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Journey to Planet Earth: The State of the Planet's Wildlife

The Washington Post LIVE Online

“*The State of the Planet's Wildlife*,” investigates why nearly half of the world's wildlife species face extinction within the next few decades. **Marilyn & Hal Weiner**, producers of “Journey to Planet Earth” answered questions.

Editor's Note: Washingtonpost.com moderators retain editorial control over Live Online discussions and choose the most relevant questions for guests and hosts; guests and hosts can decline to answer questions.

TRANSCRIPT:

Marilyn: Hello, we're delighted to have this opportunity to chat. We appreciate the fact that we have viewers who tuned in last night to watch the show and we anticipate and look forward to answering any and all of your questions.

Hal: Ditto.

Washington, DC: *Journey to Planet Earth is an amazing film and obviously one that was difficult to make, i.e. time consuming, subject matter, etc... What propels you forward in making your films?*

Marilyn: All worthwhile films take a long time to make, so the time is not the issue. It's the subject, that if you care about it, it becomes less of a chore and one on which you are willing to spend time.

Hal: The issue of wildlife extinctions has been on our minds for a number of years as we produce other episodes in the series, and we were fortunate to have the time and the funding to do this show which is really very close to our hearts.

Rio Rancho, N.M.: *I loved this show...you had me crying like a baby. Hopefully I was not the only one with tears coursing down my cheeks, since it is only through appeals such as this that our people will open their eyes to what is happening on our planet. My admiration for your work is huge. Thank you.*

Marilyn: How nice, you were not the only one weeping, we've had comments from others who were similarly touched.

Hal: In your part of the US, it may be wise in some cases to save your tears because things will be heating up, unfortunately, because of climate change. But thanks for the nice words.

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Harrisburg, Pa.: Have you observed if there are any wildlife changes from global climate changes? If so, what have you noticed?

Marilyn: There are definitely changes to wildlife because of climate change. The example that we gave in the show last night of the polar bears searching for sea ice is one such example. Sea ice is necessary for the polar bears for hunting. While we were up in the arctic we noticed that there were birds such as robins migrating to places where they had never appeared before. This is only two examples of changes that are starting to occur more and more frequently.

Rio Rancho, NM: Can you tell me how you were able to get the video of the Tiger being killed?

Hal: That footage was photographed undercover and we'd rather not reveal our sources. But it is a horrifying image. People have asked us if we paid to have that hunter do what he did, and categorically - No.

Newark, NJ: As filmmakers traveling abroad for your projects, do you have the sense that people are willing to make changes in their lives to improve their environment? Thank you.

Marilyn: I think people are willing to make changes if you can show them number one, help them identify what the problems are, and then give them viable solutions. No one, as far as I can tell, willingly wants to destroy the environment where they live.

Hal: It's really a case of economics. If people are living in poverty, it's very hard to say "don't poach." If people are living in poverty it's very hard to say don't use as much water as you are now. They are a variety of issues, all tied to issues of poverty, that those of us fortunate enough to live in the developed world often forget about.

Columbia, Mo.: Thank you both for a wonderful film. My impression is that we are too late - that humans have done too much damage to recover the natural state of the planet and its diversity. Can you comment?

Marilyn: In a short few words, as far as I am concerned, it's never too late. If there is the will and the desire to make changes...There are certain things that can never be recovered. But we can certainly take care of the diversity that we still enjoy.

Hal: In order to achieve change I think it's important that number one, we all understand the nature of the problem. And number 2, make sure that our elected officials hear our voices. Quite often, environmental problems arise well beyond the term of an elected official, and often they prefer not to make decisions that will not affect their term.

Marilyn: In other words, short term solutions are not necessarily what is needed in terms of environmental decision making.

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Newark, NJ: During your travels to the countries profiled in the film, what sort of solutions to these problems do you see being offered by development agencies such as UN, World Bank, USAID? A follow-up to that -- where did you see this type of aid as being the most effective?

Marilyn: Sometimes, all of these agencies that you listed, have done wonderful things that have made a difference. However, in our travels some of the most uplifting and remarkable efforts have been done small grassroots efforts, and NGO's, in places such as Zambia, Kenya and South Africa. And the small local initiatives that have made enormous differences in the lives of the local people. And they've developed programs that can be replicated in other places.

Hal: We found two extraordinary community programs in Montana and the Everglades in Florida, that speak well of what a few people can do in terms of saving endangered species. So there's hope out there.

Marilyn: In Montana for example, the grassroots efforts of ranchers living in the Black Foot river valley were supported by other agencies such as the Nature Conservancy and the Montana Fish & Wildlife Service, and other governmental agencies, so it's a coalition of groups that come together. It's grassroots with other support, which makes it so effective.

