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TELEVISION

'Our Planet' Series Goes Beyond Leopards and Forests

Netflix's eight-part series, 'Our Planet,' offers breathtaking photography and a plea for environmental conservation

By [John Jurgensen](#)

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The eight-part series "Our Planet" was shot in 50 countries over four years, and features wildlife scenes that producers say had never been filmed before. Arabian leopards mating in Oman. A pod of orcas toying with a penguin in the Antarctic. Great hornbill birds jousting in mid-air in India.

Another rarity for an epic nature documentary intended to captivate a mass audience: the urgent message of environmental conservation woven throughout "Our Planet."

"In the last 50 years, wildlife populations have on average declined by 60%. For the first time in human history, the stability of nature can no longer be taken for granted," narrator David Attenborough says in the introduction to the first 50-minute episode. "Never has it been more important to understand how the natural world works, and how to help it."

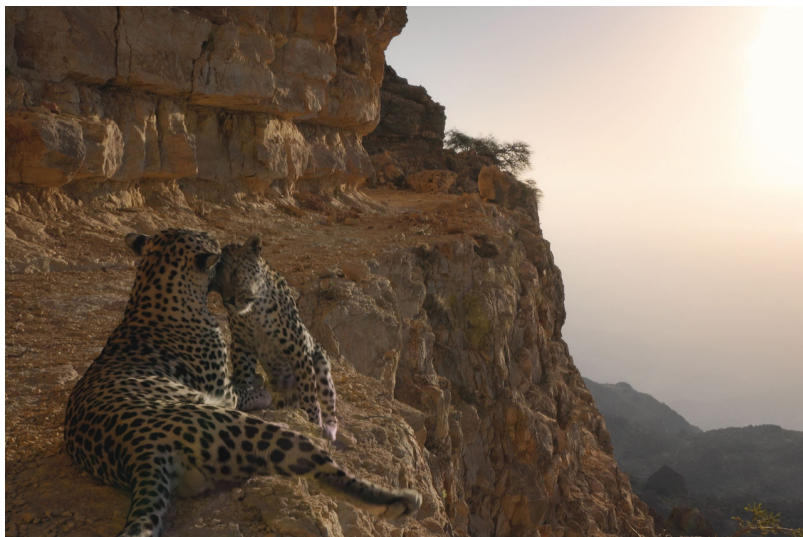


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'Our Planet' cameras documented a pair of Arabian leopards in the Dhofar Mountains of Oman.

PHOTO: MATEO WILLIS/SILVERBACK/NETFLIX

"Our Planet," launching world-wide on Netflix on April 5, is from the creator of "The Blue Planet," "Planet Earth" and "Frozen Planet." It's packed with the kind of how'd-they-get-that shots viewers have come to expect from those milestone series. In New Guinea, birds of paradise do mating dances that look like they belong in Fortnite. Ultra-high definition cameras capture fur, feathers and skin in detail. A score by Oscar-winning "Gravity" composer Steven Price drives the drama.

Yet the narratives in "Our Planet" were researched and planned to illustrate how life is connected across the biomes featured in each episode, from "Frozen Worlds" to "Forests."

"One of the key editorial challenges that we've had is getting the balance right between entertainment, education and environmental messaging," says series producer Alastair Fothergill. "If people don't sit down after a hard day at work with a gin and tonic and enjoy watching it, the whole thing falls down."



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Also in the 'Our Planet' series, a humpback whale off the west coast of Cape Town, South Africa, feasting on mantis shrimp and other food.

PHOTO: STEVE BENJAMIN/SILVERBACK FILMS/NETFLIX

It's always been a discussion among wildlife filmmakers: Does wowing viewers with nature spur them to take action to protect it? "For a long time people would talk about 'the C word'—conservation. It was to be avoided, an audience buzzkill," says Lisa Samford, executive director of Jackson Wild, a Wyoming organization that hosts a wildlife film competition and conservation summit. In recent years, climate change became a more relevant issue for audiences, she says. Jackson Wild recently prioritized "impact-driven media" in its event programming, such as projects that inform audiences how to encourage conservation behaviors or policies.

As recently as five years ago, distributors also wanted to emphasize spectacle over ecological warnings. "Many broadcasters at that stage were still nervous about it," says Mr. Fothergill, a former head of the BBC's Natural History Unit who has made wildlife films for Disney. "For many years we kept away from that territory, actually. Now the timing seems absolutely right."

Mr. Fothergill and his Silverback Films co-founder Keith Scholey first met with Netflix in May 2014. The streaming company was still new to the business of producing its own content. The first Netflix original TV series, "House of Cards," had premiered the year before.



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“We had a wonderful amount of information to tell us that this category was wildly appealing to our audience base,” says Lisa Nishimura, vice president of independent film and documentary features, who gave Mr. Fothergill’s team the green light.

The filmmakers said it would take four years to deliver the series that would later be titled “Our Planet.” That lined up with Netflix’s longterm strategy for scaling up. “What I knew internally at the time, sitting in that seat, was what our plans were as a business,” Ms. Nishimura recalls. Five years ago, Netflix was in 50 countries and had 57 million subscribers. Now, the service is available in about 190 countries and has more than 130 million subscribers.

Netflix will release “Our Planet” in all territories simultaneously. That’s not possible for traditional TV networks, and “Our Planet” producers hope this ubiquity will boost the impact of their environmental message. Netflix financed “Our Planet;” partner World Wildlife Fund contributed research support and resources for viewers on the companion site OurPlanet.com.

More than a decade ago, “Planet Earth” pioneered the use of gyro-stabilized cameras that captured smooth images of wildlife in action. The evolution of that technology allowed “Our Planet” crews to move their cameras in step with polar bears and hunting dogs sprinting at 40 miles per hour.



A wild wolf inside the fallout zone from the 1986 Chernobyl meltdown. According to ‘Our Planet, the



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controlled cameras into the region devastated by the 1986 Chernobyl meltdown. The “Forests” episode reveals trees overtaking the former nuclear wasteland, which is now populated by wildlife, including one of the greatest concentrations of wolves in Eastern Europe.

Bonus behind-the-scenes content shows the patient, often grueling, efforts of field teams that shot “Our Planet.” The crew totaled 600 people, including a unit that spent two winters in Russia trying to get a glimpse of a Siberian tiger. Two cameramen traded shifts in a camouflaged blind, which they didn’t leave for six days at a time. Ultimately, it was the team’s array of motion-sensing cameras that snagged the money shots.

Despite advances in technology, “it doesn’t get any easier,” says Mr. Fothergill, a believer in the role that “pure, blue-chip wildlife filmmaking” plays in the future of species like the Siberian tiger. “How can people possibly care about these animals if they have never seen them?”



A wild horse in Hustai National Park in Mongolia, from an episode of ‘Our Planet.’

PHOTO: BEN MACDONALD/SILVERBACK/NETFLIX

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