

Sir David Attenborough

Early Life

David Frederick Attenborough was born on 8th May 1926, 17 days after the birth of Queen Elizabeth II and a year before the first electronic television was invented. He grew up in Leicester, England, where his father was the head of the local university. David and his two brothers, Richard and John, lived on the university campus. In 1939, their family fostered two German-Jewish girls called Irene and Helga, who became like sisters to David.

Even as a child, David loved plants and animals. He used to go on long bike rides to collect fossils, stones and natural specimens. Some of the adults at the university admired his collections and gifted him objects to add to them. He once received a gift of a dried seahorse, and it was on this day that he decided to become a naturalist.

A **naturalist** is a person who studies natural history. This subject involves the observation of organisms and their interactions with the natural environment.

David studied geology and zoology at the University of Cambridge and obtained a degree in natural sciences. After university, he was called to do two years' service in the Royal Navy in North Wales and the Firth of Forth.

Geology is the study of the solid Earth. This includes the rocks of which it is composed and the processes by which they change over time.

Zoology is the study of living and extinct animals.

BBC Career

In 1952, David joined the BBC (British Broadcasting Corporation) full time. At this point, he did not own a television and had only ever seen one programme in his life. He first presented a show called 'Animal Patterns', which showcased some animals from London Zoo. During filming, David met the curator of the zoo's reptile house, Jack Lester, and they decided to make a television series about an animal collecting expedition.

The result was the popular series 'Zoo Quest', a show which brought rare animals into viewers' living rooms for the first time. Each year they went to different parts of the world in search of exotic animals in their natural habitats and brought them back to London Zoo. It was the first show to combine a studio presenter with footage filmed on location.

David carrying a chimp while working on 'Zoo Quest to Sierra Leone' in 1954, aged 28.



In the early 1960s, David resigned from his permanent position at the BBC to study for a postgraduate degree in social anthropology.

Social anthropology is the study of how people live in different social and cultural settings across the globe.

David didn't finish his degree. Instead, he returned to the BBC as the controller of BBC2 (when the channel was less than a year old). While in this role, he commissioned the shows 'Match of the Day' and 'Monty Python's Flying Circus', among many others that showcased music, the arts, sport, travel, business, science and natural history.

As controller of BBC2, he oversaw the first-ever colour television broadcasts in Europe and commissioned authored documentaries to show what colour television could do. These documentaries presented the point of view of the author rather than unbiased observations. Authored documentaries became very popular and David thought that the story of evolution would be a good subject for a similar series. David was a possible candidate for director-general of the BBC, but he would not have been in a position to continue presenting wildlife programming if he had taken this role. In 1972, age 46, he resigned from the BBC for a second time to become a freelance broadcaster.

Freelance Broadcasting

The series 'Life on Earth' began in 1979. It is estimated that 500 million people watched it worldwide. David continued to add to his 'Life' collection over the next 30 years, with each series focusing on a different habitat, plant or animal group.



The Life Collection

- 1979 – Life on Earth
- 1984 – The Living Planet
- 1990 – The Trials of Life
- 1993 – Life in the Freezer
- 1995 – The Private Life of Plants
- 1998 – The Life of Birds
- 2002 – The Life of Mammals
- 2005 – Life in the Undergrowth
- 2008 – Life in Cold Blood
- 2010 – First Life

David with a gorilla while filming 'Life on Earth' in Rwanda in 1978, aged 52.

Over this time, David also worked on many other television shows, including the BBC1 show 'Wildlife on One', which ran for 28 years. He narrated 'The Blue Planet' and 'Frozen Planet', along with 'Planet Earth', which was the biggest nature documentary ever made and the first to air in high definition on the BBC.

David created a new style of nature show which focused on the wildlife instead of the presenter. He spent very little time on screen and would instead narrate over footage.

He strived to get never-before-seen footage of creatures in the wild, with his team creating ground-breaking methods to do this. While filming for 'The Life of Birds', David visited 42 countries, travelling 256 000 miles. That is the equivalent of travelling around the world ten times.

David with a bird of paradise in Qatar in 1995, aged 69.



Environmental Programming

David's programmes contain great storytelling that has helped millions of people understand and appreciate the wonders of the world around us. Over the years, his face and voice have become synonymous with a love of nature and the environment.

However, at times, David has been criticised for not using this platform to tell the story of human damage to the natural world. He believed that his programmes should focus on the wonders of the natural world, not the human one. If people developed a love of nature, then they would want to protect it.

