

The nice man cometh

As you'd expect from Sir David Attenborough, his new nature series **Frozen Planet** is visually stunning. But it has left our best-loved naturalist less than optimistic about our future

Words **Alison Jane Reid** Portrait **Jason Roberts**

SIR DAVID ATTENBOROUGH, broadcaster, naturalist, greatest living Englishman, is distracted. He has the builders in at his pretty, Gothic cottage in Richmond, West London, for what he calls 'necessary alterations'. They are the politest builders I have ever encountered, so that isn't the problem. No, Attenborough is deep in thought about *Frozen Planet*, his new series from the polar regions – four years in the making and the jewel in the crown of the BBC's autumn schedule.

In this much-trumpeted series, Attenborough takes us on a magic carpet ride through this most elusive of natural wildernesses; from underwater shots of the crystal caves of the volcanically active Mount Erebus, as alluring and awe-inspiring as any man-made cathedral, to astounding moments such as a pod of killer whales acting in unison to dislodge a seal from the ice and into their waiting jaws.

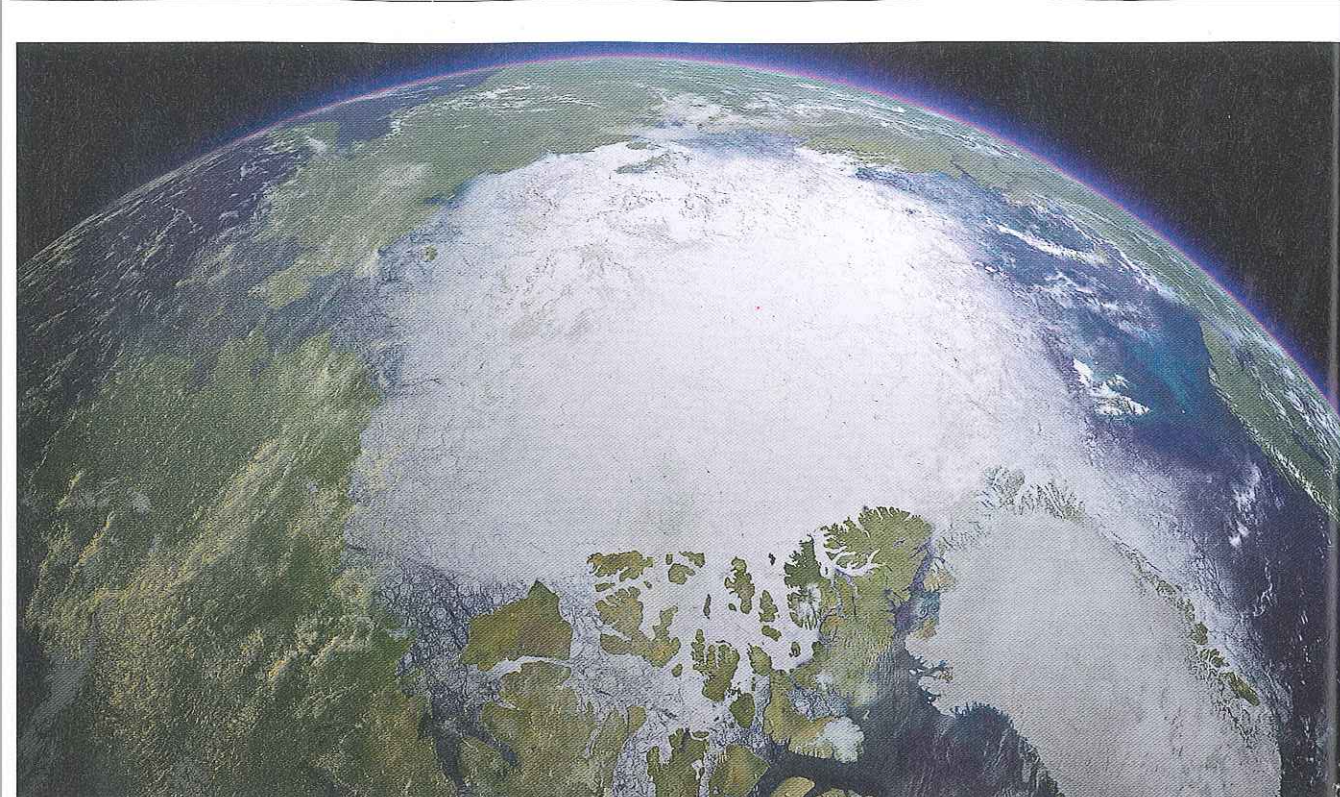
It's compelling viewing – the entire seven-part series an elegiac lament for a vanishing world. At the end, the world's most famous naturalist delivers his poignant



