CELEBRITY STUDIES
2022, VOL. 13, NO. 3, 344–365
https://doi.org/10.1080/19392397.2020.1855995

ARTICLE

# Historicising David Attenborough's nature: nation, continent, country and environment

Belinda Smaill

Film and Screen Studies Program, School of Media, Film and Journalism, Monash University, Melbourne, Australia

**ABSTRACT**

Recognising his association with Australia over the course of decades, this essay explores how Sir David Attenborough's programmes 'remake' Australian nature for global audiences. It examines not only Attenborough himself, but offers equal weight to the human and nonhuman world he brings to audiences. Offering an examination of 'blue chip' natural history programming and the two series that book-end Attenborough's work as a presenter 'in' and 'of' Australia – *Quest Under Capricorn* (1963a, 1963b, 1963c and 1963d) and *Life in Cold Blood* (2008a, 2008b), it is attuned to historical and contemporary cultures of colonisation and how these are located within the values and practices of blue-chip natural history programming.

**ARTICLE HISTORY**
Received 14 September 2020
Accepted 20 November 2020

**KEYWORDS**
David Attenborough; indigenous culture; Australia; natural history programming: wildlife television; British broadcasting corporation; environment

In *Life on Air*, the biographical documentary about Sir David Attenborough broadcast in 2002, we are told that he has 'seen more things in the world than any other living being' (BBC 2002). Characterisations of Attenborough's career frequently invoke this kind of hyperbole. A combination of factors contributes to this reputation, including his presence on television screens over the course of six decades and his pivotal role in the rise of BBC natural history programming as a global brand. Attenborough offers a singular study in both longevity and global celebrity. In his study of celebrity and environment, Dan Brockington argues that 'people need celebrities to get close to nature on their behalf when they themselves cannot' (2013, p. 3). Attenborough's *oeuvre* has consistently offered access to remote locations or species while asking the viewer to see as he sees and feel as he feels. In this respect he is a cultural intermediary, helping to steer the relationship between public culture and nonhuman nature.[1] Significantly for my purposes, Attenborough has, moreover, invited collective global engagement with the Australian environment in a way that no other individual has. Recognising his association with Australia over the course of decades, I am interested in the role Attenborough has played in the changing relationship between audiences and the Australian environment. I ask how, in his role as a surrogate or intermediary, Attenborough has brought Australia to global audiences. As Jo Littler describes, celebrity mobilities 'mediate and shape our very sense of national and transnational cultures and possibilities as well as being themselves "subject to" or shaped by it' (2011, p. 1). Attenborough, at least as he appears as a programme presenter, has historically complicated simple understandings of national

**CONTACT** Belinda Smaill belinda.smaill@monash.edu Sir John Monash Drive, Caulfield, VIC 3145, Australia
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or transnational celebrity due to the way his appearances are couched in contexts more explicitly concerned with continental, oceanic or microscopic scale rather than social identities. Looking more deeply at Attenborough's mobility, my approach evokes a thicket of concerns that encompasses the nation, the environment, the planet and Attenborough as a celebrity documentarian. 'Australia' presents a rich site for exploration, partly because it is both a nation and a continent, but also because its wildlife, oceans, and also indigenous cultures have offered a point of interest for Attenborough's productions since the 1960s.

If, as Morgan Richards asserts, 'wildlife documentary has become the primary frame through which industrialised people view wildlife and nature' (2013a, p. 173), Attenborough has held this frame up to the world, facilitating mediated proximity to nature, in a way that is unrivalled. His influence on the aesthetic development of the natural history documentary is such that tracing his work over time shows that he has not simply 'framed' nature but has been credited with important changes in the development of programme making. The changes he has overseen highlight how natural history documentary composes, optimises and I argue, *remakes*, its object in order to create worlds that hold maximum fascination for audiences. One of his most important innovations was the design of the 'landmark' style of documentary television series when he was Director of Programming of both BBC 1 and 2 in the late 1960s and early 70s.[2] Described by Attenborough as 'sledgehammer' series (Attenborough 2002, p. 280), these were multi-part epics driven by a knowledgeable on-screen presenter and scripted around a single theme that offered a sophisticated way of bracketing subject matter. They offered a more cerebral mode of television. Kenneth Clark"s *Civilisation* (BBC 1969) was the first such series. Broadcast in 1979, *Life on Earth* brought the landmark style to high cost or 'blue chip'[3] natural history programming. As Richards writes,

> rather than focusing on a particular species or exploring the ecology of a particular environment, as many blue-chip programs had done before, landmarks had the space to develop and dramatize complex scientific ideas, weaving together footage and narratives from around the globe. They did not so much document wild animals in a new way as present them in an entirely new framework. (2013, p. 148)

*Life on Earth* inaugurated a tradition that relied on the triple impact of presenter persona, spectacle and global locations. Watched by an estimated 500 million viewers (Huggan 2013, p. 31), the series inaugurated the 'blockbuster' natural history programme and irrevocably changed the televisual presentation of nature for audiences in the United Kingdom and around the world. From that time, David Attenborough was to be the face of this television revolution.

This investigation builds on the field of research into wildlife and natural history documentary that has been established over decades.[4] It is also informed by a number of important studies of the BBC, and its Natural History Unit in particular.[5] There are also key studies of Attenborough himself,[6] although the number of these is not, I would suggest, in proportion to his renown and influence. It is not my aim to raise Attenborough above a field of important environmental subjectivities in the public sphere in a way that canonises or valorises him further. Instead, in acknowledging his already significant influence and status this investigation seeks to cast new light on this influence. There remain many unanswered questions about this public figure. For my

purposes the most salient demand is to understand not only Attenborough himself, but to offer equal weight to the human and nonhuman world he brings to audiences. In this respect, my approach is informed not only by television and celebrity studies, but also environmental history. We do not yet have knowledge about the thorny conjunction of Attenborough's programmes and a specific demarcated environment, such as Australia's.

As the product of the entanglement of natural and human histories, 'place' is remade through relations that may be local, trans-local or global. Allesandro Antonello and Ruth Morgan advocate that as 'environmental historians, we should [. . .] be especially attuned to the role of place in the production of environmental knowledge. Where bodies of knowledge are formed (and how) influences the very nature of that particular knowledge' (2018, p. 62). I explore how bodies of knowledge are formed in relation to Australia as *a* place and/or places on the continent through Attenborough's celebrity and programmes. I also attend to less perceptible conceptions of place and what is at stake in how we relate to and engage with Australian environments over time. Such an approach requires not only regard for the environmental humanities (and environmental history in particular), but also a synthesising of its methods with television culture and an understanding of aesthetics, audiences, industry and celebrity. Firstly, this analysis proceeds by way of a historical rationale, offering an examination of the two series that bookend Attenborough's work as a presenter 'in' and 'of' Australia – *Quest Under Capricorn* (BBC 1963) and *Life in Cold Blood* (BBC 2008a, 2008b). The terms of my analysis are constituted by what I refer to as Attenborough's 'nature,' a shorthand term for describing the televisual and social formation that interacts with but is not the same as the materiality of the more than human. These contingencies enable different forms of knowledge about place, whether the natural history tradition, the sciences or 'the environment' as a tool in political advocacy. Attention to Australia as a particular study has much to add to current understandings of Attenborough as a cultural intermediary and a force in the production of environmental knowledge.

