

## Happy birthday, David Attenborough! 99 ways he has inspired us, by Barack Obama, Billie Eilish, Morgan Freeman – and many more

This week the presenter turns 99. To celebrate, we asked 99 nature lovers – including Margaret Atwood, Jane Fonda, Bono, Kate Winslet and Michael Palin – how he has helped us see the world with fresh eyes

Sat 3 May 2025 06.00 BST

Chris Packham

*Presenter, nature activist*

It's all about truth. Ask yourself, "Has David ever knowingly lied to me?" No, never. He may have told us things 40 years ago that science has updated, but he's always told us the truth. In an age when it's hard to trust anyone, that stands as his greatest asset.

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Robert Macfarlane

*Writer*

Watching David, I came to realise that every time we recognise something human in creatures, we are also recognising something creaturely in ourselves. That is central to the rejection of human supremacism as the pernicious doctrine it is.

## **Barack Obama**

*44th US president*

I know, from watching David's programmes, that our ecosystems are all interconnected and that if just one country is doing the right thing but other countries are not, then we're not going to solve the problem.



With Barack Obama in 2015. Photograph: Chuck Kennedy/The White/BBC/PA

## **Arundhati Roy**

*Author*

He showed how every living thing on this planet is connected to another living thing. Alone, we are nothing. We own nothing, we control nothing except perhaps for the lever that could destroy everything.

## **John Ellis**

*Professor of media arts*

For eight years, Attenborough was a revered BBC senior manager – but he refused to be director general. Admirably, he preferred programmes to power. That’s rare in TV, and something we can all learn from.

## **Monty Don**

*Horticulturist, broadcaster*

When I was starting out in television, I saw a clip of David and his director discussing a piece to camera for *The Private Life of Plants*. David said, “But what are we actually trying to say here?” then went on to deliver something succinct but with immense insight. That simple remark has remained with me ever since.



Making *The Private Life of Plants* in 1993. Photograph: Neil Nightingale/naturepl.com

## **Helen Jukes**

*Author*

The number of times I’ve typed “[Attenborough slug sex](#)” into YouTube ... David brings us the weird, wild and wonderful, so we can meet it up close and afresh.

## **Margaret Atwood**

*Author*

I was living in Edinburgh when David Attenborough’s first series launched. Nobody was to be seen on the streets on those nights. They were all home watching – a look at nature as they had never seen it before.

## **Mike Gunton**

*Creative director, BBC Natural History Unit*

Thirty-five years ago, David told me after the series we were working on, he was going

to retire. Given he is now 99, still working and still enjoying it, I think the lesson there is: for a long and happy life, don't retire!



With Mike Gunton in 2023. Photograph: PA Images/Alamy

## **George Monbiot**

*Guardian columnist*

A few years ago, [I was sharply critical](#) of Sir David for downplaying the environmental crisis on his TV programmes. Most people would have reacted badly but remarkably, at 92, he took this and similar critiques on board and radically changed his approach.

## **Samantha Harvey**

*Booker prize-winning author*

I can never forget [the nightmarish bird-eating snake](#) that tricks its prey into thinking it's a spider. David Attenborough has taught me humility; humans are amazing, but only as amazing as every other creature.

## **Caroline Lucas**

*Green party MP*

I'll never forget the mountain gorillas in *Life on Earth* welcoming David with such trust and playfulness. I'd never appreciated their immense gentleness. As he says, "It seems unfair man should have chosen the gorilla to symbolise all that is aggressive and violent when that's the one thing the gorilla is not and we are."





With gorillas, filming *Life on Earth* in 1979. Photograph: BBC

## **Billie Eilish**

### *Musician*

David Attenborough's deep love and knowledge of our planet and the animal kingdom brings out the childlike curiosity within us all. He's a living treasure.

## **Mia Mottley**

### *Prime minister of Barbados*

His voice has stirred the conscience of our planet and awakened generations to the wonder and urgency of protecting our natural world.

## **Doug Allan**

### *Wildlife and documentary cameraman*

David's deep concern for conservation extends to his camera crews. Producer Mike wanted him to drive a snowmobile, but David was hesitant when I proposed lying on the snow while he zoomed past, so he did it too far away. "Closer please," I said. David's reply? "Imagine the paperwork if I run you over."



