

Instant Expert: Mental Health – Join our special event in London to discover the latest research into mental health and wellbeing

FEATURE 29 March 2018

David Attenborough: It's time we humans came to our senses

From the plastic age, to the tripling of our population and the destruction of the natural world, **David Attenborough** has seen it all, and issues a call to arms



David Levene/eyevine

By **David Attenborough**

It's very important that young people are involved because young people are going to inherit this place – it's their world that we're talking about. We aren't doing a very good job at the moment. We are letting down our young people, there is no doubt about that. Certainly the natural world is not as rich as it was when I was a boy.

It's an extraordinary thing. I started making television programmes in the 1950s (see David Attenborough's dino soars, below). There are now three times as many people

living in the world as there were then. Three times as many! They all need places to live and roads for their cars and hospitals and schools and places to grow food. Where is that going to come from? In the most part, it is going to come from the natural world, so the natural world is steadily being impoverished. The situation is becoming more and more dreadful and still our population continues to increase. It's about time that the human population of the world came to its senses and saw what we are doing – and did something about it.

Read more: Yorkshire's Jurassic World: David Attenborough opens new show

When I was at school in Leicester, I remember very well in the sixth form, the chemistry master coming in and saying “boys, the most marvellous advance has been made! Everybody thinks that you're living in the age of steam and electricity, but you're not. The next age has come. The age of plastic! Isn't it wonderful! Thanks to the cleverness of the scientists who produced it, this marvellous material is indestructible.” And neither I nor the chemistry master – nor many other people, I guess – said, what happens when it wears out? What are we going to do with it?

In those days – we're talking about the 1930s and 40s – we poured raw sewage into the seas on the basis that, oh well, the ocean is very big and will wash it all away. The profligacy, lack of thought and the careless irresponsibility of humanity to its surroundings is breath-taking. We are now reaping the consequences of that. It's time we thought about the next generation.

Epoch-making decisions

What more can we do? The fact of the matter is that lots of us have been talking about this problem for a long time. It felt that we were blowing into the wind, and nobody was taking any notice. But actually the Paris Agreement was an extraordinary statement. The nations of the world got together and said, we're going to do something about global warming. That was actually epoch-making. The fact that the US has withdrawn is a pity, a big pity, but it doesn't deflect all that much from what is still going to go ahead. A lot of people round the world think that America will change its mind about this.

The problem is so big that it can't be handled by voluntary bodies, it has to be handled by worldwide political agreement. That doesn't mean that private citizens don't have a role to play, of course they do, there is a lot we can do, but if we're going to handle this problem it has got to be a worldwide process.

It is extraordinary how long it takes people to wake up to these things. The northern white rhino been reduced to two individuals. Could we have prevented it? Of course we could. Should we have prevented it? Of course we should.

We have done some things. Fifty years ago, the Arabian oryx was reduced to a tiny number. It was extinct in the wild. A group of conservationists got together and established a small herd in the US and bred them up and reintroduced them.

Care for the natural world

But what we tend to do is to think, oh, that is particularly beautiful and graceful and

wonderful, what a pity we're missing it. But that is not what we should be doing. We should be caring for the natural world, not just the things that happen to appeal to us.

The earth sciences are the basic sciences from which we start and unless we know the processes that control Earth we aren't going to be able to handle them.

I was educated in geology, to an extent, but when I was 16 I didn't think about the consequences for the economy, I just wanted to know about fossils. But economically earth sciences are extremely important. We get so much from Earth, raw materials.

But having said what I just said, part of the joy of life is to know and appreciate the world in which we live in, which is full of wonder. Life isn't all measured out by practicability. Life has got relish and delight in it too.

David Attenborough's dino soars

One of the first television programmes I ever made was about pterosaurs, the flying reptiles that flew over the heads of the dinosaurs. One of the early ones, pterodactyl, was found in the Jurassic down on the south coast in Devon. I had the idea that, in order to try to bring it alive, we should make a model, a radio-controlled model that would soar over the cliffs. So we built this life-sized pterodactyl and we flew it over the cliffs, banking to and forth, and we filmed it. Fantastic!

That evening I had to go back to London to do something for a conservation charity. I went to this rather posh gathering of people, and a lady – who I think must have been a duchess because she had a pearl choker on – said “Oh, Mr Attenborough, lovely to see you! What exciting creature have you been filming for us?” And I thought, this is going to knock her for six! So I said, “As a matter of fact, I've been filming a pterodactyl soaring over the cliffs of southern England.” And she said, “Oh, they're so lovely, aren't they!”

Based on a press conference given by David Attenborough at the Yorkshire Museum on 23 March. Words have been lightly edited for clarity and brevity.