## *Quest Under Capricorn* and the pull of the desert

Despite achieving a degree in zoology and biology from Cambridge, Attenborough aligns himself with natural history, a tradition adjacent to the biological sciences and often seen as a more 'amateur' sphere. In a recent interview he states: 'Using it in its original meaning, I'm the image of what they think of as a naturalist. I'm a reasonable naturalist, but I'm not the great all-seeing source of all information, knowledge and understanding' (Barkham 2019). Despite his modesty, as a public individual Attenborough has come to embody popularised scientific expertise, skilfully synthesising authority and compelling storytelling. Jean-Baptiste Gouyon coins the term 'telenaturalist' to describe a specific reliance on the television medium to 'perform,' produce and promote natural history knowledge (Gouyon 2019, p. 8). More than this, Attenborough's combined association with the BBC and natural history expertise has established a persona that is both highly trustworthy and authentic, with an emphasis on education for the public good. Authenticity can be a crucial factor in the trajectory of celebrity and it is largely produced by a capacity for audiences to perceive celebrities as representing the same values on screen and off.[7] The elaboration of Attenborough as a crucially authentic and reliable intermediary between public culture and the natural environment has occurred over decades. Beginning with an

examination of his early programmes offers an opportunity to track how Attenborough's celebrity has developed in relation to his values and interests.

Attenborough's first productions as a presenter in Australia do not neatly fit the familiar natural history mode that focuses mainly on wildlife and other nonhuman phenomena. They overlap with ethnographic filmmaking, a subgenre that is a lesser known but consistent part of Attenborough's *oeuvre*. While he presented an episode of the BBC series *Traveller's Tales* in Australia in 1960 titled 'Men of the Dream Time,' Attenborough's first substantive appearance on screen *in* Australia was in the series *Quest Under Capricorn* in 1963. It is the last of the *Zoo Quest* cluster of series which were underpinned by the idea of an animal collection expedition with the first series shot in Sierra Leone in 1954. Attenborough himself writes that although 'the word "quest" indicated a link with the *Zoo Quest* series that had preceded it over the previous half dozen years, [. . .] in truth I had little justification for using it [. . .]. I would have found it hard to explain what we had been in quest of' (2002, p. 184). In his autobiography Attenborough concedes that by the time *Quest Under Capricorn* was made 'the *Zoo Quest* format was beginning to look increasingly antiqued' (p. 166).[8] Letters in the BBC archive from Attenborough to the assistant controller in 1962 convey what he proposed from the outset: 'Our main concerns would be the Aborigines, but we would also hope to film a great deal about the animal life and the white settlers, in order to present a rounded picture of this huge area.'[9] The Northern Territory is the structuring rationale for the series and this geographical delineation sets it apart from Attenborough's later work.

*Quest Under Capricorn* is shot in rich colour on 16 mm film and across all episodes is Attenborough's strikingly young but distinctive address to camera. The series is concerned with a microcosm of life (albeit over a wide land mass) with a focus on constituent parts that include wildlife, indigenous and non-indigenous inhabitants of remote areas. In a generic sense, the series follows the format of a travel film, or travelogue, a mode that dates back to the earliest form of documentary and cinema more broadly. Offering the spectator an experience that combines education and pleasure, the travelogue, as Jeffrey Ruoff notes, constructs 'relations of space and time' between subjects, cultures and places (2006, p. 1). *Quest Under Capricorn* resembles the episodic narrative that Ruoff describes as a 'free combination of exposition, narrative, and comment' (2006, p. 11). Attenborough's embodied presence on location and moving around the territory anchors the episodic address to the audience – he is actively engaged with the world in front of the camera in a way the viewer cannot be and yet his physicality contrasts markedly with the worlds he shares the screen with. The strength of the travelogue format lies in its capacity to mix the exoticism of the location with the familiarity of the format and presenter. In harnessing this capacity, *Quest Under Capricorn* presents the Northern Territory as an 'elsewhere' to the centres of modernity (and empire). This is reinforced by the way episodes do not feature the townships or semi-urban areas of the Northern Territory, such as Darwin, which had a population of more than 12,000 people in 1961. (Australian Bureau of Statistics 1961, p. 182) Instead Borroloola, a district with a population of a few hundred at most, is the focus of an episode.[10] For a 1960s British audience the subject matter of the series presents an unfamiliar and exotic setting for Attenborough's travel narrative.

His persona as the British naturalist in the field heightens the sense of geographical and cultural otherness. *Quest Under Capricorn* is deeply marked by Attenborough's embodied cultural identity and an address to the British public in ways that

contribute to the production of authenticity. There is no doubt that the young Attenborough is who he appears to be on screen. His youthful exuberance in the series is palpable and rather than the 'whispery reverent timbre' Helen Wheatly describes (2016, p. 102), Attenborough's voice is authoritative and matter of fact, clearly guiding the viewer and assuming a place as the subject of knowledge. This offers a hint of the familiar celebrity figure he later becomes, one that Brockington describes when he writes: 'His disregard for himself and his enthusiasm for wildlife enhance his stature. He is the model of decorum, well behaved, well spoken, passionate about and fascinated by his subjects, devoting complete attention to them yet in control of his behaviour' (Brockington 2013, p. 48). The *Zoo Quest* series, however, offers a more participatory style of documentary and Attenborough intervenes significantly with the world on screen, troubling the decorum Brockington describes. In *Quest Under Capricorn* he not only sits alongside his interviewees in the frame, he also intrudes on the nonhuman world. For example, in an episode titled 'Buffalo, Geese and Men'[11] he chases a menacing looking water buffalo so it will retreat. In another episode he pokes at a goanna with a stick to observe its reaction and chips a hole in a termite hill with an axe to reveal its structure. These images would likely be discordant for a contemporary viewer more used to the 'hands off' style of contemporary wildlife programmes. Yet, perhaps the most screen time is given to the exploration of indigenous culture.

The first episode, 'Desert Gods,'[12] establishes the concerns of the episodes to follow. It begins with images of the geomorphology of central Australia, specifically the area around Uluru (referred to in the episode by its colonial name, Ayers Rock). Attenborough's narration describes the heat and 'granite boulders blistering and cracking in the sun,' before stating that 'this is the land of the Aborigine.' The narration proceeds to briefly trace how Western knowledge has dated pre-European settlement before elaborating indigenous knowledge: 'If scientists are unsure, the Aborigine himself is certain of his origins. The tribesmen that live here know that they sprang from this mountain, Ayres Rock.' The camera frames distinctive parts of the rock formation as Attenborough describes the meaning of different 'scars and cracks.' He notes that now 'the desert is almost entirely deserted' and 'the Aboriginal has gone elsewhere.' The focus then shifts to contemporary Aboriginal people living nearby in camps around Alice Springs. Provisions are handed to indigenous men and women from the back of a truck. In a direct to camera address, Attenborough then tells the viewer: 'Many people will say that their roots lie in the land but there can be few people for whom their native land means as much as it does to the Aboriginal. Even when they're on stations and settlements [...] the pull of the desert persists and sometimes it becomes irresistible.' The largest part of the episode continues in a more squarely ethnographic style, with depictions of traditional hunting, art and ceremonial practices and Attenborough on screen with cultural informants.

