

A Lifetime Involved with Nature

Regular readers of this column know that I generally only write about topics related to the Hill Country or Edwards Plateau, both because this is the area I know best and because it is the area I love the most. But a recent series of TV specials on PBS by and about David Attenborough gave me a different perspective.

I have been an Attenborough fan all my life. He is 89 years old and started making nature films in the 1950s, before I ever had a TV! I have watched his nature films from literally pole to pole and all around the equator and marveled at the experiences he has had over all these years.

The latest three-hour series details some of the early experiences he had in filming nature around the world, how the world and our technology have changed over his lifetime and some of his insights into the future. So today I want to write about some of the things I took away from Attenborough's perspectives on 60+ years of wildlife filming.

Roaming the world filming nature in the '50s and '60s, was, by current standards, primitive in terms not only of the technology available at the time, but also in terms of the attitude and knowledge about nature that they had. Most of the "expeditions" in the early days were to "collect" specimens of rare, unusual, or unknown animals, and to bring them back (dead or alive) to "civilization" and to show the film to the world.

And in those days, the idea of "conservation" was largely about how to capture threatened species to bring them back to zoos and game preserves and raise them in captivity in order to "save" the species.

But also in Attenborough's early days, his visits to various remote places in the world were to places with pretty much pristine, unaltered habitats. As time went on, however, more and more of the habitats he visited were showing signs of human destruction of habitat and the subsequent destruction of wildlife. Attenborough commented that more habitat and wildlife destruction has occurred during his lifetime than had occurred in all human history before that!

Gradually, the thinking among scientists was that the idea of "saving the species" by captive breeding and confining animals to zoos was not only ineffective and ultimately impractical, but also questionable from a moral standpoint. What was necessary was to save native habitat where the animals had evolved to live and that this was far preferable than saving a few individuals in captivity.

The problem that was occurring at the same time that the importance of native habitat began to become more widely held, was that it was also the time when the greatest destruction of native habitat was occurring, worldwide. And it is still occurring.

Most habitat destruction takes place because an ever larger worldwide human population needs a greater and greater supply of food, which requires more and more native habitat destruction for farm land and to raise livestock. It is also true that many of the most remote native habitats are home to people with very little resources and for whom feeding their families will always be more important than conserving habitat or wildlife.

The good news, from Attenborough's standpoint, is that we finally know how to conserve native habitats and the wildlife that inhabit them, but we are also, as a population, becoming more desirous of doing so. There is a greater awareness of the importance of native habitat and wildlife, and a willingness to do what is necessary to protect our natural areas.

So while we may have become enlightened belatedly, better late than never, and so there is some hope that some places will indeed be protected and/or restored.

Interestingly, I have maintained that we are lucky in the Hill Country. This area has not been very conducive to farming, and as a result we have more potentially native habitat than most of the rest of the state and much of the country as well. This is even more reason, I believe, to do everything we can to conserve as much native Hill Country habitat as possible.

For over 60 years, Attenborough has been trying to teach the world about wildlife and has in the process been witness to evolving knowledge and attitudes about the natural world. He concluded by saying "We now have a much better understanding of how to protect it. I can only hope that we will".

Until next time...

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