

April 18, 2006

TV Review | 'Dimming the Sun,' 'Journey to Planet Earth' and 'Too Hot Not to Handle'

PBS and HBO Examine Global Warming, Dimming of the Sun and Vanishing Species

By [NED MARTEL](#)

The global temperature is rising. As the poles become warmer, the domain of birds and insects is expanding. As humans take up — or mess up — more terrain, the habitat of large predators is shrinking.

And get this: From the latest measurements, all that new heat in the atmosphere is being matched with an equal decline in the rate of sea evaporation.

When television is such a mathematical word problem, it hurts the idle brain. But idling is exactly the problem, and three nationwide Cassandra cries dominate this week's public-affairs programming, with urgent calls for action. "Journey to Planet Earth: The State of the Planet's Wildlife," being shown tonight on PBS, explains the increasingly inhospitable outlook for all earthly creatures. The "Nova" report "Dimming the Sun," also on PBS tonight, complicates matters with the latest findings about how pollution has masked the effects of [global warming](#). And on Saturday HBO declares the whole climate-change crisis "Too Hot Not to Handle."

Even if you delight in scientific method or visions of whiskered things, PBS's wildlife report is a chore. Nothing is objectionable in terms of imagery, nor are there facts to dispute, and the message of crisis is drummed all the way home. The problem is that the show hopscotches from one trouble spot to the next.

Somehow the makers of a program about interconnectedness must have assumed a narrative cohesion would just emerge. It didn't, and the voiceover, by a sleepy [Matt Damon](#), goes on and on about "the timeless rhythms of nature." When malevolent images show up on screen, like elephant poachers or grassland turning into desert, they are accompanied by music straight out of Ed Wood's horror films.

HBO's program is hardly more subtle, but it is more comprehensive and comprehensible. Environmental advocates chime in, with their own statistic-spewing verve, to explicate what has gone wrong. Then a healthy dose of can-do ingenuity follows all the bad news, as prescriptions follow diagnoses. There are suggested changes for behavior at the household and industry levels.

"Too Hot Not to Handle" is shrewd for not insisting at every moment that all these changes are central to human beings' long-term survival. You would think that would be enough, but it tends to help when individuals can see short-term benefits: investment in green industries, renewable energy companies and less wasteful vehicles and appliances can put money in pockets, after all.

The first two programs are not only accessible, but their contents will also sound familiar to anyone who has listened to cycle-of-life eco-lessons from an early age. The "Nova" report on so-called "global dimming," however, is arresting, and not merely because its dynamic photography enlivens the soberness of academia. More important, recent and startling findings that "Dimming the Sun" describes subvert assumptions about global warming without discrediting them. On the contrary, it seems, the phenomenon is proving more nuanced and more dire.

Essentially the planet's particulate pollution has made clouds slightly more solid, and they now can act like big mirrors that keep the Sun's rays from reaching Earth. Beyond that, though, global temperatures will still rise as we reduce particulates. Why? As we stop sending particulates into the air, we remove a shield that has lessened the severity of observable global warming. That's right: we're worse off than we thought.

By the end of "Dimming the Sun" viewers will be able to talk about pan-evaporation, air streams above the Maldives and the potential for conflagration in the Amazon. It's an altogether more frightening hour than the others, even though it's more technical and less anecdotal.

None of these programs, timed to the annual Earth Day hand wringing — this year it's on Saturday — is overtly political. That is left to the new melting-Arctic books, special green issues of national magazines and the [Al Gore](#) documentary "An Inconvenient Truth," about global warming.

"Too Hot Not to Handle," like the Gore film, lists Laurie David, a celebrity Earth Mother, as a producer, but unlike the Gore film, the HBO one aims to inspire the grass roots without criticizing the nation's leaders. In a brief instance when it does wade into politics, "Too Hot Not to Handle" hears from a hybrid-car enthusiast who says it's conservative to conserve fuel.

Essentially, these three television programs are still preaching mostly to the choir. The environmental movement used to accumulate irrefutable evidence that all living things are interconnected, and present the ripple effects of disrupted patterns in the public forum. But in that forum, facts did not always speak for themselves. Now celebrities are recruited and attention-getting analogies written, but still no uprising occurs. These films are themselves interconnected, part of an orchestrated moment of public discussion, instead of waiting for the next specific crisis of oily cormorants or Category 5 hurricane to arrive.

Nova: Dimming the Sun

PBS, tonight at 8; check local listings.

Directed by Duncan Copp; WGBH Science Unit, series producer; Paula S. Apsell, series senior executive producer; DOX for NOVA/ WGBH Boston, producer. Producer-writer: David Sington.

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

PBS, tonight at 9; check local listings.

Produced by Screenscope Inc. in association with South Carolina ETV; Marilyn and Hal Weiner, producers; host and narrator, Matt Damon.

Too Hot Not to Handle

HBO, Saturday at 7 p.m., Eastern and Pacific times; 8 p.m., Central time.

Executive producer, Laurie David; produced by Susan Lester and Joseph Lovett; edited by Tom Haneke; written by Susan Joy Hassol; segment directors, Maryann De Leo and Ellen Goosenberg Kent; segment producers, Vibha Bakshi and Rosemary Sykes; original music by Joel Goodman. For Lovett

Productions: executive producer, Mr. Lovett. For HBO: supervising producer, Jacqueline Glover; executive producer, Sheila Nevins.

[Home](#)

- [World](#)
- [U.S.](#)
- [N.Y. / Region](#)
- [Business](#)
- [Technology](#)
- [Science](#)
- [Health](#)
- [Sports](#)
- [Opinion](#)
- [Arts](#)
- [Style](#)
- [Travel](#)
- [Jobs](#)
- [Real Estate](#)
- [Autos](#)
- [Back to Top](#)

[Copyright 2006 The New York Times Company](#)

- [Privacy Policy](#)
- [Search](#)
- [Corrections](#)
- [XML](#)