Gentoo penguin meets leopard seal in 2019, for Seven Worlds, OnePlanet. Photograph: BBC/PA

## **Morgan Freeman**

*Actor*

I've spent hours captivated by his storytelling and reminded of the beauty and fragility of the world we share. David Attenborough is one of my favourite narrators, bringing the wonders of our planet to life in a way that's both inspiring and unforgettable.

## **Hannah Bourne-Taylor**

*Author, swift campaigner*

Attenborough taught me to convert my deep love of birds into action to save them. The average return date of swifts to Britain is his birthday. That says it all.

## **Dr Paula Kahumbu**

*Conservationist, WildlifeDirect CEO*

Through him, I discovered the power of storytelling to move entire nations to love, care and act to protect nature. He inspired me to tell African stories through African eyes, transforming conservation outcomes.



In northern Kenya in 1961, with Elsa the lioness, whose story was turned into Born Free, a film and later a [wildlife conservation charity](#). Photograph: BBC Pictures Archives

## **Lily Cole**

*Model, environmental advocate*

David Attenborough has taught that any hope of protecting the extraordinary biodiversity of our planet begins with curiosity, love and wonder.

## **Steve Backshall**

*TV presenter, wildlife expert*

I learned, via David, how to approach your heroes. A friend who had been his producer said, “When you meet Sir David, don’t go down on one knee and tell him how much he’s inspired you. He’s spent decades being told that. Talk about the rugby, that’ll be much more up his street.” We presented some awards together and, as luck would have it, the Irish had just beaten the All Blacks. We spent hours gabbing about it.

## **Michael Palin**

*Presenter, comedian*

When Monty Python first aired, the BBC put it on late, hoping no one would notice. At a BBC event, the only one who’d talk to us was David Attenborough, then director of programmes, who told us the more they tried to stop it being seen, the greater would be our cult following. He was right. Years later, David, now the most respected man in television, was to receive an award at the Canadian embassy. He strolled in alone, unnoticed. I told him I admired him for arriving with so little fuss. Almost apologetically, he said, “Oh, I came here yesterday as well. It was the wrong night.”



With Michael Palin in 2002. Photograph: Richard Kendal/BBC

## **Maria Isabel Sánchez Vegara**

*Author of children’s book David Attenborough: Little People, Big Dreams*

When David was just a boy, a friend sent him a dried seahorse for his fossil collection. The tiny treasure sparked a decision – he would become a naturalist. That was 90 years ago. It’s a beautiful reminder that even the smallest gift, shared with wonder, can ignite a passion that lasts a lifetime.

## **Will Whatley**

*Captain of RRS Sir David Attenborough*

Sir David taught me not to take yourself too seriously. While we were building the Royal Research Ship Sir David Attenborough, I had the idea that he could record the onboard announcements – and he kindly agreed. Newcomers get a good chuckle when we play his message about the status of the toilets.

## **Doug Anderson**

*Wildlife cameraman*

For 30 years I've worked as a wildlife cameraman beneath the waves, in silence and shifting light. Yet in my mind David Attenborough often speaks – giving voice to wonder, turning moments into meaning. When the sea is unkind, when doubt sets in, I still hear him, calm and clear: "Stay with it, Doug. Trust the process. Trust the journey."



Filming *Life on Earth* in 1979. Photograph: BBC Picture Publicity

## **Jane Fonda**

*Actor, activist*

I have watched every one of his documentaries. There is so much to learn and love, but particularly how he shows us the interconnectedness of the natural world: everything matters, and we must fight to save it all.

## **Simon Armitage**

*Poet laureate*

David's broadcasting style isn't just about the science of the natural world. His voice is one of wonder that we have the good fortune to exist in the same space and time as these bewildering, beautiful creatures.



## **Hamza Yassin**

*Strictly winner, children's TV presenter*

David Attenborough taught me everything about the natural world as a young boy arriving in the UK from Sudan. He instilled the excitement in me to follow my dream of becoming a wildlife cameraman.

## **Emily Eavis**

*Co-organiser of Glastonbury festival*

There is a spark, a shimmer of youth in him – you can see it when he talks to children. When he came to Glastonbury, we were lucky enough to meet him and my youngest kid asked, “Which is your favourite country and where would you most like to live?” He said, without hesitation, “Great Britain”, listing all the reasons, including our wonderful seasons, astonishing wildlife and the diversity in landscapes.



