

Our Planet (Silverback Films, 2019; <http://www.ourplanet.com/>; available on Netflix)

Our planet is in trouble. However, there is still time to save it. That is the message of the Netflix documentary series *Our Planet*. The eight episodes take the viewer all over the globe to see how climate change and human activities are impacting the major biomes of Earth. As narrator, Sir David Attenborough lends his voice to the global message that all life on the planet is connected and that humans, through their interactions with it, are having a dramatic effect that may soon be irreversible. The series gives viewers a good look at the planet in general and at many specific biomes, including frozen worlds, jungles, grasslands, deserts, coastal seas, high seas, fresh water, and forests. At each stop, Attenborough shows specific examples of how climate change and human activities are impacting the normal functioning of the biome. For example, in the “Frozen Worlds” episode, he describes how krill, which are the foundation of the Antarctic food chain, have decreased in numbers by more than 50% in the past 50 years. As such, the larger animals that depend on the krill as a food source have had to either move to different areas or die. He attributes the loss of krill to increased ocean temperatures and increased pollution. Additionally, this episode discusses the plight of polar bears in the Arctic and how the sea ice they use for hunting seals is disappearing at an alarming rate. Attenborough says that if the ice disappears, so will the bears.

An example of human interactions is described in the “Jungles” episode. In the

jungles of Africa, poaching is a huge problem. Rhinos, elephants, and gorillas are being hunted although they are all protected species. The wildlife preserves where the animals live are too vast, and the countries where the preserves are located do not have enough resources or manpower to patrol the thousands of acres of land where the animals live. As such, poachers are able to hunt and kill almost at their leisure, not realizing that wild populations of these species have decreased by 50%.

Each of the other episodes shows specific examples of how animals are responding to the changes in their environments. Not all hope is lost, however. Attenborough describes some areas where animal populations have actually increased. For example, in the “Forests” episode, he explains that the area in Ukraine surrounding the Chernobyl nuclear power plant that exploded in 1986 has become an oasis for wildlife in an otherwise uninhabitable area. Without human activity, which is limited because of the radiation, plants and animals have moved back in, creating quite a successful ecosystem. In fact, the top predators of the area, wolves, have been seen regularly. These animals would not be there if their prey species were not plentiful. This example just goes to show that if humans leave an area alone, it can recover.

Our Planet is an excellent series that is appropriate for middle school and up. However, there is some footage that younger children may find disturbing. In particular, the “Frozen World” episode shows a number of

walrus falling to their deaths off a rock cliff. The walrus need to climb up these rocks because the ice they would otherwise use has melted as a result of increased water temperatures. Since walrus do not navigate well on land, they lose their footing on the steep rocks and plummet to the bottom of the cliff. There are a few other scenes in other episodes that may be similarly problematic for younger viewers.

Students in general biology, ecology, and marine biology classes will find the series interesting and quite relevant. In the wake of the recently published international report stating that over one million species are at risk, this documentary may encourage students to take a more active role in protecting the planet. Although *Our Planet* is currently available only on Netflix, there is a good chance it will soon be released on DVD. For now, teachers will need to access a Netflix account to show this in their classrooms. They should check with the administration to make sure this does not violate any local copyright laws. There is a companion website that shares some additional information on each episode, as well as a book with the same title.

Sir David Attenborough, even at 90 years old, is still able to share his passion for the planet and relay probably the most important message of all time: Earth is in trouble. If we all work together, it can be saved.

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