats, islandisation and pollution. It also touched briefly on global warming and climate change, but stopped short of ruling definitively on the extent of the threat. In his narration, for example, Attenborough argued in no-uncertain terms that human action was responsible for global warming but he was careful to use caveats in reference to its wider impacts: "There is one kind of pollution, however, that *could* have worldwide consequences – that is the global warming that results from human activities that pump carbon dioxide into the atmosphere". Six years passed before Attenborough went on the BBC's *Ten O'Clock News* in 2006 to talk about the devastating impacts of human-induced climate change. Commenting on his reluctance to speak publicly about global warming, he cited BBC impartiality and his sense of himself as a non-expert.

I'm not a climatologist. I am a reporter and my views, whatever other people might attribute to me, but I always make it absolutely clear, they're second hand. I haven't analysed all those ice cores, I am just reporting. I am reporting when there is enough academic support for you to be able to report that opinion" (Attenborough 2012).

This comment underlines the difficulties of exactitude in science and the wildlife genre's romance with safe science.

Green chip programming began to proliferate within primetime, big budget wildlife programming in 2006. BBC series such as *The Truth About Climate Change* (2006), *Planet Earth: The Future* (2006) and *Frozen Planet* (2011) finally dealt conclusively with climate change, while series like *Saving Planet Earth* (2007) and *Last Chance to* See (2009) took the form of a celebrity quest to highlight conservation issues. This key turning point in wildlife documentary's treatment of green issues, as I argued earlier, was linked with the larger transformation in the way that international news media embraced climate change as a global threat (Cottle 2009, Lester and Cottle 2009). It was also shaped by the rise of international cable and satellite channels specialising in wildlife programming, such as the suites of channels operated by Discovery Communications and National Geographic, which saw the dominance of the blue chip format begin to wane (see also Cottle 2004 and Chris 2006). New technologies and storytelling practices, combined with the resurgence of wildlife documentary as a profitable niche television market, helped to pave the way for a more inclusive approach to environmental issues.

In the two-part series *The Truth About Climate Change* Attenborough used a similar format to *The State of the Planet*, to examine the consequences of climate change. Neil Nightingale, a senior NHU producer who helped to devise this series, argued that it coincided with the strengthening of the scientific consensus around climate change.

I was delighted that we could do the two programmes with David Attenborough. Climate change was such a big topic and there was a lot of misinformation around at the time. It was brilliant to be able to do something which clarified things more than anything else and that David felt very comfortable doing. The science was solid (Nightingale 2012).

Yet as the science behind anthropogenic global warming became more solid, allowing BBC producers to present this information unequivocally, it was accompanied by a subtle shift in how environmental issues were framed. In a contemporary rendering of the slogan "think globally, act locally", the second episode focused on how audiences could effect change by engaging in waste reduction schemes and reducing their carbon footprints. This series helped to pave the way for a new style of wildlife programming that focused on climate change and other complex environmental issues not as "doom and gloom" scenarios but as problems that could be solved though concerted local, national and global action. Problems, in other words, that could be recast as upbeat, feel good, solutions.

A similar approach was used in *Saving Planet Earth*, in which Attenborough and a host of British celebrities focused on the success of individual conservation projects – Will Young on Gorillas, Graeme Norton on Wolves, Jack Osborne on elephants, and the slightly bizarre choice to send Carol Thatcher, daughter of Margaret, to the Falklands to save the albatross. In many ways these programmes were an extension of the "green crusade" films featuring environmental activists in the 1980s, which, as Luis Vivanco argues, were popular because they offered "carefully crafted win-win visions of conservation and sustainable development" (Vivanco 2002: 1202).⁷ Far from being a condemnatory lecture, *Saving Planet Earth* tended to be more up beat and inclusive. In the first episode Attenborough issued the following invitation, "Some scientists suggest that up to a quarter of animal species could be extinct by 2050. But it's not too late – you can be involved in *Saving Planet Earth*". Each programme explored the work of different conservation projects before appealing for public donations to the BBC Wildlife Fund, a charity formed to coincide with the launch of the series. *Last Chance to See* (2009) is another notable series in this tradition.

The renewed focus on environmental issues in BBC landmark wildlife series followed two distinct strategies. The first, typified by *Planet Earth* (2006), saw the landmark format return to the familiar convention of avoiding environmental issues altogether until Attenborough's final statements. However, *Planet Earth* was also accompanied by a separate three-part series, *Planet Earth: The Future* (2006), which used interviews with scientists and conservationists to highlight conservation issues surrounding the species and environments featured in *Planet Earth*. In the UK, this series was broadcast on BBC4 just after the last three episodes of *Planet Earth*, where it reached a much smaller audience than the spectacular high-definition landscapes featured in *Planet Earth* did on BBC1. This strategy of creating two separate series represents a desire to maintain the historical separation of pristine wilderness and environmental concern in the wildlife genre, perhaps with revenues from international television sales and DVDs in mind, whilst still adopting an ethic of environmental concern.

The second approach, exemplified by *Frozen Planet* (2011), was more inclusive. Following the precedent set by *The Living Planet* in 1984, in which the last episode had focused on the destruction of ecosystems, an entire episode of *Frozen Planet* was devoted to the exploration of the effects of climate change on the Polar Regions. Alastair Fothergill, the executive producer of *Frozen Planet*, argued that the choice to include an episode on climate change and to get David Attenborough to author it had been made from the outset.

We worked very hard to make it feel like it was part of the main series. What does that mean? That means that visually it was as glossy as the rest of the series, so it looked fantastic. The other important thing was to get David to author it, because he is enormously trusted by people. There is a great deal of respect for David as a person, so when he tells you things you tend to believe them (Fothergill 2012).