At Glastonbury in 2019. Photograph: David Levene/The Guardian

## **Chloe Cobham**

*Former neighbour*

My dad lived next door to David Attenborough when I was six. One afternoon, we discovered what my father remembers to be a chipmunk in our kitchen. Unsure what to do, my dad rang his doorbell. To our shock and delight, he was round in a flash and rescued it. Some years later, I wrote to him about a science project, regaled the chipmunk tale and asked some inane questions about jellyfish. He quickly responded with a handwritten letter assuring me he remembered the incident and answering my queries.

## **Sam Lee**

*Singer, writer, naturalist*

It was Sir David's first job, as a folk song collector for the BBC, that inspired me. These songs are examples of ancient forms of land stewardship. Could their old truths be central to his campaign today to bring about societal change to protect our beleaguered wildlife?

## **Ben Fogle**

*Presenter, adventurer, author*

David is the reason I do what I do. As a child, he rewilded me, providing a bridge between my urban home and the jungles and deserts of faraway places. The first time I met him was the day my wife was due to give birth to our second child. She suggested I join her first, then go and interview my hero. It was the best day of my life ... for two reasons!



Filming in the Suguta valley in northern Kenya in 2013. Photograph: David Chancellor/BBC

## **Dave Reay**

*Climate scientist*

David has shaped my entire life. He's shown me life on Earth is miraculous, beautiful, brutal; that all species matter and in harming nature we harm ourselves. He's also made clear that I make awful cups of tea.

## **Robin Hanbury-Tenison**

*Survival International founder*

David's The Tribal Eye series was one of the first to reveal the wisdom of indigenous societies, how much they have contributed to culture and how much better they are than us at protecting the environment.

## **Jane Goodall**

### *Conservationist*

He has done more than anyone to educate people around the globe about the magic of the natural world, so more and more are working to protect the environment and the ecosystems that support life.



With Jane Goodall in 2010. Photograph: Wenn Ltd/Alamy

## **Jay Griffiths**

### *Writer*

From the start, he spoke to animals in friendship and presented them to us as friends. This helped shift attitudes, to see them not as aliens or prey but “persons” in their own right.

## **Mike Salisbury**

### *Retired TV executive*

David’s willingness to put up with any discomfort – mud, cold, wading through swamps, getting bitten by army ants – for the sake of a good piece to camera was an inspiration to me when we were working together. And if things went wrong, as they often did, so was his huge chuckle!

## **António Guterres**

### *UN secretary-general*

“If working apart, we are a force powerful enough to destabilise our planet,” David once said, “surely, working together, we are powerful enough to save it.” He has taught us we must unite to tell leaders enough is enough. Act now to protect people and nature.

## **Beccy Speight**

*RSPB CEO*

In Wild Isles, he waves goodbye to a Manx shearwater chick taking off on a 6,000 mile flight. “Good luck, good luck!” he chuckles. “What an astonishment!” So human, rooting for the individual bird while also teaching us the wonder its journey represents.



Birdwatching in 1995. Photograph: Marinepics Ltd/Shutterstock

## **Ben Goldsmith**

*Environmentalist*

My love of wildlife has been nourished by David’s documentaries since childhood. The best moments I spent with my late father were watching footage of wildlife, including from our garden: blue tits raising their young, ponds teeming with frogs, foxes fighting.

## **Simon Barnes**

*Nature writer*

I was once asked to speak at a World Land Trust fundraiser. So was its patron – which is why I refused: “You can’t ask me to follow David Attenborough.” They insisted – and it was then I realised I’ve been following him all my life. The world would be a better place if everyone else was to follow him, too.

## **Bella Lack**

*Environmentalist*

I have seen young people increasingly disenchanted, wrestled from the biophilic human tendency to lean towards the natural world. It’s Sir David who has stirred up the restless curiosity that brought us back.



