

Leader of the Earth: Sir David Attenborough's Legacy

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“If working apart we’re a force powerful enough to destabilize, surely, working together, we are powerful enough to save”

~ Sir David Attenborough

Abstract

Sir David Attenborough is considered a leader beyond the traditional corporate settings. He is renowned in the field of environmentalism and conservation because of his significant contributions and impactful work as a naturalist and an advocate for protecting the nature. In a career that has spanned decades of remarkable work, he has opened our eyes to the marvels of the natural world, the damage human activity has inflicted on it and what we must do to save it. This essay examines his leadership journey, focusing on his authenticity, visionary thinking, communication, ability to inspire change, resilience and many other traits that has made him a global leader in climate action, biodiversity sustainability and the protection of the natural world around us. His continuing legacy as an educator and leader sets out actions that humans can take to make a difference and take accountability for climate change and other environmental issues.

How it all started

Sir David Attenborough was born on the 8th of May, 1926. He completed his schooling from the Wyggeston Boys School in Leicester, England. Even as a child, he was extremely fascinated by science and nature. He would collect fossils and rocks as he went searching for wildlife. David loved to visit the New Walk Museum in Leicester where he used to help to classify fossils. This is where he initially developed his love of natural history. He went on to study Natural Sciences at the Clare College in Cambridge and he graduated in 1947. He joined the BBC in 1952, and in 1954 began his famous 'Zoo quest' series. He became a prominent write, presenter and narrator and this spanned for about eight decades and included: Natural World, Wildlife on One, the Planet Earth franchise, The Blue Planet and its sequel.

Sir David Attenborough officially opened the Dinosaur Gallery at Leicester's New Walk Museum on 7 September 2011. "I owe a great deal to Leicester Museum" he said. "It was there, as a boy, that I first found out the names and the nature of the fossils that I found in the Leicestershire countryside. I even had the privilege of helping there as a volunteer when I was a little older."

While Sir David's earlier work focused primarily on the wonders of the natural world, his later work has been more about the support of environmental causes. He has advocated for restoring planetary biodiversity, limiting population growth, switching to renewable energy, mitigating climate

change, reducing meat consumption, and setting aside more areas for natural preservation. His contribution to broadcasting and wildlife film-making has brought him international recognition.

By January 2013, Attenborough had collected 32 honorary degrees from British universities, more than any other person. He was awarded honorary Doctor of Science degrees from Durham University in 1982 and the University of Cambridge in 1984 along with honorary Doctor of Philosophy degrees from the University of Oxford in 1988 and the University of Ghent in 1997. In 2010, he was awarded Honorary Doctorates from Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University and Nottingham Trent University. He has also received the title Honorary Fellow from Clare College, Cambridge in 1980, The Zoological Society of London in 1998, The Linnean Society in 1999, The Institute of Biology (Now the Royal Society of Biology) in 2000 and The Society of Antiquaries in 2007. He is Honorary Patron of The North American Native Plant Society and was elected as a Corresponding Member of The Australian Academy of Science as well.

Blue Planet II was narrated and presented by the naturalist, Sir David Attenborough. The series was first broadcast on 29 October 2017. It was critically acclaimed and earned worldwide recognition.

He is also recognized by Guinness World Records as having the longest career as a natural historian and presenter in television. At least 20 species and genera of plants and animals, both living and extinct, have been named in Attenborough's honor. He has also been honored with a constellation in the shape of a blue whale. The constellations were created with a view to getting more young people interested in stargazing and the universe.

The Winning Leadership Mindset- Qualities of Sir David Attenborough

In an era where public sector leaders are often derided and unrecognized for their work, Sir David is an outlier. He is widely considered a national treasure in the UK, although he himself does not embrace the term. This is a significant evidence of his intelligence as a leader. He is living proof of how much impact a leader can create if they have the courage and organizational encouragement to think of long term success.

- **Authenticity**

Sir David has always advocated for following one's own passions. He decided earlier on in his career that he did not want to proof read children's books but create an impact of his own. He had his own visions while he worked with BBC. As he climbed to the top of the BBC hierarchy, he insisted on keeping his hand in by making natural history programs. Since then, Sir David has been knighted twice, won 29 industry prizes (including four Emmys) and received a lifetime achievement award from the UN's environment program. Seldom in the history of leadership has the merit of following your passion been proved so emphatically.

- **Resilience and Openness to Experience**

In Sir David's early years at the BBC he worked as an interviewer, assistant producer, talent scout, anthropological model, and presenter, turning his hand to a varied range of topics from rat catching and athletics to ancient fish fossils. After this he began making Zoo Quest, in which a TV crew filmed London Zoo's efforts to find and raise awareness regarding exotic creatures from distant parts. One episode featured the first televised footage of the Komodo dragon.

