Turning trailblazing science into agenda-setting TV

NERC science helps to shape BBC nature documentaries that drive public policy and change the way people choose to live their lives – extraordinary, award-winning programmes watched by millions and exported worldwide.

Why it matters
Raising awareness, informing attitudes, challenging preconceptions – television remains a massively influential medium. The BBC’s hugely popular nature documentaries are perfect examples of beautifully made programmes that create a lasting impression. Iconic series such as Blue Planet II, Planet Earth II and Frozen Planet have delivered a dramatic wake-up call to the world on key environmental issues, from climate change to plastic pollution of the oceans. To be effective, programmes like these have to harness the very best, very latest environmental research and the incredible new insights it generates.

Actions and outputs
NERC’s long-term support for world-class science, training, infrastructure and innovation has played a pivotal role in ensuring these documentaries provide authoritative, captivating television. For example:

- NERC’s British Antarctic Survey (BAS) has a long-term relationship with the Natural History Unit. Involved in all of the recent blockbusters, BAS staff have contributed to programme development, facilitated access to the polar regions, appeared onscreen and worked with camera crews to apply new technology and techniques to capture ground-breaking footage.
- Frozen Planet and Blue Planet II were both co-productions between the BBC’s Natural History Unit and The Open University (OU), with NERC-supported researchers at the OU playing a crucial role as series advisors.
- All three academic consultants working on Blue Planet II, who were based at the universities of Exeter, Oxford and York, were NERC-funded researchers. In total, NERC had supported 95% of all UK-based science advisors that contributed to the series, through research grants, studentships and institutional funding.

88% of Blue Planet II viewers said the series inspired them to change their behaviour.

78% of Blue Planet II viewers said they now tried to buy less single-use plastic.

£300m to be paid by the Discovery Channel to include BBC natural history shows on its new global streaming service.

Contributing to the UN Sustainable Development Goals

88%

78%

£300m
Impacts and benefits

• **Inspiring vital environmental action:** In total, over a billion people worldwide saw *Blue Planet II* and *Planet Earth II*, while *Frozen Planet* – the first prime-time BBC1 show to devote an entire hour to the effects of climate change on polar regions – was the UK’s most-watched natural history programme for a decade. The impact of the BBC’s nature documentaries is correspondingly huge. *Blue Planet II*, for example, catapulted plastic pollution up the public agenda in the UK and internationally, changing perceptions and behaviour, and has been cited repeatedly in policy announcements and calls for action⁶, including a high-profile speech by the Prime Minister in January 2018⁷.

• **Generating valuable export income:** *Blue Planet II* was BBC Worldwide’s most popular programme of 2017-18, selling to 234 territories by year-end⁸, while a £300m deal between the BBC and the Discovery Channel for natural history programmes, represents “the largest content deal the BBC has ever done” according to the BBC’s Director General⁵.

• **Boosting British influence worldwide:** The documentaries add to the UK’s ‘soft power’ by projecting a compelling image of the UK as a global leader in the production of high-quality, high-impact TV and in environmental science that delivers profound real-world benefits. In the US, *Blue Planet II* became the most watched advertising-supported nature documentary in nearly eight years and the same series amassed over 250 million views on China’s Tencent video-on-demand service⁹.

**Future view**

NERC-funded scientists are already hard at work helping the BBC deliver its ‘biggest ever commitment to natural history’ in the shape of new landmark programmes such as *Perfect Planet*, *Frozen Planet II* and *Planet Earth III*.⁹

“We simply couldn’t make programmes like *Blue Planet II* without the insight and support of the UK environmental science community. We look forward to strengthening these close collaborations in the future.”

*James Honeyborne, Executive Producer, Blue Planet II*

**Some of the scientists behind the successes**

**Professor Mark Brandon:** A renowned polar scientist, Mark was Principal Academic Advisor on *Frozen Planet*. He helped shape the content of the series – including Sir David Attenborough’s distinctive, thought-provoking documentary and his own seminal NERC-supported work on Antarctic ocean circulation and on ice-sheet melting, carried out using NERC’s autonomous underwater vehicles.

**Dr Lucy Quinn:** Lucy (pictured above) provided the focus of one of the most harrowing, most talked-about sequences in *Blue Planet II* in which albatross parents were seen to be feeding plastic to their young. In an interview filmed on location in South Georgia, she revealed how plastic debris polluting the world’s oceans is seriously harming seabird populations¹⁰. This problem was originally discovered as a result of long-term NERC-funded monitoring of bird populations.

**Professor Steve Simpson:** A marine biologist, fish ecologist and twice a NERC Fellow, Steve was a Series Academic Advisor on *Blue Planet II*. Appearing on screen in the final episode, he revealed how the seemingly silent aquatic world is actually filled with noise – including man-made disturbances that are increasingly affecting animal behaviour in the world’s seas and oceans¹¹.

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1. 59% of UK adults say they watch at least one science/nature documentary a month: ComRes research (2017).
2. BBC BOOKS (2018), Blue Planet II: A New World of Hidden Depths.
3. WARTOSE AND PARTNERS (2019), Food and Drink Report 2018-19. Figure for UK viewers.
4. KEEP BRITAIN TIDY (2019). News release. Figure for UK viewers.
6. Examples: Potential plastic tax, ocean plastic, royal estates.
7. Prime Minister’s speech on the environment, 11 January 2018.
10. BBC (2017), Online extract from Blue Planet II.