



An Inconvenient Truth: Pristine Wildernesses and Other Myths Peddled by the BBC

By Stephen Corry



BBC Natural History has [just announced](#) a new series, “One Planet, Seven Worlds”, fronted by veteran broadcaster David Attenborough, to tell “the fundamental truth about what makes each [continent] unique.” I’d be astonished if it covered one of the most important aspects of the “fundamental truth”, which is the way local people have enhanced biodiversity and shaped “nature” since time immemorial, and what happened and is still happening to those people who have largely escaped being subsumed into the mainstream by colonialism and industrialisation. (These minorities are now labelled as ethnic, indigenous or tribal, depending on the regional context.)

Like most families in rural Britain, we got our first television towards the end of the 1950s. Every five o’clock came Children’s Hour - rather dull puppets, some excellent cartoons, and of course “nature.” My earliest memory is that of Armand and Michaela Denis filming “Pygmies” and constructing a rope suspension bridge in Africa (entirely faked, why would they want one?), and a boyish David Attenborough in fuzzy black and white chasing down wild animals to capture for the London Zoo. It was the start of something big: The BBC’s Natural History Unit has gone on to become the world’s biggest producer of wildlife films.

In the decades since the rope trick bridge, the BBC Natural History Unit has also presented a single, unshakable view of wildlife and conservation. No one doubts that it works magnificently; it's the corporation's biggest money earner. It formed and still shapes the public's view of what conservation actually means in distant continents. This specialised BBC unit shows us a pristine wilderness full of photogenic beasts whose existence, we are told (usually by the same David Attenborough), is endangered by loss of habitat, human overpopulation, and of course "poaching" - such threats apparently emanating from Africans or Asians.

The same narrative is also peddled by the big conservation organisations, which thrive in financial symbiosis with the BBC's orthodoxy as the corporation makes money from its programmes and as donations from the viewing public flow to the NGOs. Each presents the complex question of conservation in exactly the same way, and each proposes the same, simple - and entirely wrong - solution. It is "fortress conservation" with more and more "brave guards" and increasing military force and weaponry to defend the animals against the human killers (who are never white).

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To anyone who knows the other sides of conservation, the bias is obvious, but the BBC unit's ideology is relentless and impacts the wider BBC as a whole. The corporation's website, for example, almost always features a news story about poaching, illustrated with grisly pictures of mutilated animals, or it did until recently.

"Massacre" in Botswana

Then, in September 2018, something new happened. It began with BBC News [breaking a story](#) on elephant poaching in Botswana ("Dozens of elephants killed near Botswana wildlife sanctuary") which, as usual, gathered in hysteria as it rolled around the web. It became a "[genocide](#)" and even one of the "[worst mass poaching sprees](#)" in Africa.

But the tale unraveled when scrutinised, and no one who's followed it can now sensibly believe it was true. There was no "massacre", it turns out that the story arose at least partly from the power struggle between the country's former President Khama, an army general known for his implacable support for "fortress conservation," and his successor, President Masisi.

In spite of a great deal of evidence to that effect, the BBC journalist who broke the story, Alastair Leithead, [stood by it](#), though the corporation itself quietly changed its tune. For example, over eighty per cent of BBC Africa tweets reported on poaching in the month prior to the "massacre" but there was only one story (about shellfish) in the following three months. Leithead's source for Botswana was [Elephants Without Borders](#), an NGO with a vested interest in supporting ex-president Khama, and which would have raked in donations as a result of the story. Leithead was doubtless unaware of how he had favoured one political faction over another; he was presumably just supporting the BBC's traditional conservation model in the run-up to the Illegal Wildlife Trade Conference due to take place in London the following month, October 2018.

That's speculation, but what's certain is that films that show a completely different side of conservation, such as the excellent "Unnatural Histories," can be counted on one hand and are relegated to non-mainstream channels, like BBC4. The wholly different narrative they expose begins with the revelation that protected areas were never "pristine wildernesses" in the first place; they

were home to local peoples who actually created the “wild” ecosystems, and who were then thrown out and destroyed when parks were imposed by national governments. The grass plains of the Serengeti, the Amazon rainforest and so on, were all formed by vigorous human intervention over thousands of years. Experts now accept this, but it remains little known among the general public. Why? Because very few BBC nature viewers have ever been told the real history: After all, it profoundly undermines the fake one.