## **Amy-Jane Beer**

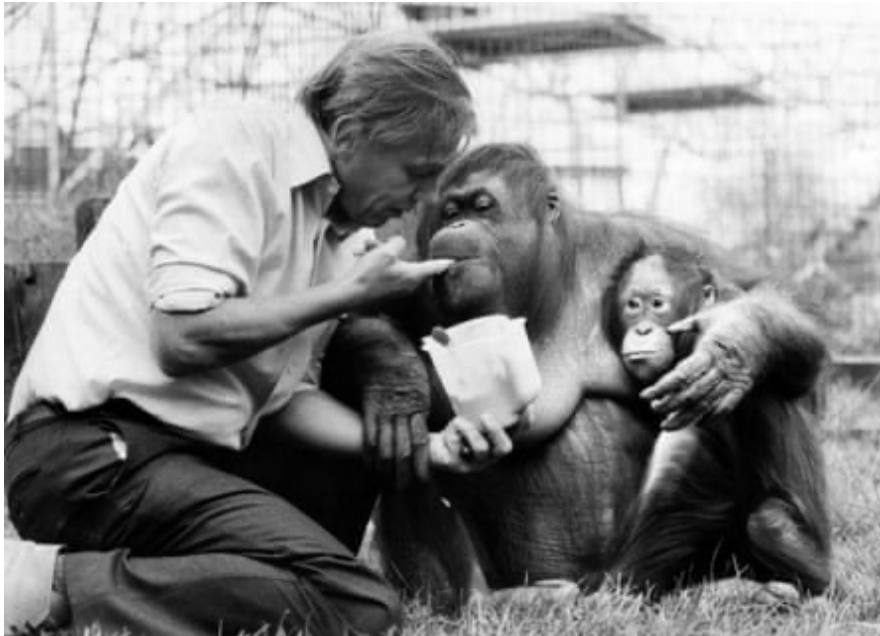
*Right to Roam activist, nature writer*

Sir David is the closest we have to a real-world Gandalf or Merlin. Aided by longevity, tech-wizardry and a host of animal familiars, his quests have enriched, bewitched, inspired and motivated generations.

## **Michael Morpurgo**

*Author*

He has opened hearts and minds to the connection we share with every species, and renewed in us the understanding that we are the sisters and brothers of all those with whom we share this planet. He has passed on his knowledge and love of the wild world, and given us a chance as a species to redeem ourselves.



With orangutans at London zoo in 1982. Photograph: Mirrorpix/Getty Images

## **Ed Miliband**

*UK secretary of state for energy and net zero*

Nobody has done more to fill us with awe about our world, or to inspire us to protect and preserve it for future generations. David is a true British hero.

## **Mary Colwell**

*Environmentalist, writer*

David is an honest broker in a time of increasing divisions, even between groups who identify as nature lovers but seem to be at war. We need leaders like this more than ever, to speak out for the natural world with compassion and purity of vision.

## **Joe Lycett**

### *Comedian*

Before doing something I'm unsure about, I think: would David Attenborough approve? If not, I (usually) don't do it. Among all his achievements, his role as our national moral compass is the most important.

## **Simon King**

### *Conservationist, presenter*

In an age of celebrity for celebrity's sake, David is atypical. Despite being one of the most famous people on the planet, he remains humble and puts the focus of his passion – the natural world – front and centre.



Working on Zoo Quest in 1954. Photograph: © David Attenborough

## **Megan McCubbin**

### *Broadcaster*

Even though he's travelled the globe seeing rare and endangered wildlife, he still comes home to admire the blackbirds in his garden. An important reminder to recognise the extraordinary in the ordinary.

## **Mike Dilger**

### *Naturalist, broadcaster*

As a mediocre student, I won a school award for “trying hard” and bought *Life on Earth* by a certain D Attenborough. This fabulous book lit a fire in my 12-year-old soul, that 46 years on still blazes away, with a burning desire (like him) to spark an interest in the natural world in anyone willing to listen.

## **Kate Humble**

*TV presenter*

When you see something you've never seen before, you need a guide. Someone with authority, but who doesn't talk down to you. Someone with knowledge they want to share. Someone with infectious enthusiasm, always curious, always with a sense of wonder. Someone who tells the story without making themselves the story. And that's David.



With Kate Humble in 2010. Photograph: Hilary Jeffkins/BBC

## **Diane Boyd**

*Author*

As a wolf and carnivore biologist, I was amazed by [David's show on pitcher plants](#), which ingest insects and mice through mimicry and entrapment. Who knew these beauties could be so dangerous?

## **Christy Lefteri**

*Author of The Beekeeper of Aleppo*

I have been haunted by David Attenborough's stark warnings about the climate crisis. I learned from him that fires should regenerate a landscape, but instead they are becoming destructive, ferocious. I visited a burned-down forest near Athens where once lived birds of prey and foxes and weasels and butterflies and bats and snakes and lizards. A wildfire had ripped through, transforming it to ash and ghosts.