The series produces knowledge about place through the spatial practices of the travelogue. The visualisation of space, in this instance, is open to diverse interpretations. Attenborough's narration presents the presence and absence of indigenous bodies in particular spaces as a matter of autonomous movement (the movement from Uluru to town camps), rather than an effect of power. As Emily Potter describes:

> colonization itself is spatially practised and the processes by which Australia was colonized - its dispossessing, violent and profoundly disruptive force - were pointedly concerned with moving Aboriginal people off land where they were not desired, and locating them either by intent or by default in contexts amenable to particular forms of surveillance and physical and social control. (2012, p. 133)

His brief opening description of the role of the state and settler colonial interaction maintains an image of benign welfare and indigenous autonomy (as a spatial practice) at the expense of conveying the more complex aspects of the historical moment the series was made.[13]

While he chooses to begin the series with images of people living on stations and in camps, those visibly impacted by Western modernity, Attenborough's narration seems most intrigued and impassionate when describing traditional practices. Aboriginal peoples, and it is mostly men who are depicted, are deemed more authentic when 'bonded with nature.' This is most clearly articulated in the final sequence of 'Desert Gods,' which shows a man working on a dot painting high on a rock with Attenborough's voice poetically describing:

> When his world changes, when he ceases to hunt a kangaroo and gets his food in a tin from a store, when he no longer drinks from a rock pool but draws water from a bore hole tap, and is handed tea and sugar, shirts and trousers free from the government, then the direct bond with nature is broken and his religion and often his life loses its meaning. Over most of Australia this has already happened. Soon this will happen here too and little will be left except this enigmatic painting.

This statement celebrates traditional cultures and laments their disappearance, but in a way that poses a clear divide between the cultures of Western modernity and lives that are more closely entwined with nature, while erasing actual indigenous knowledge systems and connection to the land, or 'country.'

A more interesting turn in relation to *Quest Under Capricorn's* primitivism is evident in audience studies documented by the BBC. These suggest the episode most popular amongst audiences was not among those with an ethnographic, or even wildlife focus, but rather the final episode, titled 'First Australians'[14] which focuses on government initiatives in the Northern Territory, including mission schools, social housing and instruction for men on Australia's political system. A BBC summary of audience response to the last episode notes:

> Viewers in the sample who were not very well satisfied with this final programme in the *Quest Under Capricorn* series were hard to find. [. . .] It was evident that interest was maintained at a high level as far as most were concerned, as they watched this film report about the "first Australians." Particularly interesting, according to several viewers, was to see and hear what was being done by the Australian Government towards the gradual assimilation of the aborigines into the modern world, illustrated by the scene such as that showing an official explaining the right to vote.[15]

While Attenborough's focus on indigenous Australia seemed most compelled by the documentation of traditional cultural practices, the British public were more interested in the benevolent colonialism presented in the final episode. It is also interesting to note that viewer feedback was focused on the themes and content of the series rather than Attenborough as a presenter, marking this as an early phase in the trajectory of his celebrity.

Not all the human stories in *Quest Under Capricorn* are focused on indigenous culture and experience. One whole episode, 'Hermits of Borroloola,'[16] is made up of interviews with three white men who have chosen to live away from society. Yorky Billy is a character in another episode, who explains that his family were originally from Yorkshire (it is possible he may also be of Aboriginal descent). In these interviews Attenborough sits alongside the men and skilfully weaves a conversation that reveals where they came from and how they arrived in their current situation. Indeed, *Quest Under Capricorn* demonstrates Attenborough's interest in studying the story of the past and this can be clearly observed in his framing comments in the first episode. Graham Huggan writes, 'Attenborough is committed to the greater understanding of where we have come from as a prerequisite for deciding where we are going – hence his insistence on the immeasurable value of studying origins' (2014, p. 178). Huggan is referring to the *Life on Earth* series, which is primarily focused on zoology and evolution, but the same can be said of Attenborough's interest in anthropology. A preoccupation with origins pervades his style as a storyteller and interviewer.

Attenborough opens a window onto Australia's Northern Territory in order to show it to be a place on the edge of modernity and strongly identified with isolation and environmental extremes. The series is culturally positioned through the Attenborough persona and clear address to a Britishness audience. While the continent is very spatially diverse with major urban areas located along the eastern seaboard and a range of different climates and ecoregions, the exclusive focus on the 'Top End' institutes a sense, for BBC audiences, that this area stands in for the rest of Australia. Not only does the focus on place emphasise *continent*, above *nation*, the singular elaboration of Attenborough's expository narration eclipses any possibility of an understanding of *country*. More aligned with an indigenous perspective, the term country signals a connection to the land in the spatio-temporal registers of indigenous knowledge systems. The narration, moreover, traces a racialised hierarchy that celebrates indigenous culture's association with nature, rather than acknowledging the complexity of settler-colonial impacts.

While I have emphasised the series" connections with the travel film tradition, *Quest Under Capricorn* has clear allegiances with histories of ethnographic filmmaking. It demonstrates Fatimah Tobing Rony's critique of ethnographic spectacle and the 'obsession with race and racial categorisation in the construction of peoples always already Primitive' (1996, p. 12). Given that there have been thousands of ethnographic films made about Aboriginal people in Australia, Attenborough would have been aware of some of this visual culture when deciding to produce the series. Interested in contributing to the anthropological record, he does not seem willing or ready to rethink it (as Jean Rouch was in West Africa over the same decade). Indeed, on completing the series Attenborough began study towards a degree in anthropology, believing at the time that *Quest Under Capricorn* had made him aware of how little he knew about anthropology. (Attenborough 2002, p. 185) Rather than filmmaking as fieldwork, Attenborough's style remains that of the television presenter (albeit naturalist) rather than professional anthropologist, making the resulting series more travelogue than ethnography. His alignment with anthropology, albeit as a presenter, began to anchor his authenticity in the ways of the expert and align his values with knowledge production. Not yet a fully realised celebrity, *Zoo Quest* initiated Attenborough's career as a telenaturalist and British broadcasting personality.

This was supported by the innovation of the series, and the *Zoo Quest* endeavour broadly, which centred on the production of on-location natural history television about wildlife, a turning point in the history of animals on film.

Attenborough also, however, offers some interesting, albeit small, ways of troubling the colonial paradigm, one that expects a move from 'discovered' and putatively empty continent to settled nation. His focus on origins hints at the different ways in which nature, or the continent, are not simply places remade (and cleared away) for the successful British-settler state, but rather that the continent has, through different human histories, been transformed through indigenous and non-indigenous practices of place. This is the case whether describing the 'hermits' of Borroloola who fall outside the prescriptions of progress and industrialisation or the importance of Uluru and its geomorphology to local indigenous peoples. The straightforward move from continent to industrious Australian nation, in this sense, is disrupted or unsettled. *Quest Under Capricorn* is not only Attenborough's first endeavour as a presenter in the Australian continent, it is also his most sustained exploration in a single series because the tele-naturalist's next significant forays into programme-making were dominated by the introduction of the blockbuster blue chip series.