The destruction of the original landowners, the creators and curators of the world’s “wildernesses”, is criminal in several respects. One is that they were often far better at maintaining biodiversity than the incoming, usually white, conservationists. The latter often fail, and usually blame the locals when things go wrong.

Another point is just how protected these areas really are. They usually include an infrastructure specifically aimed at only the richest tourists. Most of the African parks marketed as “pristine wilderness” include roads, hotels (called “lodges,” to make them seem smaller), luxury “camps”, artificial water holes and salt licks to attract animals, airstrips, and so on. I have been in one where a leopard appeared every evening in perfect view of the hotel dining room, just as food was being served. The excited guests rarely stayed long enough to question what might lie behind this spectacular coincidence, but of course the tourists weren’t the only ones being fed by the hotel staff.

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Protected areas are not only landscaped for elite tourism, some of the animals which fill our screens have been transported there. That doesn’t always work out well, and some pay with their lives. For example, at least ten rhinos died in Kenya in 2018 as a result of being moved into a park. That’s more than were poached in either of the previous two years. Sadly, it’s not an isolated incident: Some twenty per cent of “endangered” cheetahs routinely die while being transported in South Africa [by conservationists](#).

But artificial landscaping and importing animals are just two aspects of what has become partly a film set: Protected areas are often home to mining (such as the Central Kalahari Game Reserve in Botswana), logging, destructive monoculture, such as teak and oil palm, and [trophy hunting](#) (such as around Lobeke National Park, Cameroon). Much of this happens in government-approved concessions and some of the companies involved work in close partnership with conservation NGOs.

Since the Botswana elephant “massacre” was exposed as a sham in September 2018, I’ve noticed a quiet shift at the BBC: I haven’t been scrutinising rigorously, but I can’t remember seeing a single poaching story headlined since.

Pitting people against nature

However, now there’s a new development, this time concerning India. It began with a BBC news report in 2017, [“Killing for Conservation”](#), by correspondent, Justin Rowlatt. His film exposed the atrocities committed in the name of conservation in India’s Kaziranga National Park – cinematically visited by Prince William and Kate – where rangers have “shoot on sight” orders and are never prosecuted for vigorously deploying them. They killed around twenty so-called poachers a year, sometimes more than the number of animals poached.

Some “animal liberationists” may raise a cheer at this gruesome news, but Rowlatt filmed testimony from innocent locals who had been devastated as a result, including relatives of a man with severe learning difficulties, fatally shot as he was rounding up cows near the park’s edge, and 7-year-old Akash Orang, crippled for life when rangers fired on him by mistake. His father told Rowlatt, “He used to be cheerful, he isn’t anymore. In the night he wakes up in pain and cries for his mother.”

Killing for Conservation was about Kaziranga in Assam, but many other atrocities have been reported from dozens of protected areas across India. At the time of writing, no less than 280,000 people, mostly tribal Adivasis,* face illegal and forced eviction from tiger reserves, usually from places where they’ve lived successfully in close proximity to the big cats for generations.

Rowlatt’s film attracted a fierce outcry from the conservation establishment. The National Tiger Conservation Authority (NTCA) clamoured for retribution, so the Indian government responded by banning the BBC from all protected areas for five years. In a stroke, the wildlife filmmakers were deprived of their most iconic non-African star, and all because BBC News had exposed an inconvenient truth about what “conservation” actually meant for local people.

At the end of 2018, the story took another twist when a letter received by the NTCA [was leaked](#). It was seemingly written by Julian Hector, head of the BBC’s Natural History Unit, but had no date or addressee. Hector expressed “regret for any adverse impacts” caused by the Rowlatt film. He noted the “successful efforts” in Indian tiger conservation, and was concerned that the work had now been “made harder”. He proffered apologies for his failure to approach the tiger authority earlier. Stories quickly appeared in the Indian press falsely claiming that the BBC had apologised for, and even retracted, its film.