## **Craig Bennett**

*The Wildlife Trusts CEO*

The Victorian tradition of natural history was very much about cataloguing species, almost in isolation from their environment. But as a child of the 70s and 80s, watching The World About Us with boiled eggs and toast for Sunday night tea, Sir David taught me to celebrate the infinite connections of Life on Earth.

## Stephen Moss

*Former wildlife TV producer*

“Ah, you’re the birdman!” were David’s first words to me, swiftly followed by, “I don’t really know much about birds.” Not false modesty, but because he has always seen himself as a popular communicator rather than an academic expert. He does, of course, have an immense avian knowledge, as I discovered while interviewing him for the series *Birds Britannia*, during which he offered his insights into what birds truly mean to “the health of the human spirit”, while delighting in the noisy parakeets in his garden.



With daughter Susan and cockatoo Georgie in 1957. Photograph: Smith Archive/Alamy

## Rowan Williams

*Theologian, poet*

There are people who seem to think concern for the natural world somehow sidelines characteristically human concerns. David Attenborough makes it clear deep attention to our environment nourishes all that is most humane and generous in us – and if we lose this capacity for caring attention, we lose our souls.

## Benedict Allen

*Writer, explorer, film-maker*

He once said to me, “In the end, Benedict, I’m a professional communicator. And I chose to communicate what I passionately care about: our planet.” I thought that was perfect. Also, I love that he inspired my friend’s daughter with a long, heartfelt letter, replying to her scribbled little note as a very young fan. She’s now a grownup, and an ecologist.



## **Ben Okri**

### *Author*

The chief thing learned from David Attenborough is that longevity in the service of a leading interest is one of the most powerful things in the world. Year after year, just when you would think there is nothing more to be said about the mole or the seal, the tiger cub or the zebra, David finds a new lyricism in the ordinary denizens of the natural world going about their business wholly unaware of being observed and gushed over by this passionate Englishman.



With Ben Okri at the Observer Magazine ethical awards in 2009. Photograph: Suki Dhanda/The Guardian

## **Inger Andersen**

### *Executive director of the United Nations Environment Programme*

As part of Blue Planet II, Sir David captured the beauty of our oceans and the threats they are facing, including the impacts of plastic pollution. It helped build momentum behind a global call to action.

## **Lucy Lapwing**

### *Broadcaster, naturalist*

In admiring David, I've learned it's OK to be critical of your heroes. David has inspired millions, but he's not infallible. People have called for him to be more outspoken, and it's working: recent documentaries have highlighted the plight of the natural world in the face of the climate and consumption crises. I've also learned the spider-tailed horned viper has a tail that resembles an arachnid. Nature is incredible.

## **Chantelle Lindsay**

### *Conservationist, presenter*

David's voice and vast knowledge have long been a soundtrack to my journey of connecting with nature. In *Life*, I cried at the beautiful mating ritual of the Clark's grebe. Who said romance was only for humans?



Making the 1976 series The Discoverers. Photograph: Barry Boxall/BBC

## **Philip Bernie**

*Head of BBC sport content*

Among his many extraordinary achievements, David Attenborough notably advanced sport on television when he was controller of BBC Two in the late 60s. He was responsible for Wimbledon being the first regular colour TV offering and for developing snooker as a TV sport, now you could see the balls in colour.

## **Louis Theroux**

*Broadcaster, writer*

I've watched David Attenborough's programmes my whole life and what I am inspired by, other than the obvious warmth and intelligence, is the economy of his writing and the music of how he delivers the lines: the pauses, the inflection, how he can imbue even a single word with wit. He never says too much.

## **Benedict Macdonald**

*Writer, founder of Restore*

The lesson I remember from David is, when creating a sequence, "don't just show what has happened, but why it is important". We spent two years setting up shoots in Sumatra for Our Planet, trying to capture [orangutans using tools](#) for the first time. But it was the emotional resonance of the wider setting that made the story; here they were, showing near-human behaviour, in a habitat being cut down by humans.