The breadth and variety of that experience served him well when he became controller of BBC and director of programs. His deep understanding of the technicalities of production– and of what made good TV (acquired through trial and error) – shone through such classic natural history series as Life On Earth, The Living Planet, Life In The Freezer, The Private Life Of Plants and The Blue Planet.

- **Self-awareness: Knowing Strengths, Limits and Weaknesses**

In 1969, Sir David was widely tipped as a likely successor to Sir Hugh Greene as BBC director-general, but he made it clear that he had absolutely no interest in the job. He had not enjoyed his administrative burden as director of programs, and suspected he wasn't very good at it and felt frustrated because he couldn't make more programs. He quit in December 1972, flying off for a literal baptism of fire as a presenter, describing the devastating 1883 eruption of Krakatoa on the Indonesian volcano. Avoiding “the threat of the desk”, in his words, he launched his first natural history epic ‘Life on Earth’ in 1979, watched by an estimated 500 million people globally.

- **Learning Mindset**

In 2020, Attenborough joined Instagram not to seem relevant but because he thought it could help fight climate change. He now has more than five million followers. This reflected one of his consistent, career-long, and widely overlooked, strengths: his determination to keep his professional knowledge up to date. In the 1950s, he participated in passionate BBC canteen debates about the best way to switch from one shot to another and filmed Zoo Quest in color because, even when converted back into black and white, it was clearer than the BBC's customary stock. In the 1960s, he immersed himself in the challenges posed by color TV. His natural history series have been technically innovative, notably The Blue Planet and The Blue Planet 2, but they also required him to understand the latest scientific thinking (especially on climate change) so thoroughly that he could present it in an enlightening and entertaining manner. He personified the learning mindset of a leader.

Sir David Attenborough's Leadership Style

Sir David Attenborough has a very unique and unconventional leadership style. He leads by inspiring generations to generations to care for the nature, the planet Earth. Sir David is a leader who leads without formal authority unlike a CEO. His influence is based on trust and credibility that he has worked to gain throughout his life. He advocates for moral responsibility towards the environment thus practicing an ethical leadership style. He uses his knowledge to communicate with people and spread awareness regarding nature, climate change, biodiversity etc. Instead of commanding people, he inspires and influences them. He has a visionary leadership and inspires people to work towards a long term benefit, and not just short term. Finally, he uses a form of transformational leadership in which he inspires people to transform the current situation of the planet earth into something that is sustainable and beneficial for all living beings. It is a fact that he influences millions of people on a global scale. His documentaries not only educate but call for action. He makes people rethink about their relationship with nature. In his documentary ‘A Life on Our Planet’ (2020), he advocated for urgent environmental action, and this was not to glorify himself but to motivate people to bring about a change. It is pertinent to note that his leadership at BBC shaped natural history programming, while his leadership to the world shaped environmental consciousness.

Upwards, Downwards and Sideways Management

There are very few examples of leaders in the world who have successfully managed to lead upwards, downwards and sideways as well.

- **Managing Upwards**

Sir David has again and again successfully managed to influence higher authorities and decision makers to make changes regarding the current environmental issues. When he was at BBC as a producer, he convinced his senior administrative executives to invest in wildlife documents. This is worth noting because wildlife documentaries were considered a very niche topic back then. He also managed to persuade the executives to showcase his nature documentaries in color television. Apart from this, all of his documentaries, and his speeches at conferences such as COP26 Climate Summit (2021) pushed for policy changes regarding climate issues, deforestation and biodiversity preservation.

- **Managing Downwards**

Sir David has always encouraged creative freedom among those who work under him. In all of his documentaries, such as ‘The Blue Planet’ and ‘Planet Earth’, he has allowed and encouraged the directors, scientists and filmmakers to innovate and bring out novel ideas themselves. This has led to the major and ground breaking success of not just the two mentioned documentaries, but all of his nature documentaries. He also leads millions of people with passion, impactful communication and by making sure his documentaries are factual and not just storytellings.

- **Managing Sideways**

Throughout his career, Sir David has made strong collaborations and close relationships with his peers, naturalists, scientists and conservationists. He has had close partnerships with marine biologists, ecologists and other field experts with excellent two-way communication to ensure his work was based on latest research and that the people he is working with get recognition for their work.

Conclusion

Sir David Attenborough’s leadership is one I deeply admire. His ability to inspire change through knowledge, his unwavering commitment to environmental conservation, and his humble yet powerful storytelling make him a leader unlike any other. He does not command authority; instead, he earns trust and influences action through wisdom, integrity, and passion. His resilience in advocating for the planet, even as a senior citizen, is a testament to his dedication. Sir David Attenborough’s leadership has taught me that true leadership is based on education, persistence, and purpose-driven action.

References

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