'We can't reverse the changes happening at the Poles; there is no chance in hell of that. All I know is that if we don't do anything, the outcome will be much worse'

At the North Pole

Within 15 minutes of filming, the ice had moved and David and the crew were no longer on the right spot



Shrinking Arctic sea ice In September 1980, the minimum extent of the summer sea ice was 7.8 million square kilometres (above).



In September 2007, it was 4.3 million square kilometres (above) – the smallest size recorded since satellite records began

< conclusion. Just as we are finally getting to see and understand the Poles for the first time, they are changing, possibly for ever. What happens at the Poles affects each and every one of us.

Attenborough might reasonably be expected to be a touch more splenetic about the rapid rate at which ice is melting in the Arctic and Antarctic, and its implications. But as always his delivery is measured and calm. It's not his style to ram home a message with messianic zeal; instead, he takes us gently by the hand and leads us to a point where we have no option but to understand just how serious the situation is.

Sitting in his elegant sitting room, surrounded by a fascinating collection of artefacts and fossils from his global wanderings, he explains how he hopes that the series will help to change our perceptions about a part of the world we still know little about.

It is a plea to remember what we have. We can't reverse the changes happening at the Poles; there is no chance in hell of that. All I know is that if we don't do anything, the outcome will be worse. All we can do, and it will take a huge effort by

humanity to do it, is to lessen our impact, and make things less bad than they would otherwise be.

I ask if he's optimistic that governments and people will act. 'No,' he replies emphatically. 'I am not optimistic. There are some enlightened countries that are doing their best, then vested interests get

in the way. Never in the history of humanity have nations got together and said, "Yes, we will do that". But then never before have we faced the global issues we are talking about.

'Nobody can be surprised that these international committees don't produce agreement. We can't control what we do in the North

Sea. We can't even control fishing in the Atlantic. How do we think we can agree on the entire globe? How do you deal with it? I don't know.'

Clearly Attenborough has run out of patience with all the endless rhetoric on climate change. In his own softly spoken way he is imploring all of us to wake up and

As many who have watched and listened to Attenborough in recent years will know, he believes that our biggest challenge is dealing with increasing population levels and dwindling resources.

'The only way to deal with population is through economic improvement. It's the only way,

in Africa. But whether they will or not... I can't pretend I am optimistic.'

If it all sounds somewhat bleak, Attenborough is still upbeat about our own remarkable ability to adapt and survive. 'We survived the Dark Ages and the sacking of Rome,' he says drily. 'Human beings are the most adaptable species that has ever evolved, and unlike the dinosaurs, we build greenhouses! We are extremely inventive, and I have no doubt that we will find ways of coping with climate change and everything else. But we won't survive in the same numbers, and not at this level of material comfort.'

He confesses that he loathes the idea of being seen as some kind of sage or prophet, and is 'fearful' of making 'doom-laden' prophecies. 'All I know is that we have to do our utmost to reduce the things that we are doing; that we have to reduce our consumption, and we have to reduce population. If we do both those things, we have a reasonable chance of surviving for another 500 to 1,000 years. But, if we don't, we are in for a real catastrophe.'

He stops, deep in thought. Though he is now 85, his serious, familiar countenance looks 20 years younger. But he is in his ninth >

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take action before it is too late.

'It is not enough to change the way we live; we need to change our politics,' he says. 'I wish people would stop talking about global warming; it is climate change that matters. Instead of becoming hotter, the air will become cooler, and many regions including Britain could become much colder. I've been saying that for years. The problem is that we can look back and see what has happened to temperatures, but we still can't look forward – it is still informed guesswork.'

without being draconian and compelling individuals not to have children. We saw what happened in China, and that was terrible.

'The only thing we know is that in every circumstance where women have the vote, where they are educated and have the right to determine their own lives, and they are not dictated to by men, the birth rate drops like a stone, even in small states in India, like Kerala.