## **Dr Mya-Rose Craig**

*AKA Birdgirl, Black2Nature founder*

As a child who was aware their love of birds was seen as odd, I lived for each Attenborough documentary that came to our living rooms. His love of birds helped me learn mine wasn't weird, that it makes sense to be excited by the natural world humans are part of.



With Mya-Rose Craig in 2016. Photograph: courtesy of Mya-Rose Craig

## **Lizzy Crotty**

*Australian conservationist*

When I met Sir David, what struck me most was his sense of humour. He reminded me that, while conservation is serious work, we won't last if we don't find joy along the way.

## **Charles Foster**

*Author of *Cry of the Wild**

It's not the epic elements of David's work that stay with me – the high drama of a hunt across the plains, or the ant's eye view of an aphid – but his childlike wonder at it all. David shows us it's intellectually respectable to love the non-human world, and if you observe closely, you'll get very emotional about it.

## **Tim Hannigan**

*Travel writer*

Britain's rich tradition of nature writing wouldn't exist without David. His documentaries introduced me to nature as narrative. The shock of the revelation that chimpanzees sometimes hunt other animals – and behave in uncannily familiar ways – still lingers.

## **Chloe Dalton**

*Author*

Watching his presentation of [the male bowerbird's efforts to lure a mate](#), I realised nature contains more wonders than can be observed in a single lifespan, but a lifetime can be spent learning from its secrets.

## **Michael Malay**

### *Nature writer*

In one of her letters, Elizabeth Bishop described the qualities she admired in Charles Darwin: exactness of attention and openness to mystery. Behind the patient collector of “facts and minute details”, she glimpsed a “young man ... sliding giddily off into the unknown”. She could have easily been describing David Attenborough. He, too, has helped us see the world with greater respect, care, accuracy and joy.



With the Zoo Quest team in 1956, en route to Komodo, island home of the giant lizard.  
Photograph: © David Attenborough

## **Huw Cordey**

### *Wildlife documentary-maker*

David radiates confidence and calmness (although I discovered on a shoot he has a phobia of rats). I was once working with him in Bristol when he got a call to say there'd been a mix-up and he had a speaking engagement in St Paul's in London that afternoon – he was doing the keynote speech, which he'd done nothing to prepare for. He didn't seem at all flustered. Next day, I asked how it went. “Oh, fine,” he said. “I waved my arms around a bit and it seemed to work.”

## **Bill Bailey**

### *Comedian, musician, writer*

His elegant, unceasing advocacy for the planet is an example to us all. To paraphrase the Victorian naturalist and explorer [Alfred Russel Wallace](#), he is himself one of the great productions of nature.

## **Dara McAnulty**

### *Author, conservationist*

David Attenborough's unwavering voice follows you when you're out in nature. Recently, on a field trip to Borneo, I was (nastily) bitten by a centipede, thanks to my naive explorer complex (which he also inspired). Of course his voice rang in my ears, his indomitable, and sometimes necessary, admonishing narrative. That's the power of his presence, his embodiment of the joy and wonder of the natural world.



## **Lorraine Kelly**

*TV presenter, author*

I was honoured to interview the great man and wanted to sit at his feet and listen to him for hours – he has so much wisdom, compassion and humanity. He saved me when I was editing my book while camping in remote Zimbabwe. The only wifi was at anti-poaching stations and when I showed them a pic of me and him, I was given all the internet access I needed.



David Attenborough's Madame Tussauds waxwork with Lorraine Kelly in 2023. Photograph: Ken McKay/ITV/Shutterstock

## **Helen Macdonald**

*Author*

*Life on Earth* was a foundational experience for me. Deeply serious and founded on cutting-edge science, it was lit with devotion and fascination. *Look*, he said. *Look at this*. He showed us what was there. And that, ever since, is what I have tried to do.

## **Kate Winslet**

*Actor*

Before the digital world filled our everyday lives, we lived in a different time. David Attenborough remains, for me, an integral part of how things used to be. Our more plentiful oceans, our verdant, bulging rainforests, full of species that thrived before their natural habitats came under such serious threat. He is someone I would swim through stormy seas to meet. In a declining world when we desperately need compassionate anchors, David is that anchor for so many, showing us depths and beauty that won't be with us forever, forming a picture for future generations of just how vital it is to stay educated, to stay curious.