## *Life in Cold Blood* and globally legible nature

While Attenborough took a break from programme-making later in the 1960s and early 1970s to work in administrative roles at the BBC, after *Life on Earth* he returned to Australia many times as presenter.[17] The archive of Attenborough programmes has developed over decades and is extensive. In negotiating what Frances Bonner refers to as the 'tension between representativeness and exceptionalness' (2011, p. 5), my examination of Attenborough's later work focuses in some detail on *Life in Cold Blood*, the last series in the 'Life Collection,' chosen because it is also the last series in the landmark mode written and presented by Attenborough and as such, it is the last time he is significantly *in* the continent as a presenter for global audiences.[18] Notably, he does return to Australia to appear in and narrate other, more conventional, modes of documentary in subsequent years. My selection and analysis should also be seen in light of the fact that there is remarkable stylistic consistency across Attenborough's landmark series clusters, such as the Life Collection. The five episodes of *Life in Cold Blood* explore the evolution and habits of amphibians and reptiles. Filming began in 2006 and Attenborough travelled to many of the locations featured in the series. He celebrated his 80th birthday in the Galápagos Islands while filming giant tortoises. The series was a co-production with the BBC's Natural History Unit and Animal Planet, an American pay television channel owned by BBC Worldwide (the commercial subsidiary of the BBC at the time) and Discovery Communications with, at the time of broadcast, access to audience markets in North America, Europe, Asia and Latin America (Discovery Communications 2008). Animal Planet achieved great success with a range of 'adventurous naturalist-hosts' (Chris 2007, p. 147) and significantly, chief among them was Australian Steve Irwin with the *Crocodile Hunter* series that ran from 1996–2007.

Attenborough rejects the term 'celebrity' and does not consider himself to be a celebrity 'when defined in today's terms' (Brockington 2013, p. 47). His renown and influence as a public personality would suggest otherwise. Further, his more recent

association with the BBC's commercialisation of the landmark mode might easily lend the Attenborough persona to celebrity processes of commodification. Yet, it is notable that he distances himself from the notion of celebrity 'in today's terms.' Longevity has cemented his authenticity – he is not simply another interchangeable celebrity. It is also clear that his celebrity should be understood as distinct from what Graeme Turner describes as the contemporary 'demotic turn' (Turner 2010), or the growing phenomena of ordinary people and culture entering an expanded media sphere. Attenborough is better suited to the mode of celebrity that is described by Chris Rojek as 'achieved celebrity,' which is produced through the institutions of elite culture and knowledge. Drawing on Machiavelli's *The Prince*, Rojek locates a precursor for theorising celebrity in sovereign power in medieval times. He writes 'a healthy kingdom is when the Prince is perceived to be the conduit of the people's will, just as celebrity status is maximised when it is believed to derive from a genuine popular relationship' (2014, p. 460). This is a mode of celebrity that is elevated and succeeds, I suggest, because it is perceived to have a civic function that aligns public opinion and the values of the public personality in question. While it encompasses the importance of perceived authenticity, with its emphasis of public good, achieved celebrity offers a more precise way to understand Attenborough's late career. I take up *Life in Cold Blood* as a study in Attenborough's later work as a cultural intermediary working at the nexus of television culture and nonhuman nature. I elaborate particularly on Ursula K. Heise's perspective on contemporary environmental travel narratives, which provides a useful way of understanding the spatial practices of the landmark style while staying attuned to what is at stake for Australian environmental knowledge.

There are several Australian species and locations featured in *Life in Cold Blood*, such as lungfish, crocodiles and shingleback lizards. Sequences are also shot in Malawi, Argentina, Mozambique and South Africa, amongst other national locations. Through a manipulation of time and space, Attenborough is able to multiply his attention to place, while making it much more fleeting. The landmark mode, thus, radically revises the episodic structure of the travelogue as it appears in *Quest Under Capricorn*. Examining global travel narratives that take the form of non-fiction environmentalist writing (including film), Heise invokes the structuring logic of the database. Natural history programmes are not environmentalist per se but they offer a significant parallel in a formal sense. Indeed, it is quite possible that environmental travelogues have been influenced by Attenborough's series as both aspire to a temporal and spatial structure that can tell the story of global phenomena through an encyclopaedic register. Heise describes environmentalist travelogues as

> experiments in mapping global systems in their biological and ecological dimensions. The elements of epic narrative such texts invoke, their modernist moments of fracture and uncertainty, and their postmodernist integration of lists of species, facts and data into the text all seek compromises between conventional storytelling and phenomena so large that only a database can adequately map them. (2012, p. 74)

Necessarily, Heise refers to the manner in which 'the combination of narrative and database' (2012, p. 74) limits how ecological connectedness can be even minimally conveyed. This is a spatial practice that has consequences for how the science of ecology, whether recent or older approaches, can be elaborated in relation to place.

The final episode of *Life in Cold Blood*, 'Armoured Giants,'[19] explores the traits and habits of crocodiles, alligators and turtles. In a sequence shot somewhere near the coast in Northern Australia, a large gathering of crocodiles waits at a flooded coastal road. This site presents them with, at a particular seasonal moment, a flood of migrating mullet. The crocodiles attempt to catch mullet in their jaws as the fish jump over the crest created by the road. The first part of the sequence is shot at night with Attenborough featured in black and white night vision with the crocodiles behind him, presumably unable to see him in the dark. The camera also captures kangaroos and birds as they move around on the banks of the river. Saltwater crocodiles, as an apex predator, have a particular function in ecosystems. While Attenborough's voiceover is crucial in explaining the scene, the focal point is the spectacle of the formidable crocodiles and the close up of their jaws as they chomp on the mullet, rather than what this achieves for the marine and terrestrial ecosystem. The sequence aligns with what Wheatley, in her study of *The Blue Planet*, refers to as 'non-narrative visual and aural pleasure that exist(s) outside the informational remit of the programme' (2016, p. 107). Yet, rather than the relaxation effect that Wheatley describes, the chomping crocodiles are both unsettling and compelling, evoking the visceral horror that the prey/predator scenarios of wildlife documentary have excelled at. The sequence is only a few minutes long and is followed by a compression of space that allows Attenborough to next appear on the banks of a river in Argentina, discussing the American alligator.

If the series, or its textual properties, exhibit a combination of narrative and database, this is to suggest an aesthetic characterised by lists and fractured points of entry. This aesthetic should also be understood by way of the particular documentary conventions in play. While often referred to as an exemplar of expository documentary due to the consistent use of narration to elucidate on screen events, natural history programmes also rely heavily on observation. Images (often featuring spectacular nature), and sound (the source of scientific explanation in the form of narration) provide two distinct forms of knowledge for the viewer. As one of a series of brief vignettes, sequences such as the crocodile and mullet standoff in *Life in Cold Blood* serve to atomise cause and effect into discrete moments isolated from the rest of the programme. Indeed, in purely observational documentary there is already often a tenuous or implicit relationship between cause and effect.[20] The minimisation of causal relations is one way in which ecological connectedness is diminished. A related concern, one that plagues all databases, is the inferred illusion that *data set* implies something discrete, complete, and portable, but it is none of those things.[21] There are processes of selection and exclusion underlying the collection of data. For example, ecology in Australia has developed as a science of empire and government, with knowledge frequently produced for specific utility.[22] Scripting necessarily relies on existing science available to producers in programme development. The science is subject to the contingencies of data collection. The crafting of science on the terms of documentary form and its address to audience markets shapes the communication of environmental knowledge.