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Given the letter’s missing date and addressee, Survival International initially suspected a hoax. We asked Hector’s staff if it was genuine, but they weren’t saying. We turned to the head of the BBC, Tony Hall, to ask whether or not the BBC stood by Rowlatt’s film. The BBC boss quickly replied in the affirmative: It turns out that the letter really had been written by Hector, but the corporation was certainly not retracting its report that innocent people have been shot, tortured, and some killed, in the (supposed) conservation of Indian protected areas.

This was encouraging because we knew Rowlatt’s report was just the tip of a monster iceberg: For years, Survival International has been reporting harrowing testimonies about atrocities committed against the Mising, Baiga, Jenu Kuruba, and many other tribal peoples in the name of conservation. Hector’s letter was simply an attempt by BBC Natural History to get back to filming tigers - irrespective of the atrocities Adivasi people face in the reserves.

One can understand its desperation, of course. BBC Natural History was launching a new flagship series, “Dynasties”, and it was as spectacular as expected. Its wonderful episode on tigers, broadcast in December 2018, repeats the usual old falsehoods. Viewers are lectured (by the very same David Attenborough!), “In India today there are new pressures, making it harder than ever [for tigers] to rear a family.” This simply isn’t true. According to the Indian authorities, tigers are increasing in

numbers, albeit slowly, and so wasn't it really "harder than ever" for them during the British Raj's tiger massacre (starting in around the 1870s and carrying on in independent India)? This "sport" lasted a hundred years and [killed tens of thousands](#), taking the animal to the edge of extinction. The blood from that slaughter lies on the hands of the parents and grandparents of many of today's British viewers, but it's always safer, and supposedly less "political," simply to blame poor villagers in today's India.

What needs to be done

What all this highlights is the bias at the heart of the BBC's Natural History Unit. It relentlessly promulgates the foundation myth of Western conservation, that "wildernesses" must be defended against the Africans or Asians who actually live there. Never mind that national parks in Europe often include working farms and even towns; in other continents the locals must be thrown out, and then shot if they try and go back in. Such pitting people against nature may be the metaphorical lifeblood of a conservation industry that relies on the TV portrayal of natural history, but it's an entirely false antagonism that drains the real lifeblood from indigenous, tribal and other local people.

Things must change, and not only to respect the law and human rights. If they don't, we could soon be facing the end of protected areas and their wildlife. The local backlash against them is gaining increasingly angry momentum and is bound to prevail, especially in Africa where "our" cherished conservation is increasingly seen as nothing more than land-grabbing colonialism. The imagery that has filled our screens throughout my lifetime must acknowledge its bias and start reflecting the real world.

We should be shown how protected areas are the result of thousands of years of human habitation; how local, especially indigenous, people, have enhanced both the landscape and wildlife; how evicting and mistreating them leads to biodiversity loss; and how it is they who must be returned to the forefront of protecting wildlife, in all its forms. You don't need environmental qualifications to realise that the people defending their own land and resources are going to be better guardians than the hired, underpaid rangers who are easily tempted by corruption. We should be listening to them, the locals, much more than to the environmentalists and broadcasters (with their own sky-high carbon footprints).

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The BBC, with its millions of viewers, really should play a leading role in the conservation of nature, but it's not the one currently acted out on our screens: In the long run, the images now transmitted into the comfort of our living rooms are deeply counterproductive for conservation, irrespective of their undoubted beauty and the money and accolades they gather.

*(*Adivasi" is a term used for many of the 700 or so unique tribal peoples in India, numbering over 100,000,000 individuals. Some may not be more "indigenous" to the subcontinent than many mainstream Indians, and the government doesn't use the term "indigenous." They do, however, retain their own separate identity, are often largely self-sufficient, and maintain a strong attachment to their lands. They are widely discriminated against. I go into the fraught question of "correct"*

terminology in my book [Tribal Peoples for Tomorrow's World.](#))

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