## **Hans Zimmer**

*Composer*

I've been a film composer all my life, telling stories with music. I've worked on [countless movies](#) – some great, some good and some I'd rather not mention. But I've always loved the process, the endless hunt for the right note, which expresses something that can't be elegantly expressed in images or words alone.

And then, one day, Sir David and the BBC Natural History Unit came knocking on my door and seduced me with the truth and beauty of extraordinary pictures, tales of courage and a love of the world we have the honour to share with fascinating and extraordinary creatures. And the power of Sir David's message, always spoken gently with his extraordinary human spirit and intellect, reaching out to us – profoundly moving and kind, full of hope and love – convincing me that now, I've finally found the reason for my work.

## **Sadiq Khan**

*Mayor of London*

He is a guiding light in our efforts to make London a more sustainable city. From parks to rivers, his influence can be felt across our green and blue spaces.



With Sadiq Khan in 2016. Photograph: David M Benett/Getty Images

## **Lira Valencia**

[\*Wildlife influencer\*](#), *volunteer ranger*

I often think why did someone like me get into nature? A council estate girl from the city, destined for the corporate world. David has the gift of inspiring people from all walks of life to appreciate and respect nature – a real super power and key to a greener future.

## **Tony Juniper**

*Chair of Natural England*

I have never forgotten Sir David telling of the huge significance of the evolution of grasses. They are the basis of food webs that include grazing mammals and predators such as lions, because they grow from the bottom up, not the top, like other plants. When I see a neatly trimmed lawn, this pops into my mind.

## **Bill McKibben**

*Climate activist, author*

His whole life has been a remarkable journey, but the last couple of decades are a powerful reminder that long experience can produce deep clarity.



Abseiling down a living wall in 2016. Photograph: Toby Smith/Geoff Robinson Photography

## **Melissa Harrison**

### *Author*

There's respect and patience in his approach to nature: it's not all drama and spectacle, but also waiting, at times failing, it's about smaller, intimate behaviours, and not inserting yourself into what's unfolding. Just sitting on a riverbank watching fish flick about feels like something David showed me how to do.

## **Fiona Mathews**

### *Professor of environmental biology*

I first met David with a bat in my hand. We were at an event with throngs of people and he made a beeline for me as soon as he saw the bat. It turns out they are among his favourite animals, demonstrating his true love of the weird, wonderful creatures of the planet.

## **Farhana Yamin**

### *Climate lawyer, author*

I came to the UK from Pakistan in 1973. My dad banned "western" TV but Life on Earth was allowed – Attenborough's storytelling made everything fascinating, whether it was about exotic creatures such as cheetahs or insects in our gardens. My sense that nature is a source of delight but that we have a responsibility to protect it comes from him.

## **Molly Easton**

### *Co-director of [Youngwilders](#)*

Attenborough taught me nature is something we do together – not just watch "over there". Visually, this is strongest when he's interacting with wildlife (my favourite is him observing a bowerbird's nest). Seeing ourselves as active participants in nature is key.



With a pygmy goanna in 1984. Photograph: Fairfax Media Archives/Getty Images

### **Bono and Ali Hewson**

*Musician and activist/businesswoman*

In a world full of noise, you find signal with a whisper. Your voice the greatest voice of them all, to sing without singing is a gift beyond us mere vocalists.

Your melody lines bounce around the cathedral that is the natural world and bring us to awe ... We feel the divinity in every tiny thing.

You bring us silence as we wait for the gurgle clack and roar of the animal kingdom, the harmonics of the ocean, muted but pealing, the rhythm and squeal of the rainforest.

We have listened to your voice in our home for as long as I can remember ... It's been a voice of wonder ... You, sir, are a wonder. Happy birthday.

### **David Obura**

*Marine ecologist, coral expert*

I was brought up on *Life on Earth*. I received the book as a birthday present before I turned 13, still on my bookshelf now. I pored through each chapter, then waited with bated breath for episodes flown to Kenya on VHS video, screened at sporadic movie nights. I wonder that his words now sound close to a semi-obituary for nature that can yet be beautiful, but must be at a new balance with our overbearing species.

### **Colin Butfield**

*Co-author with David Attenborough of *Ocean: Earth's Last Wilderness**

I remember, before I met him, watching in *The Life of Mammals* a blue whale breaking through the water as he perched in a small boat only a metre or so away. It was 2002, so there were no drones or satellite tags to help them locate the whale. Most of us would have said "wow" or waffled a few rehearsed facts. David told a story. I've learned many things from working with him but the one that stays with me is the power of turning expert research into a fascinating story.