An additional concern for the scripting of episodes and series' is the casting of particular species, with due consideration given to what species the audience had already been exposed to and which are more novel. The quirkiest scene featuring Australia in *Life in Cold Blood* appears in the third episode, 'Dragons of the Dry.' With a focus on lizards, the South Australian desert is a key location in this episode. The sequence begins with

Attenborough surrounded by boxes of equipment, sitting in a folding chair and holding a fishing rod, as if by a lake. Yet rather than by the water, he is a solo figure camped out in a dry field with nothing but patchy grass as far as the eye can see. As he explains in his address to camera, 'these fields in south Australia are home to a little lizard that is so rare that it had been thought to be extinct for over thirty years until it was rediscovered in 1992.' The pygmy blue tongue skink lives deep in the holes created by trapdoor spiders and a worm hooked onto a fishing line is the most effective strategy for bringing it to the surface. As Attenborough speaks, the camera becomes tightly framed around the hook as the skink takes the bait. A low angle shot captures the skink holding fast to the worm with Attenborough still sitting behind it and framed by a blue sky. In the next shot Attenborough lies on the ground, manoeuvring an optical probe to reveal the interior of the skink's hole and a whole family inside. The travelling naturalist is not only firmly ensconced in the natural environment, this imagery also invokes the leisure-orientation and prowess of the recreational fisherman, bringing another modality for viewing nature as human resource. South Australia, while noted in the narration, is not invoked as a state in the Australian commonwealth – it is instead a site on the continent, one of a series of discrete locations within an ecoregion and a place available for the activities of the telenaturalist who observes remarkable and exceptional species on behalf of distant audiences. The exclusive focus on naturalist and lizard, accompanied by the tools of technological mastery, tell us little about non-visible specificities of place or even its exact location, leaving open a vista of imaginative possibilities.

In *Life In Cold Blood*, as is the case in *Quest Under Capricorn*, Attenborough's Britishness is signified by his accent and image. Without other visible signifiers, the empty landscape tells us this could be a place yet to be discovered – the image hints at a place out of time, a pre-historic ordering of nature. In *Life In Cold Blood*, moreover, Attenborough fraternises with native reptiles, crocodiles and lizards. While, from time to time, he may refer to the impact of invasive species, the thematic structure of blue-chip programming privileges native biota, often in the context of evolutionary biology rather than more recently adapted ecologies. This signals another crucial difference between the concerns of the blue-chip landmark mode and the conventions of the travel film as seen in *Quest Under Capricorn*. With a more expansive interest in the life of the remote Northern Territory, Attenborough not only turned his attention to human inhabitants (albeit in an imperial mode) he also focused on at least one feral[23] species – herds of water buffalo which were introduced from West and East Asia in the 19th century. The inclusion of a species brought after colonisation suggests a different history – one in which Australian ecosystems have been altered by significant numbers of introduced species over the course of centuries. This demonstrates the mutually entangled transformation of human and 'natural' worlds.

Biotic and symbolic meaning frequently mingle together in the cultural imaginary, whether it is the international media sphere for Attenborough's programmes or changing forms of national identification in Australia. Both of these are relevant for understanding how *Life in Cold Blood* remakes Australian nature in ways that have become accepted by audiences as common sense, normalised by the realism of the landmark mode. For the global television market, distinctive marsupials and reptiles authenticate Australia as a biogeographical region that has evolved over millennia. This is especially the case because they have well-known associations with the desert and the tropics of the Australian continent. But this recognition alone simplifies or abbreviates recent colonial

history and the struggle over what Nicholas Smith refers to as the 'triadic association between nature, native and nation' (2011, p. 7). A pre-colonial 'historically authentic'[24] Australian environment, in many parts of the continent faces what Tim Low refers to as a 'feral future,' (2002) as hybrid new ecologies, made up of native and introduced plants and animals have become irreversibly established. Smith takes a further leap and reads the environment through the lens of postcolonial belonging, arguing that, as the public awareness of invasive species has intensified in recent years, for many in Australia, 'getting rid of feral biota (and reintroducing native ones) is a way of making the country and themselves more Australian. In contemporary Australia this equates with becoming more indigenous' (2011, p. 7). I suggest that rather than becoming more indigenous, this points to a fantasy that it is possible to return to the perceived simpler moment of European contact, return to a time before the violence of colonisation, with its human and more than human consequences. In the scene in South Australia, Attenborough sitting alone against the horizon conjures the apparition of *terra nullius*, the designation of discovered land as empty that in Australia enabled colonisation and denied indigenous sovereignty. The particular attention to native species doubles down on this apparition by concealing the new hybrid ecologies of the continent.

The global database narrative obscures more than the connectedness of ecologies or the cause and effect of environmental crisis. Digging into the case of Australia shows how *Life In Cold Blood* remakes 'place' in a subtle manner, notably by featuring abbreviated sequences about flora and fauna that cover over more consequential bodies of environmental knowledge. The choice of species and visual vocabulary is shaped by their storytelling potential and while the aim is a universally legible experience of nature, what is on offer to audiences is nevertheless produced by ideological and aesthetic contingencies. This is not only relevant to an Australian context. Narratives of nation that are forged and reshaped in relation to entwined natural and human histories are powerful and exist in many global locales – they produce a sense of place through distinct environmental knowledge.

Brockington delves into the nexus of conservation and celebrity, noting that 'celebrity conservation produces images that are commodities in themselves' (2013, p. 3) circulating, in the first instance, with commercial intent. With a public persona so moored to authenticity, trustworthiness and civic culture, Attenborough's celebrity requires careful examination to reveal the tensions between commodification and knowledge dissemination as public service. In part, Attenborough's status as a transnational figure assists in this examination. Transnational celebrities do not move through the cultural spaces of transnationalism in neutral ways. As noted, Littler proposes that celebrity mobilities shape our experience of national and transnational cultures, 'as well as being themselves "subject to" or shaped by it' (2011, p. 1). Attenborough has been critiqued for his efficacy (or lack of) within a global environmental movement, but as an intermediary he has been first and foremost 'subject to' a particular aspect of commodified transnational culture–the aesthetic formula of the natural history mode and within this the natural history tradition's imperial (British) historical ideology. Through this vehicle he produces a natural world that largely (but not always) prefers a pristine nature, uncomplicated by human history and culture. Offering an analysis that celebrates Attenborough's work as a contemporary telenaturalist, Gouyon describes a scene shot in the USA's Grand Canyon that shows this recognisable figure descending a steep slope and:

> as if travelling back in time, getting closer to the origin of life on Earth the deeper he goes, demonstrates his gift for observation, determining the age of fossils without the help of scientists' radioactivity. These on-camera appearances, carefully staged, did not simply link together geographically distant parts of the story to make a coherent narrative whole but were key moments when the presenter, unconstrained by time and space, could freely roam the world and explain the order of things, expertly performing natural history on-screen and becoming part of the story. (2019, p. 224)

More than simply a presenter, Attenborough is a celebrity and if his renown is aligned with the public good and the people's will, this quote is symptomatic of his influence in promoting a singular way of 'explaining the order of things' and being 'part of the story,' when histories and stories are in actuality manifold, troubled by vectors of nation, country, continent and environment.