Commenting on the fact that the "climate change" episode rated just as highly as other episodes in the series, which attracted the exceptionally high average audience figure of 8.2 million, Fothergill argued:

I think people watched the programme more readily because they really cared about the place by then. If it had gone out as a single film on its own, it never would have got that audience. But as part of a series that had by then grown enormous momentum – everybody was watching it (Fothergill 2012).

The episode predictably ignited controversy in the press, where it elicited criticism from British climate change sceptics, most notably Nigel Lawson (Porritt and Lawson 2011). However, it was the accusation that the BBC had given international channels the option to drop the last episode of the series, dubbed "the climate change episode", to help the show sell better in international markets, which highlighted another growing source of concern. *Frozen Planet* had been offered as a six part series, with the option to include the climate change episode and a behind-the-scenes episode as "optional extras". Over thirty networks bought the series, but a third of them rejected the additional two episodes. It was rumoured that Discovery, the largest co-producer of the series, were planning not to air the climate change episode due to a "scheduling issue". Instead, producers at Discovery planned to incorporate elements from this programme into their final show (Bloxham 2011). In effect, Discovery's proposal meant that Attenborough's nuanced take on climate change would not be broadcast in the US, where the largest population of climate change deniers resides. Discovery later backtracked on their decision, and opted instead to broadcast all seven episodes including the one on climate change (Hough 2011).⁸

The exclusion of environmental issues in wildlife documentary is a feature of the generic constraints of the wildlife genre, where audience expectations and the appetites, both perceived and actual, of American co-producers, as well as the BBC's public service values of balance and impartiality combine to ensure that controversial issues are supressed. There is, however, another facet to the birth of green chip programming. By putting a positive spin on conservation projects, utilising celebrity endorsement or neatly corralling environmental issues into separate programmes and even separate series, the producers of wildlife programmes have succeeded in making concern for the environment more palatable to local and global television audiences. This change represents a significant shift in how environmental issues are produced and framed in wildlife documentaries. Nevertheless, when viewed in a cynical light, these programmes can also be understood as cheaper offshoots of more profitable wildlife series, riding on the popularity of

eco-consciousness while landmark series like *Planet Earth* (2006) continue to present, in Stephen Mill's words, "period-piece fantasies of the natural world" (Mills 1997). Ultimately, it is not just whether environmental issues are excluded from wildlife documentary that matters. It is how they are financed, produced, represented and broadcast (in all their versions) when they do get airtime.

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^{1. &}quot;Landmarks" are multi-part documentary series, focusing on academic subjects and authored by a single knowledgeable on-screen presenter. Attenborough's landmarks began with *Life on Earth* (1979) and continued to *Frozen Planet* (2011). Other BBC series, such as *The Blue Planet* (2001) and *Planet Earth* (2006), are variations on the landmark format, with Attenborough acting only as a narrator rather than on-screen presenter and writer. This trend continued in *Frozen Planet* (2011), in which Attenborough only appeared on-screen in the final episode.

^{2.} Environmental issues have been part of television wildlife documentaries almost since the genre's inception, featuring regularly in the BBC's *Life* (1965-1968) and *Nature* (1983-1994) series, and in environmental or conservation films like National Geographic's *Save the Panda* (1983) and Bullfrog films' *Blow Pipes and Bulldozers* (1988). The trend for using celebrities to present environmental programmes, which was pioneered by Tigress Productions' *In the Wild* series (1992-2002), broadcast intermittently on ITV and PBS, allowed environmental programming to briefly break into the mainstream.

^{3.} Bousé cites three major categories of proto-wildlife films – "Safari Films, Scientific-Educational Films, and Narrative Adventures" (2000:46). However, I would like to distinguish ethology films, made by professional scientists such as Niko Tinbergen and Konrad Lorenz, from scientific-educational films, as they subtly differ in their roots and modes of address.

^{4.} *The Living Desert* (1953), for example, was produced for roughly \$300,000 and is reputed to have earned between \$4 and \$5 million in its first domestic cinematic release. The following year in 1954, *The Vanishing Prairie* earned \$1.8 million, or around fifteen times its production costs (Chris 2006: 35).

^{5.} There are exceptions to the wildlife genre's avoidance of "talking head" formats as a vehicle for controversial issues. *Warnings From the Wild: The Price of Salmon* (2001), for example, used this format to highlight the catastrophic environmental impacts of fish farming on wild salmon populations. However, the use of counter-posed "talking head" interviews remains an underused device in natural history programming.

^{6.} *The Living Planet* (1984) provides a notable exception. In this twelve-part series on the world's ecosystems, the final episode was devoted entirely to the destruction of ecosystems.

^{7 .} Luis Vivanco outlines two common narrative strategies used in environmental filmmaking. The first portray conservationists as "green crusaders", heroic activists struggling "to save species from the ignorance, greed, and overpopulation of local people." While the second strategy, exemplified by *Blow Pipes and Bulldozers* (1988), relies on depictions of the "noble savage living in Harmony with nature" (Vivanco 2002: 1199-2000). There are, of course, exceptions to these simplistic formulas. Both Vivanco and Dan

Brockington (2009) cite *The Sharman's Apprentice* (2001), as evocative of a new kind of environmental film that attempts to chart the more complex environmental, cultural and economic politics behind conservation projects, by addressing issues such as social justice for local communities. Another major trend is the increasing use of celebrities to endorse conservation projects and present wildlife documentaries (Brockington 2008, 2009, Cottle 2004, Vivanco 2004).

^{8.} The first six episodes of the US version of *Frozen Planet* (2012) were narrated by the actor Alex Baldwin, however Attenborough's narration and his onscreen appearances remained intact in the controversial programme on climate change.