Filming A Life on Our Planet with Colin Butfield in 2018. Photograph: Conor McDonnell

## **Chris Watson**

*Musician, sound recordist*

In April 2010, I was standing with David at the north pole. The Russian helicopter that had flown us there had just taken to the air to film him standing alone on the ice. I had stayed to keep him company and would duck behind a slab of sea ice when the helicopter returned. As we chatted, we observed that in one direction was the US while to our left was Europe and farther over was Asia. All the time zones on the planet converged at our feet, so what time was it for us?

## **Helen Czerski**

*Physicist, oceanographer, presenter*

The UK named a research vessel for him and I saw it being built and talked to him about it. His excitement was focused on the science it would enable, and the new ideas, new knowledge and new perspectives on the natural world that would come with it. It was humbling to see such indomitable curiosity, alongside the absolute conviction that nature will always have something fascinating to teach us.

## **Raynor Winn**

*Author*

David taught us to look below the surface, observe the detail, then question what we saw. I received the Life on Earth book as a school prize in 1979. Since then, he's taught us all how to see what's really happening, not just in nature but in the wider shifting world.

## **Tanya Steele**

*WWF CEO*

David is famous for his words, yet he is a generous listener, whether discussing politics or a new species. I'm inspired by his willingness to be a voice for nature in the corridors of power as well as our living rooms.



## **Louis Jadwat**

*Club promoter*

You might not think of David Attenborough as having a big impact on clubbing, but in 2018 a student party my friend Will and I threw, [celebrating him](#), went viral. We turned a Leeds venue into a jungle and filled it with cardboard cutouts and masks. Then the DJ cut his narration over tracks. It led to a sort of collective joy, realising he'd taught a generation to find excitement and happiness in the natural world.

## **Mary Robinson**

*Former president of Ireland, former UN human rights commissioner and climate envoy*

Our family loved watching David Attenborough's films, enthralled by his wonder and joy. Gradually, watching with grandchildren, I became irritated. Why did he not mention the climate crisis? When he did, with increasing authority, what a difference he made!



With Mary Robinson, receiving an honorary degree from Trinity College Dublin in 2008.  
Photograph: PA Images/Alamy

## **Elif Shafak**

*Author, activist*

For me, David Attenborough is, first and foremost, an exquisite storyteller, making “the invisible” more visible and bringing the “far away” closer to our homes and thus our hearts. In an age in which we need to connect the dots and see how deeply interconnected we all are beyond borders, he is a bridge builder between cultures and continents, humans and nature.

## **Debbie Pain**

*Conservation biologist, ecotoxicologist*

In 2016 David Attenborough wrote a letter on behalf of the World Land Trust, for which I worked, opposing plans to build an environmentally disastrous road bridge across the Kinabatangan River in Borneo. The Guardian published [extracts of his letter](#) in early 2017, and plans were halted. I've learned The Power of One: one man, one letter, one enormous difference.

## Kabir Kaul

*Conservationist, wildlife campaigner*

Sir David's introduction to nature's beauty galvanised me to campaign for wildlife in cities. He inspired me to find spectacles on my London doorstep: stag beetles battling in Hillingdon, peregrine falcons soaring over Southwark, beavers shaping waterways in Ealing.



With Kabir Kaul in 2023. Photograph: Megan McCubbin

## Roger Hallam

*Extinction Rebellion co-founder*

David has shown us how beautiful the world is beyond words. And also taught us that words alone will not save what is left to save.

## Steve Reed

*UK environment secretary*

As we look to the future, we must build on David's trailblazing achievements to transform nature from a story of loss to one of hope, so our children and their children can enjoy the future that is their birthright.

*Compiled by Patrick Barkham, Damian Carrington, Patrick Greenfield, Natalie Hanman, Fiona Harvey, Helena Horton, Kate Lloyd, Emma*

<https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2025/may/03/david-attenborough-birthday-99-by-barack-obama-billie-eilish-morgan-freeman>

You can be misguided as an environmentalist / naturalist, too much or too little as things present, a self-righteous prig virtue-signaling in a world of easy targets, making yourself part of the problem, but you can't be wrong being one. Sir David gave us a masterful example as a guide to how to be that person. TJB