

IT'S A PREDATOR'S WORLD

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The scene opens with a close shot of polar bear cubs taking their first steps. After a moment, the camera pans out, revealing the vast Arctic in springtime, sparsely covered in thawing ice. It is March 26, 2007, and over five million Americans have tuned into the Discovery Channel to watch the premiere episode, “From Pole to Pole,” of *Planet Earth*. The visual effect is, in a word, awe; it is nature unveiled through fantastic high-definition panoramas with no humans in sight. It is the wild. But how does one define “wild” in a world where humanity’s influence has reached virtually all areas of the globe, whether directly or indirectly? In “Getting Back to the Right Nature,” Donald M. Waller defines “wild” by a habitat’s historical continuity: “For an organism to be considered ‘wild’ . . . it must exist in an ecological context essentially similar to the one its ancestors evolved in” (547). Capturing the wild like never before, *Planet Earth* gave millions of people access to the most remote regions of the world, displaying rare species and never-before-seen animal interactions.

Some suggest this series does a great service in the midst of the largest environmental movement in history. In a review of the series, *The New York Times* columnist Susan Stewart wrote, “It includes serious evidence that the natural world, however wounded by global warming, continues to be red in tooth and claw.” The Discovery Channel, who partnered with the Nature Conservancy on the series, claims on their website that the mission of *Planet Earth* was to “capture rarely seen moments in the lives of some of the world’s rare and endangered species” in order to “show why the planet would never be the same without them.” But what did *Planet Earth* accomplish in terms of protecting the habitats and animals it broadcasted? Despite such claims to the contrary, this documentary, viewed by over one hundred million people (Stewart), serves not to conserve, but to entertain; not to activate, but to comfort. *Planet Earth* creates an illusion that these remote regions are free from humanity’s impact, that they remain utterly wild and pristine. In his essay “The Trouble with Wilderness,” William Cronon explains the underlying paradox: “wilderness embodies a dualistic vision in which the human is entirely outside the natural” (97). Though there exist some conservationist undertones in its narration, *Planet Earth* creates a detachment between civilization and the wilderness, making wilderness seem distant and unaffected by humans.

Why should this detachment be problematic? On the one hand, as the dominating species on Earth, human beings are inherently separate from all other forms of life. On the other hand, with the environment in its current dire state, it seems almost paradoxical to portray the wild as predatory, fierce, and violent. In his essay, Cronon argues for an anthropocentric view of nature: the idea that we conserve and preserve for human benefit. Discussing the transcendental and romantic views of nature,

Cronon emphasizes that viewing nature as sublime makes it a spectacle rather than an intimate part of our lives. Further, he argues that humans view the tree in the wilderness as different from the tree in the backyard simply because the former is so unfamiliar. “Wilderness gets us into trouble only if we imagine that this experience of wonder and otherness is limited to the remote corners of the planet, or that it somehow depends on pristine landscapes we ourselves do not inhabit” (107). Thus, the power of the tree in the wilderness lies in its ability to remind us that both trees share our common world. Cronon argues that this detachment causes us to lose sight of the value of the tree in the backyard—the nature around us. In other words, we need to care about our own environment before we relate to and feel empathy for more distant environments.

In contrast, Waller argues in his essay that there exists a “larger biotic context” in which not all habitats and species are valued equally; some have a higher biotic value than others (564). Waller uses this idea of biotic value to explain the ideology behind protecting endangered species and preserving certain habitats. A species of leopard with only thirty remaining animals has a higher biotic value than a well-populated fish species because the extinction of the leopard may damage that habitat’s ecosystem. *Planet Earth* notably expresses the idea of biotic value, but fails to present the complete picture in the “larger biotic context.” In the episode “Jungles,” the camera crew shows the awesome power of fungi in rainforest and jungle environments feeding on decay and consequently recycling nutrients. When the narrator notes that the rainforest could not survive with these countless fungi species, the rainforest appears to peacefully exist in a natural, cyclical balance. This statement has an oversimplifying effect: while fungi play a vital role in many ecosystems, they can be detrimental when humans unknowingly introduce them to new habitats, as in the case of fungi that destroy American hardwood trees.