## Rethinking Attenborough's nature

By way of a conclusion I explore further what is to be gained by looking at Attenborough's ventures in Australia, particularly how they might add to our understanding of him as a cultural intermediary and celebrity. I do so by exploring a portion of the critical discussion around Attenborough and his work, specifically in relation to environmental advocacy and his inheritance of a long tradition of natural history including cultures of science. These areas constitute the contingent ground on which his approach to nature settles. While Attenborough self-identifies as a 'reasonable naturalist,' others have offered more detail about the long-standing ideals and orientations that are evoked by natural history practice, and the Attenborough persona in particular. Identifying a 'natural history paradigm,' Michael Jeffries argues that natural history occupies a different realm to other science programming at the BBC. The heroic field naturalist is an essential component of the paradigm and for Jeffries Attenborough echoes 'the traveller from the days of empire, well connected with the government and national institutions, travelling the earth to bring back objects of interest to those at home in Britain' (2003, p. 534). Huggan explores the combination of 'expeditionary' and 'exhibitionary' orders, that were both designed to 'confirm European colonial master over the rest of the world' (2014, p. 174). Like Gouyon he refers to the manner in which Attenborough's embodied presence links geographically distant places, but argues that:

> the apparent effortlessness with which Attenborough moves from place to place in *Life on Earth*—an effortlessness reinforced, as in all his natural history vehicles, by the skilful use of continuity editing –cannot help convey a sense of mastery and containment that suggests its representations of the natural world are far from innocent, and that these representations are linked to specific historically circumscribed relations of spatial power. (2014, p. 175)

The spatial power Huggan invokes underpins the relationship between empire and former colonies – the exotic spectacle collected for nature programming is, specifically, the 'elsewhere' of familiar British (and European) landscapes. As I have shown, this sense of an elsewhere is plainly apparent in *Quest Under Capricorn* and is bound up with the travel film. The seeming ease with which Attenborough's British, white masculinity travels the globe, from centre to periphery, brings undercurrents that connect nature, nation and empire. These are practices of representation that Attenborough inherits from his naturalist forefathers.

Consideration of Attenborough as natural historian (and telenaturalist) extends to the presentation of scientific knowledge in his programmes, most notably evolutionary biology and ecology. The former is influenced in particular by the work of Charles Darwin and is part of his broader interest in origins that extends across not only biology but also anthropology. Others have observed the mutual relationship between the narrative inspiration of nature programmes broadly[25] and what Jeffries refers to as 'old ecology' (2003) with its sensibilities of order, cyclical balance, and harmony,[26] which can be linked to ideals of romanticism and traced back to Linnaeus and then Darwin.[27] Having already discussed the interlacing of science communication and formal specificity, I wish to highlight that the sensibilities of old ecology and the spatial practices of the landmark mode, especially the database style, limit the scale of knowledge that can be conveyed precisely because they privilege space over time. As a compendium of distinct places on the globe (albeit through abbreviated narrative chunks), series such as *Life in Cold Blood* are not only unable to deal with ecological connectedness, they also cannot bring to the screen what is known about the history, pace and scale of anthropogenic ecological change. Such change is a key consequence of (and actor in) imperialism and globalisation. Australia is not the only bioregion to be reshaped by the movement of species across regions. With globalisation, the mixing of species across continents, as Ned Hettinger writes, 'threatens to homogenize the world's ecological assemblages into one giant mongrel ecology' (2001, p. 216). Attenborough's focus on Australian biota leaves unspoken the way ecologists and biologists have grappled with, as described by Low, the new hybrid ecologies of introduced and native species. In turn this reveals the important 'elephant in the room' of this televisual planetary scale – the speed of biodiversity loss and the impact of pervasive species mixing.

While scholars such as Jefferies, Huggan, Gouyon and others are attuned to the values and assumptions that underpin Attenborough's practice as a travelling naturalist, they do not tell us, at least not in detail, what happens when he arrives in the colonies or the at periphery. It is not surprising that of the two series, *Quest Under Capricorn* most obviously rehearses the typology of the heroic field naturalist and colonial relations of spatial power. Consequently, it produces a familiar sensibility for British audiences. Yet a consideration of the continent within a frame of Australian nationhood casts the series slightly differently. In the 1960s a dominant narrative of nation revolved around a post war modernity that required the full engagement of the natural environment for the advancement of the resurgent nation, and the celebration of the technological innovations that might transform nature. *Quest Under Capricorn* was broadcast at a moment when the Australian resources boom was taking hold, capitalising on the extraction of iron ore, uranium, and bauxite. Although episodes explore benevolent modernising colonialism, his focus on origins and his interest in the science of anthropology means that Attenborough's characterisation of the Top End fits awkwardly with this cultural imaginary. Yet it also highlights the repression that this narrative entails. While fitting with an imperial ethos, Australia as the remote 'elsewhere,' and the site of ancient indigenous culture (albeit through the lens of primitivism), offer a rupture and destabilise the premise of nation building based on 'nature as resource' – that the empty continent is simply available to fuel white settler modernity. While the series are very different, again the focus on Australian species and landscape in *Life in Cold Blood* offer a familiar image of Australia for an international audience. But, the converse evocation here of a vacant Australia

populated by native biota offers a fantasy of a simpler pre-colonial moment. This more mature Attenborough, again *in situ* in the Australian landscape, feeds into the visual imagination of a natural world uncluttered by, paradoxically, invasive species and the untidiness of human invasion and settlement, whether indigenous or non-indigenous, by taking us to a moment that never existed – a contact moment of discovery where *terra nullius* was a reality.

As a cultural intermediary, Attenborough embodies the legacy of a natural history tradition and his familiar figure positioned alongside wildlife and in remote nature has signalled a particular perspective on environmental knowledge for decades. Because he is a presenter, and so part of a/the, story, this is not simply 'deep nature' without human history – in series such as *Life In Cold Blood* he invokes the problem of human relations. Huggan writes that 'Attenborough has been described as quintessentially English, and has positioned himself within a specifically English tradition of natural history; he is also closely identified with the corporation for which he has worked for more than half a century: the BBC' (2013, p. 25). Yet he also suggests that to say 'the Attenborough persona cuts a colonialist figure' is possibly an 'exaggeration' (2013, p. 27). It is noteworthy that the large proportion of writing about Attenborough is produced within the English academy. Exploring Attenborough *in* Australia and from the perspective of Australian environmental knowledge, tells us more about the stakes of his celebrity mobility. In Attenborough's case, what Rojek refers to as 'the social construction of renown' (2014, p. 466) is tied to the power of the BBC as a public service broadcaster. Evoking a milieu of cultural expertise, the BBC has been crucial to Attenborough's persona and his achieved celebrity. He has possibly surpassed this now and lends his 'Englishness' and stature as a respected figure onto every project and institution he is associated with. Brockington observes that 'celebrity can become the means by which environmental narratives appear truthful' (2013, p. 24). Reading his celebrity against this appearance of truthfulness, can bring into much sharper relief histories of British imperialism and the narratives that have sustained it, histories that are inseparable from environmental practices. My analysis also points to a more far reaching proposition. I suggest that in the case of Australia, Attenborough's nature needs to be always thought in relation to indigeneity, whether implicit or explicit on screen. This is because nature in the cultural imaginary has been crucially tied to the events and repercussions of colonialism. The case of Australia reveals the specificity of this locale as I have outlined it but also gestures to the complicating reality of global imperial expansion – dynamic ecosystems are part of the constant 'unsettling' of ongoing cultures of colonisation and invasion.