'So what the developed, wealthy part of the world has got to realise, and do, is to improve the conditions



Drip drip effect A river melts through winter ice on St Andrews Bay, South Georgia



Got the shot After waiting six days for bad weather to clear at the North Pole

◁ decade: how does he manage to work in the coldest, most physically challenging parts of the planet?

'I don't feel it,' he says honestly. 'One of the great things is people wanting you to do things. If you lie in bed in the morning and you feel creaky, and nobody cares tuppence whether you get up or not, that must be terrible. I know people of my age who are very unwell. It's not virtue. I don't know what it is; it's just luck. I can't pretend I run up and down stairs, or that I have ever really done any exercise, because I don't.'

'Going to the North Pole was an intellectual thrill, because of course there is nothing to see. I am always amazed that anyone knows exactly where it is. I don't know how Scott managed to take surveys at the South Pole and say, "Boys, we're not there yet - another three days to go."'

While *Frozen Planet* captures the beauty and majesty of nature, it doesn't shirk from showing brutal sequences of bloodied polar bears and a pack of wolves tearing apart a bison. Does he feel it is important not to sugar-coat animal behaviour?

'We are not in the business of producing fairy stories. I have always tried to show it as it is. It goes back to Greek drama. How do you show Oedipus Rex putting out his eye? You have to do it in a way that in your imagination you can believe is real, without making people physically ill. As film-makers, we strive for that balance constantly. If people saw what I had left on the

cutting-room floor, they would feel I had gone the other way.'

And now back home, how does he relax, I wonder. What does one of the most-watched broadcasters in the world watch on TV himself?

'I like comedy, but I'm afraid my tastes are rather dated, and stuck in the Sixties. It's an age thing. There just isn't much that makes me laugh now. Though I did like *The Office*. Other than that it's the news, mainly, and documentaries.'

What about the new generation of presenters? 'I think that a lot of programmes now are simply adventure shows - but I don't mean that in a derogatory way. Gordon Buchanan did an extraordinary report on how to track a bear. I admire him very much. You learn a lot about bears, and you also learn a lot about Gordon; and that's fine. There are many ways of killing a cat, as they say.'

'It isn't the way I do it; but it did make very good television. Today, programme-making is about people, and people like people. That's not a bad thing, it is just different.'

People evidently like Sir David Attenborough in particular. But this greatest living Englishman is far too modest to acknowledge such an absurd notion. ▷

Frozen Planet starts on October 26, 9pm on BBC One. The accompanying book is published by BBC Books, £25. To order at a 20% discount, see Saga Bookshop on page 169

CLIMATE CHANGE What is happening?

Climate change is a subject that shows no sign of cooling down. Here's the lowdown on the evidence so far, what's causing it, and how it might change our planet and our future.

◆ **Average temperatures have risen** across the world. The earth's surface is 0.8C (1.4F) warmer than it was in 1880.

◆ **The rate at which temperatures are rising is speeding up.** According to NASA, the warmest years have all been recorded in the past 12 years - and temperatures are still increasing.

◆ **The rise in temperature has warmed up the sea**, as well as the land - the top 700m (2,300ft) of the oceans are on average 0.3F (0.17C) warmer than temperatures recorded in 1969.

◆ **Sea levels are rising.** Throughout the 20th century the global mean sea level (GMSL) rose about 17cm (6.7in). NASA reckons that the increase in the past decade is nearly double that figure.

◆ **Arctic sea ice is becoming thinner** and more vulnerable to melting - the US National Snow and Ice Data Center predicts there could be open water at the North Pole in the next few decades.

◆ **There's a general scientific consensus** that the greenhouse effect is the main cause of climate change. An increase in gases such as carbon dioxide and methane prevent heat from escaping the atmosphere - leading to rising temperatures on Earth.

◆ **Extreme weather - heatwaves, drought, hurricanes** and other natural disasters - may become more frequent in many parts of the world.

◆ **Millions of species face extinction** as habitats change - vulnerable species will be driven out in the competition for food and breeding grounds.

◆ **Rising sea levels threaten a hundred million people** living on land that is close to sea level - within one metre (3ft). Coastal cities at risk include Calcutta and Dhaka.

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