In more recent years, David felt that public mood had changed and his programming took a greater environmentalist stance. In the 2019 Netflix documentary 'Our Planet', the destructive role of human activities was woven throughout the series. It became the platform's most watched original documentary.

In 2020, at 94 years old, David narrated a documentary film that acts as his witness statement. In 'David Attenborough: A Life on Our Planet' he reflects on his career as a naturalist, the changes he has seen and his hopes for the future.

Achievements

David has received many awards throughout his career, including 32 honorary degrees from British Universities. In 1985, he received a knighthood from The Queen for his services to broadcasting.

He has had several species of plants, insects and birds named after him, as well as the British polar research ship RSS Sir David Attenborough.

David is the only person to have won BAFTAs for programmes in black and white, colour, high definition, 3D and 4K resolutions.

A 2021 YouGov poll found him to be the most popular person in Britain.



David with a meerkat while filming 'The Life of Mammals' in South Africa in 2002, aged 76.



Sir David Attenborough

1. On what date was Queen Elizabeth II born?

2. How do you think the place that David grew up influenced his career?

3. Explain how David's interest in fossils connects the two subjects that he studied at the University of Cambridge.

4. Explain why 'Zoo Quest' was a popular television show.

5. What story did David hope to tell through his 'Life' collection of television series?

6. Explain how the messages in David's programming have changed over time.

7. Why do you think that David Attenborough was found to be the most popular person in Britain?



Sir David Attenborough

1. In what year was the electronic television first invented?

2. How do you think living on a university campus encouraged David's interests?

3. Fossils are the remains of organisms from millions of years ago, which are usually found in rocks. Why do you think David's interest in fossils led him to study geology and zoology?

4. Explain why 'Zoo Quest' was a popular television show.

5. How many televisions series did David produce to tell the story of evolution?

6. Explain how the messages in David's programming have changed over time.

For most of his career, David's programming focused on_____

In his most recent shows,_____

7. Why do you think that David Attenborough was found to be the most popular person in Britain?



Sir David Attenborough **Answers**

1. On what date was Queen Elizabeth II born?

21st April 1926

2. How do you think the place that David grew up influenced his career?

He grew up on a university campus, which may have encouraged him to see university as normal/part of his future.

He was able to interact with adults at the university who encouraged his interest in natural history with gifts of fossils and other specimens.

3. Explain how David's interest in fossils connects the two subjects that he studied at the University of Cambridge.

Fossils are the remains of organisms from millions of years ago, which are usually found in rocks. Zoology includes the study of extinct animals, and geology includes the study of rocks. Knowledge of both subjects is important when studying fossilised remains.

4. Explain why 'Zoo Quest' was a popular television show.

It was the first show to combine a presenter in the studio with footage filmed on location. For the first time, this allowed people to see rare, exotic animals in their natural habitats that they were unlikely to ever see in the wild themselves.

5. What story did David hope to tell through his 'Life' collection of television series?

David wanted to tell the story of evolution.

6. Explain how the messages in David's programming have changed over time.

In most of his programming, David's aim was to focus on the wonders of the natural world, not the human one. This meant that he told great stories that were focused on the wildlife and not on the damage that humans have done to the environments that he was showcasing. The aim was for people to develop a love of nature so that a desire to protect it would follow.

In his later shows, he has spoken about the impact that human activities have had on the environment.

7. Why do you think that David Attenborough was found to be the most popular person in Britain?

Student answers will vary.



Sir David Attenborough **Answers**

1. In what year was the electronic television first invented?

1927

2. How do you think living on a university campus encouraged David's interests?

He was able to interact with adults at the university who encouraged his interest in natural history with gifts of fossils and other specimens.

3. Fossils are the remains of organisms from millions of years ago, which are usually found in rocks. Why do you think David's interest in fossils led him to study geology and zoology?

Zoology includes the study of extinct animals, and geology includes the study of rocks. Knowledge of both subjects will be important when studying fossilised remains.

4. Explain why 'Zoo Quest' was a popular television show.

It was the first show to combine a presenter in the studio with footage filmed on location. This allowed many people to see rare, exotic animals in their natural habitats for the first time.

5. How many television series did David produce to tell the story of evolution?

The 'Life' collection tells the story of evolution and consists of ten series.

6. Explain how the messages in David's programming have changed over time.

For most of his career, **David's programming focused on the wonders of the natural world, not the human one. The aim was for people to develop a love of nature.**

In his most recent shows, **he has spoken about the impact that human activities have had on the environment.**

7. Why do you think that David Attenborough was found to be the most popular person in Britain?

Students' answers will vary.