While the conjunction of the Attenborough persona, imperial ideals and the natural history tradition have attracted a reasonable amount of scholarly evaluation, the most intense critique of Attenborough's approach to nature has focused on his paradoxical relationship with the reality of a changing environment due to human activity. While these critiques of Attenborough have intensified recently in the popular press,[28] scholarship concerned with wildlife filmmaking broadly has persisted over decades.[29] Censure has been underpinned by an expectation that Attenborough's programmes can or should play a role[30] in environmental advocacy. Attenborough's scripts have, since the 1970s, offered nebulous claims about human responsibility for the environment,[31] but only in recent years has he publicly made clear statements about the threat of mass extinction and climate crisis.

The historical vista I have proposed adds another, longer range dimension to Attenborough as environmental advocate. Between the completion of *Quest Under Capricorn* in 1963 and the beginning of production for *Life on Earth* in 1976, Attenborough was seldom involved in 'hands on' broadcasting. During this hiatus the environment as a concern for political activism gained crucial ground. Notably, Rachel Carson's book, *Silent Spring* is released a year before *Quest Under Capricorn* was broadcast and spurred public debate not only in the USA but also helped revive the environmental movement in Australia.[32] Only shortly before this, in the post war moment, 'the environment' became an idea, produced by regulation, policy and science.[33] Ecology as a discipline is formalised at this time and the interconnection of local environments and earth systems is put on the political and imaginative agenda. In terms of the latter, moreover, allegories of the global ecosystem are emerging in literature.[34] Against this background, *Quest Under Capricorn's* imperial orientation and travelogue style come into view as looking to the past, rather than the future. This context shows the longer period in which Attenborough was out of step with just some of the germinating cultural moves towards a conceptualisation of the environment as a phenomenon of global scale.

It would be clear to anyone with an interest in this renowned figure that he has, however, forged a public path through environmental activism that has shifted over the course of the last two decades. Richards dates his first unequivocal statement about his belief in climate warming to 2006 (2013a, p. 171). Again, from the perspective of the periphery, the popular press in Australia has reported not only on his television work, but recently also his presentations at meetings of the World Economic Forum and the UN Climate Summit where he appealed for action on the climate crisis and other environmental issues (Barkham 2019). During the Australian bushfires of the summer of 2019/2020, he spoke out criticising the governing conservative party for inaction on factors contributing to climate change (Australian Broadcasting Corporation 2020). Since 2001 productions have taken on, in their way, the task of environmental advocacy – with growing regularity he has lent his voice and image to programming and media that explicitly identify environmental degradation, including a series focusing on the Great Barrier Reef.[35] This began with his documentary work outside the blue chip format and although concerned with natural history, these programmes have been less commercially successful in global television markets. 2019 heralded the full integration of environmental messaging into the blue chip mode.[36]

In terms of the maintenance of celebrity, whether and when Attenborough has made strong claims about the environment, including the cause and effect relationships of environmental decline might be seen as part and parcel of the engineering of renown – a discerning celebrity might choose to affirm or reject certain environmental knowledge in ways that hold sway with public opinion. This, however, misses mark on understanding his contributions to a visual vocabulary that has had an unrivalled impact on the way the nonhuman world is perceived. He has contributed to what Heise refers to as the 'environmental imagination of the global' (2008, p. 25), a cultural phenomenon that observes the 'imbrication of local places, ecologies, and cultural practices in global networks' (2008, p. 210). Yet Attenborough's programmes contribute to the environmental imagination of the global in ways that are tied to the manner in which his genres of television function – rather than moving from the local to reveal global networks, the blue-chip landmark style he is celebrated for takes the planetary as a starting point and compiles (into a database)

fragments of places. Attenborough (as a product of the ideological, commercial and cultural institutions he is bound to) must be understood through the manner in which he has recast place-based environmental knowledge as global and normalised this conception of nature through the realism of the landmark mode.

## Notes

1. Frances Bonner describes television presenters as 'cultural intermediaries,' drawing on Pierre Bourdieu's use of the term. This characterisation only works for Attenborough if it also addresses the crucial relationship that he enables across culture and the nonhuman natural world (Bonner 2011).
2. As Huggan notes, Attenborough was not only a presenter and producer, he was also a skilful mediator, linking different individuals and publics involved in a project. His particular brand of celebrity is partly due to this mediating role; he 'came increasingly – sometimes exclusively – to be identified with the projects in which he featured, suggesting a cross-over between the reified roles of the media professional (Attenborough as TV producer) and the mediated celebrity (Attenborough as product of TV).' (Huggan 2013, p. 31).
3. Derek Bousé's definition of 'Blue Chip' film is the most well-known but is most suited to the American tradition of wildlife film, often associated with Disney. Nevertheless, it has some utility because it has informed the BBC model, as Richards describes, and proposes six criteria including, the depiction of mega fauna; visual splendour; dramatic narrative; the absence of history and politics; and the absence of people (Bousé 1998, p. 134).
4. Important work in this field includes See Armbruster (1998); Bousé (2000); Chris (2006); Cottle (2004); Cubitt (2005); Horak (2006); Mitman (1999); Mills (2015); Smaill (2016).
5. See Jeffries (2003); Gouyon (2019); Richards (2013); Richards (2013a).
6. See Huggan (2013) Huggan (2014), Bonner (2011), Bonner (2020) Gouyon (2019), Gouyon (2011); Wheatley (2016).
7. The notion of authenticity as an evaluative concept negotiated across the star, media and audiences was proposed by Richard Dyer in his 1979 theorisation of cinema stardom. While Attenborough does not align with a cinema paradigm necessarily, the general principle of authenticity is very germane to the development of Attenborough's celebrity.
8. Attenborough, *Life on Air*, 166. Nevertheless, letters in the BBC archive from Attenborough to the Assistant Controller in 1962 show that Attenborough had been intending to undertake a conventional *Zoo Quest* expedition to Australia, aiming to export species of wildlife previously unseen in Europe. Plans changed when he was denied permission to export native animals. Following this he secured rare permission to enter parts of the Northern Territory (Melville Island and Groote Island especially) with film cameras. This was due to a contact he had in the Australian government, the government anthropologist.
9. Letter from Attenborough to the Assistant Controller of the BBC, dated 26 April 1962 BBC Archive.
10. The census cites a population of 85 but given Aboriginal people were not counted in the census at this time the number is likely to be higher.
11. *Quest Under Capricorn*, Episode 3, 'Buffalo, Geese and Men,' TV, BBC. 10 May 1963.
12. *Quest Under Capricorn*, 'Episode 1 Desert Gods,' TV, BBC. 26 April 1963.
13. In the period directly prior to 1963, when the series was broadcast, government polices ruled many of the life choices available to indigenous people, including the freedom of movement. It was only in 1962 that the federal government passed legislation (*The Commonwealth Electoral Act*) requiring states and territories to allow Aboriginal citizens the vote. Prior to this, in 1957, The Northern Territory government had deemed 'full blood' Aboriginal people to be 'wards of the state,' limiting their movement and governing their work and education choices. Many of the cattle stations, moreover, offered work conditions akin to indentured servitude and were sometimes unsafe, especially for women and massacres of indigenous

peoples in remote areas had occurred within living memory. Given this, what Attenborough describes as 'the pull of the land' opens out onto many possible meanings, including refuge, maintenance of traditional practices and cultural sovereignty.