Washington, DC: Just curious, after your films have aired, especially in the DC area, have you heard from any administration officials? Have you been consulted at all by lawmakers? Members of Congress? Have you also aired your films in special screenings for Members of Congress?

Hal: Yes, we've had a number of screenings on the Hill and in various scientific gatherings here in DC. And several years ago I was invited to testify before the Commerce Committee on the problems and availability of freshwater around the world. We welcome the opportunity of appearing in front of any organization, large or small, if it helps get the message out.

Harpswell, Maine: Obviously business and agricultural interests have played a key role around the world in the preservation and lose of species, etc. For example some business interests in the US are keen on undermining the Endangered Species Act. How do we as a people address those concerns?

Hal: Good question. Our research tell us that on the whole most people in agriculture are also good stewards of the land. The problem comes from economic pressures on large agri-businesses that force them in some cases to not pay attention to environmental regulations, and I think it's important for local communities to be aware of what is happening environmentally in their area, and then let the authorities know about it. In other words, be vocal.

Marilyn: One of the good things in the business sections of the newspapers lately is this movement towards cleaner environmental technologies, such as cleaner energy sources...So I think people are becoming a little bit more aware that we have to change the way we do business. And there are some hopeful examples.

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Columbia, Mo.: The key issue to me appears to be human overpopulation. The only way to reverse consumption on this scale is to prevent the exponential increase in human numbers. What can be done about this?

Marilyn: Well human population is not expanding at the rates that it has in the past. It is leveling out. So, I don't think population is the most critical issue facing us. I think consumption is a bigger issue. Consumption of goods, of energy, consumption of food. And of course climate change in terms of having available water and land.

Hal: Here's where I disagree with my producer. Though population will level off at about 9.5 billion in about 50 years, there is still a major population problem because we have billions of people living in the developing world who want to live the same lifestyle that we in the developed world have. And this will present huge problems. Particularly from places like India and China. If they want to have as many cars as we do, or if they want air conditioning the way we have it - which they are entitled to - we'll have big problems, requiring innovative ways of coping with energy and food production and distribution.

Marilyn: Our U.S. model of 2 cars in every garage, and miles and miles of highway, is not going to work. We're going to have to have a more efficient way of living in the future.

Munich, Germany: 10 or 15 years ago, the disappearance of the Amazon rain forest was more prominently covered in the news than it is now. Perhaps this was due to efforts from celebrities such as Sting.

How are the rain forests of the world doing these days? I've read that logging is still destroying rain forests in Africa and Asia at an astonishing rate. Is it still a major problem in the Amazon?

Hal: The Amazon is being devastated. Not as much by logging as it is by clear-cutting for agriculture and cattle ranching. Right now the Amazon is the world's largest exporter of soybeans, at the expenses of tens of millions of acres each year of rich habitat for wildlife.

Washington, DC: Did any of the countries where you filmed create obstacles to the filming?

Marilyn: There are always some obstacles that filmmakers learn to get around. But in this particular program there weren't quite as many as we have encountered in others. In the past we've been detained and/or arrested, in places like Uzbekistan, threatened in Turkey, and escaped by several minutes being victims of a suicide bombing in Bangladesh, directed at the press. Ten of our colleagues were killed in that bomb attack. Nothing as dramatic in terms of obstacles in this program.

Hal: Actually the biggest problem we had was with a terribly large bull elephant who objected to our being in his turf. Ultimately he won the confrontation. As he knew he would.

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Coventry, RI: *I watched your program last night, and am very concerned about the state of the world's wildlife, and the stresses and strains we, as humans are placing on the world's ecosystem. From all angles, I feel we are destroying the planet. What can I as an individual do to help preserve the world's wildlife from extinction? I'm an academic librarian, and many times students in the classes I teach, need information on controversial/impact topics. Would bringing up some of these points to the students have an impact? I feel as a lone person, short of re-training in ecology or conservation, I don't have much power to change anything. Yet, I want to preserve the wildlife. I've been out to Montana, and their slogan "the last best place" is starting to become a reality...Judith*

Marilyn: There are a lot of organizations that are dedicated to just that, protecting wildlife, such as the Wildlife Conservation Society, the Nature Conservancy, the World Wildlife Funds, and many others. They all have Web sites indicating ways that you can sign up to get involved. And it's definitely worth looking into these so you feel you are with an organizations and that differences can be made.

Hal: You may also want to visit our Web site at pbs.org. there is lots of free educational material that you can share with your students.

Huntsville, Ala.: *This show was excellent! It reveals exactly what I feared for years. Unfortunately I didn't see it all and most likely only a small fraction of people did as well. Is there any chance they will repeat this show again and will they branch out to the networks to reach a more broad audience? Please hurry!*

Marilyn: The best thing to do is contact your local PBS station and find out when they intend to rebroadcast. Often they do. But you have to check the individual markets because the broadcast schedules vary.