In his discussion of biotic value, Waller argues that there has been “a broad shift in moral perspective . . . away from the anthropocentric goals and values Cronon describes so well toward values that are at least ostensibly concerned with the ecological viability of species and biological communities”—the biotic value (555). Indeed, Waller draws a distinction between man’s nature and nature’s nature. *Planet Earth* appears to incorporate facets of both Cronon’s and Waller’s positions, providing entertainment for man while capturing nature in its most natural form. Though *Planet Earth* clearly places a high value on the wildlife it presents, the question remains as to what kind of value resonates with the audience. Is it the anthropocentric value that drives Cronon’s argument for appreciating the tree in the backyard, or is it the biotic value that Waller believes has little to do with humans and everything to do with ecosystem stability and survival?

Since *Planet Earth*’s stated mission was to promote efforts to preserve the rare species of the world, it should undoubtedly follow Waller’s ideology over Cronon’s. Instead, the series offers aesthetic value rather than biotic value; it implies that these

species are important because of their beauty and raw naturalness, and not because of their contribution to an ecosystem. The ultra-slow-motion camera shot of the exotic frog miraculously whipping its tongue to capture a miniscule fly does not leave the viewer wanting to save endangered frog species. On the contrary, the image leaves the viewer in awe of a predator in its most natural state, making the frog seem formidable and resilient when in fact there are only hundreds remaining. The series' countless predatory images—ranging from a wild bee pollinating a stunning flower to a great white shark ferociously feasting on a seal—puts the audience in awe of the sheer mercilessness of the natural world. Our sympathy for the mutilated seal does not evoke a sense of anger or injustice, but rather a feeling of pity for the prey in a predator's world. At the same time, “among this series' many rare feats is that it often encourages you to root for the predator rather than the prey” (Stewart). What *Planet Earth* fails to convey is the idea that human beings are the biggest predators of all, that we can do more harm to that seal than a hundred great white sharks ever could. Indeed, to us, all species, including the monstrous great white shark, are prey.

Though the show's narration oftentimes bemoans the decline of a certain species' population, it fails to overshadow the breathtaking wildlife images. However rare the snow leopard may be, when it attacks an unsuspecting deer, it seems unstoppable. Its rare beauty and raw strength and agility outshine the fact that it is on the brink of extinction. Herein lies the problem with *Planet Earth* as a work of conservationist propaganda: it shows nature at its absolute best. Though captivating, it creates an illusion that these species are immune to humanity's impact on the world, that they can survive and prosper in spite of human influence. That there are no people in any of the shots only serves to amplify this sentiment. The image of animals alone being animalistic is comforting in a world in which global warming has become a tangible threat. To be sure, *Planet Earth* is a far cry from an environmental documentary; it is a product meant to make money by playing on human emotions. As human beings, we inherently prefer the fantastic to the depressing, which is why *Planet Earth* is perhaps more popular than documentaries that show men poaching elephants or seals drowning in an oil slick.

Unlike the TV show *Planet Earth*, William McKibben's book *The End of Nature* doesn't shy away from the depressing truth of the current environmental situation, emphasizing that human beings have an enormous impact on all the world's species. McKibben argues that nature no longer exists because human influence is felt everywhere: “We have deprived nature of its independence, and that is fatal to its meaning.” While Cronon and Waller provide insight into the problem of our detachment from nature, McKibben provides the bridge between humans and the natural world through collective consequences. Using the weather as an example, McKibben explains that pollution changes global weather patterns and climate such that no region of the world is completely free from humanity's impact. In McKibben's view, human beings, despite their dominance, are not separate from all other species;

on the contrary, our actions greatly affect global climate, natural habitats, and species populations. Thus, *The End of Nature* and *Planet Earth* both ask the question, whether implicitly or explicitly: What can we do about our environmental problems? Whereas *Planet Earth* overshadows this question with cinematic splendor, McKibben addresses it head on: “To level off fossil fuel consumption, much less reduce it the 70 percent that is necessary, involves tinkering with virtually every facet of our daily lives” (xxi).

Planet Earth's illusion of detachment between humanity and the animal kingdom provides the audience with a certain guiltless comfort as they watch in awe. But why is *Planet Earth*'s failure to promote conservationism important when it is, perhaps, just another TV show? The power of *Planet Earth* lies in the breadth of its audience. Reaching individuals in record numbers all across the world, the series lost a pivotal opportunity to broadcast the human impact on the natural world. During an environmental movement bogged down by politics and an unenthusiastic majority, *Planet Earth* emphasizes the sheer power of the predator, rather than the dismal reality that nature's predators are humanity's prey.

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