14. *Quest Under Capricorn*, 'Episode 6 First Australians,' TV, BBC. 31 May 1963.
15. Memo from the BBC Audience Research Department, dated 19 June 1963, BBC Archive.
16. *Quest Under Capricorn*, 'Episode 2 Hermits of Borroloola,' TV, BBC. May 3 1963.
17. While my central concern here is with Attenborough 'in' the Australian environment, Attenborough was *on* Australian television screens before his first embodied appearances on the continent. BBC wildlife content was shown on Australian television by the Australian Broadcasting Commission (ABC) as early as the 1950s, including episodes of *Zoo Quest*. Ben Dibley and Gay Hawkins describe how *Zoo Quest* and other BBC imports were important in 'generating local audiences for wildlife content,' with the ABC later establishing its own Natural History Unit focusing on Australian locations and animals. Ben Dibley and Gay Hawkins, 'Making animals public: early wildlife television and the emergence of environmental nationalism on the ABC,' *Continuum* 33, no.6 (2019), 7.
18. Since *The Blue Planet's*, release in 2001 the 'Planet' cycle has eclipsed previous programme models in terms of audience reach and cost but Attenborough's role in these series has been largely confined to that of narrator, select shots. In some markets, such as the USA, his narration has routinely been replaced by other celebrities.
19. *Life in Cold Blood*, 'Episode 5 Armoured Giants,' TV, BBC. 3 March 2008.
20. The films of Fredric Wiseman are a classic example of the observational mode in which, without narration, shots and scenes are cut together in ways that craft infer meaning, such as cause and effect.
21. I draw in the work of Yanni Loukissas who expands on this in his book length study: Loukissas, *All data are local: Thinking critically in a data-driven society* (2019).
22. As Libby Robin notes, 'good science,' is still concerned with an 'emphasis on "improving" flora and fauna known to be economically useful in the short term, rather than on understanding indigenous species irrespective of their long term economic and ecological potential' (1997, p. 73).
23. 'Feral' is a term that describes alien species that have been introduced to serve as domestic animals but have become have become undomesticated or 'wild' and often had impact on the broader ecology.
24. Theoretically, there are multiple ways of defining alien species. Charles Warren states: 'native species are those which have auto-colonized an area since a selected time in the past, and alien species are those which have been introduced by humans, intentionally or otherwise' Warren, 'Perspectives on the "alien versus native" species debate: a critique of concepts, language and practice,' *Progress in Human Geography* 31, no. 4 (2007), 428. In Australia biodiversity change with regard to native species (especially extinction) is frequently measured from the arrival of the first fleet in 1788, despite the fact that prior to this the activity of indigenous populations also had impact on biodiversity. Nevertheless, the pace and scale of anthropogenic ecological change increased sharply since European contact. In terms of the decline and extinction of native species, the predation of feral species has had more impact on some Australian bioregions than climate change and its effects.
25. See, in particular, Armbruster or Wheatley.
26. As Huggan notes, *Life on Earth* at times even departs from Darwin to promote 'an orderly view of creation, that disregards discontinuity, contingency and chance.' Huggan, 'Attenborough's natural,' 179.
27. Notably, ecology as a formalised discipline is relatively new, especially as a field that includes the interdependence of earth systems. It was formalised as a science in the early 1950s with Eugene and Howard Odum publishing *Fundamentals of Ecology*, the first and only textbook in the field for about ten years. Among other things, the Odums explored how one natural system can interact with another.
28. Journalist George Monbiot is well known for his negative appraisal of Attenborough and the BBC – as recently as 2018 he accused him of 'knowingly creating a false impression of the

world' citing Attenborough's role in BBC productions that underplay human impact and fail to identify the forces that have driven environmental crisis. Monbiot, 'David Attenborough has betrayed the living world he loves,' *The Guardian*, 7 November 2020. [https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/nov/07/david-attenborough-world-environment-bbc-films].

29. Scholars have firmly established the manner and rationale by which the blue chip mode has offered a presentation of 'deep nature,' a version of nature that is impossibly insulated from human impacts and sociality. As Simon Cottle asserts that the '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.' Cottle, 'Producing,' 96-97. See Bousé (*Wildlife*), Armbruster ('Creating'), and Richards ('Greening') for further discussion of this point.
30. For example, in the wake of the broadcast of *Planet Earth II*, Neil Genzlinger takes aim at not only the explicit omission of environmental degradation, but also Attenborough's style of narration: 'Nature photography has rarely been as spectacular as it is in *Planet Earth II*, yet at the same time the reverent, nonjudgmental approach embodied by David Attenborough seems too dispassionate for the cultural and environmental moment, at least to an American audience.' Specifically tied to Attenborough's persona, Genzlinger's characterisation is a new iteration of disquiet about Attenborough's role in the environmental complicity of the blue chip mode (2017). Genzlinger, 'Not Enough Snakes in Your Nightmares? See *Planet Earth II*,' *The New York Times*, 17 February 2017. [https://www.nytimes.com/2017/02/17/arts/television/not-enough-snakes-in-your-nightmares-see-planet-earth-ii.html?mcubz=3].
31. See Richards for compelling discussion of Attenborough's rationale for standing back from environmental advocacy in blue chip programmes, which, as she notes, 'stems in part from the wildlife genres presentation of uncontroversial science.' Richards, 'Greening,' 173.
32. See Hutton and Connors for discussion about this moment. Drew Hutton and Libby Connors, *History of the Australian environment movement* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).
33. Warde, Robin and Sörlin chart the development of 'the environment' as an idea in the post war period. Paul Warde, Libby Robin and Sverker Sörlin *The Environment: A History of the Idea* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2018).
34. See Heise (2008).
35. The three-part series, *The Great Barrier Reef* (2015), is a co-production with the BBC and the Australian Broadcasting Corporation and an interesting example that offers a clearer indication of his interest in conservation science and technology. While it uses sophisticated natural history cinematography in parts, formally it is more aligned with television documentary (as can be seen by its use of interviews, re-enactments and data visualisation) than the landmark style that has been so successful for the BBC. *The Great Barrier Reef* is not central to my discussion because My interest is in Attenborough's work in the landmark style and its predecessor, *Zoo Quest*, as signally a particular kind of television.
36. *State of the Planet* (2000) was the first series written and presented by Attenborough to provide an unequivocal critique of anthropogenic environmental impacts. Its aesthetics are more conventional documentary than blue chip style. *Frozen Planet* (2011), a blue chip series narrated by Attenborough featured an episode that dealt with climate change which was offered as an optional extra in some markets (Richards (2013a, pp. 183-184). By 2019 the blue chip mode had been transformed with Attenborough narrating *Our Planet* (2019) for Netflix, and *Seven Worlds, One Planet* (2019) for BBC Earth.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

## Funding

This research was supported by the Australian Government through the Australian Research Council's *Discovery Projects* funding scheme (project DP190101178). The views expressed herein are those of the author and are not necessarily those of the Australian Government or Australian Research Council.

## Notes on contributor

*Belinda Smaill,* is an Associate Professor in Film and Screen Studies at Monash University in Melbourne. Her current research explores nonfiction and documentary screen culture, animals and the environment. She is the author of *The Documentary: Politics, Emotion, Culture* (2010), *Regarding Life: Animals and the Documentary Moving Image* (2016) and co-author of *Transnational Australian Cinema: Ethics in the Asian Diasporas* (2013). She is a Chief Investigator on the Australian Research Council funded project, Remaking the Australian Environment Through Documentary Film and Television.

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