Coatesville, Pa.: *I watched the film last night and It was very powerful and moving. I am a teacher of at-risk students who are not very motivated. I discussed the entire film with my class. They were very moved by the discussion and want to build a garden here at school to help the environment. Do you have any suggestions on how I can do something with my kids to make the environment more meaningful to them?*

Marilyn: There is a site called tryscience.org that would have activities such as that which you are looking for.

Honolulu, Hawaii: *How do you feel the Pacific ocean will be affected and or affect global climate as a result a 1 or 2 degree climate change?*

Marilyn: Our preliminary research indicates that all may not be well in the Pacific in terms of water temperature and increased dead zones. But you'll have to wait for our show next year to learn more, as we learn more.

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Albuquerque, NM: *Your film greatly disturbs me, and at the same time makes me want to do something to reverse the trend. But with the exploding human population on earth, do you see any real hope of things changing before we are forced to, or before the sad evidence is right in front of us, too late to do much about?*

Hal: Though the future doesn't seem to be without peril, there are glimmers of hope in communities all over the world. So it's important to continue to participate in grassroots efforts to save wildlife, to improve the quality of water, and to make communities more sustainable.

Winter Springs, Fla. (15 minutes North of Orlando): *I saw your television special last night and was motivated to contact my city about 200 acres of raw wetland/upland that were purchased to develop commercially.*

I just got off the phone with a commissioner who feels the same way as I do and has the same concerns. I live in an area in central Florida that is rapidly disappearing to mini-disney-esque monstrosities.

I am starting a grass roots campaign to STOP development at a city level in order to preserve wildlife for migratory birds and landbound creatures we have here. Next Monday I have gotten permission to show YOUR documentary that references the devastation already done to Central Florida as it is concise of the issues in question and it urges action on a community level.

I need to help find a solution to the land development that would benefit the environment as the actual plans to build have already been approved. The land mitigation, has NOT yet been finalized and I have been urged by the commissioner to voice my opinions.

The question: Can you refer anyone to me that has the knowledge and the creativity to help us find a solution? My background is in financing and while I am an advocate of the environment, I do not have the education to create a tangible proposal to stop the mitigation or offer an alternative.

I think it's time to get involved. I really feel like commercial development will never stop if I don't make it my business.

Here is a fact of interest: there is no land in the St. Sohn's Basin LEFT to mitigate. This should be a clear warning signal to our commissioners, but only one of them agrees with me. help help -- thank you-Katie

Marilyn: The Nature Conservancy and the World Wildlife Fund are very actively working in Florida to save what remains of the wetlands ecosystem. So I suggest contacting both organizations which are headquartered in Washington, DC and they may have local offices as well. And we need more people like you.

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Barbados: *Thank you so much for the time and effort you have spent on opening eyes of hopefully lots of people! It was a heartbreaking reality to see at times on your program last night but wonderful to see such efforts put forth to try and make a difference. I will do whatever I can to help. I am an American living in Barbados working to help animal life here as well .Thank you again!!! Most sincerely, Dianna*

Marilyn: There can be nothing more satisfying to a filmmaker to get comments such as yours. We give you are heart-felt thanks.

Johnstown, Pa.: *To Whom It May Concern: A Comment-*

Thank you Mr. and Mrs. Weiner for putting together one of the most interesting programs that I have ever seen.

As a trained Geographer and Historian I look at things through a different set of eyes. My wife is an accountant and sometimes does not follow all of my thinking.

Knowing that there are an estimated 6 billion 400 million people on planet Earth is part (if not all) of our problems pertaining to these issues.

Your 'Journey to Planet Earth: The State of the Planet's Wildlife' series reflects some issues that I have been going over. The 'POACHING' issue stands out. It shows how humanity has a way to go. It shows how much more we need to look at how things are done on this planet. It shows that we need to pay more attention to our neighbors in need (people who need FOOD and WATER). It does not get any more basic than that.

Mr. Hal and Mrs. Marilyn Weiner, the both of you and your staff (including Matt Damon) created one incredible program. It is a story that the entire human population must see. -God Bless, K. Charles Rován-age-36.

P.S. If you ever want to have two people hosting and narrating these programs, please look me up. I am passionate about the well-being of our little planet that we ALL call home-Earth.

Hal: Thanks for your passion. However, Matt Damon has signed on for as long as we continue to produce these shows! He, like you, believes that the earth is worth saving. And again, thanks for your kind words.

Marilyn: We were delighted to spend this time with you and hope it was of value.

