



British Ecological Society

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Professor J.S Jones,  
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Dear Steve

Thank you for the opportunity for the BES to contribute to your review of the BBC's science coverage. I asked Ceri Mangerison, our Policy Officer, to canvas opinion and her report is below.

If I might add my personal perspective: I agree with our membership's view that BBC science coverage is in general very good, though in some cases in understandably trying to achieve balance the Corporation can over-accentuate the views of small minorities, in particular on issues such as climate change.

One of the outstanding successes of recent BBC broadcasting on radio is *In Our Time* which despite its often challenging content is amongst the most downloaded podcasts. While appreciating the BBC must address a diversity of audiences I think science programming on television is failing to address a constituency that is willing to explore more difficult ideas. *Horizon* used to do this but today has a much more entertainment agenda and relatively infrequently explores in depth cutting-edge science.

Good luck with the review.

With best wishes

Charles

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## The Trust's review of BBC science coverage; the British Ecological Society's response

Thank you for giving the Society the opportunity to express a view on the BBC's coverage of science. As a Society aiming to advance ecology, most of our members place a great importance on the media's role in communicating the science of ecology to the public. This review is therefore highly relevant to our academic members, many of whom have direct experience working with journalists and broadcasters to communicate their research to the public, be it on television, radio or in on-line content.

The Society has consulted our members on this issue, who have expressed a variety of opinions which we will be conveying in this written response; the Policy Team would be happy to expand on this verbally by interview should more detail be required. Some of the feedback we have received relates to our members' first-hand experiences of gaining BBC coverage of their own research, whilst others have commented on the BBC's coverage of the subject more generally, by assessing mainstream programming.

On issues of impartiality, accuracy, precision, clarity and scope of content, we have received a surprisingly diverse range of opinions, reflecting the often contrasting attitudes from individuals to the different output mediums. To draw a qualitative conclusion, the response received was broadly positive, although many respondents expressed some negative caveats. Whilst it will be difficult, and perhaps not useful to feedback specific examples, we will endeavour to report the full spectrum of opinion expressed by our members. We would like to address the three mediums separately, addressing radio and television output first before commenting on on-line news content.

### Radio broadcasting

Firstly considering the BBC's radio output; we have had a number of positive comments about the news and factual programmes, specifically on Radio 4 (such as Today, PM, More or Less, Home Planet and Farming Today), which are seen to present well-researched content in an impartial manner, with a few exceptions. The BBC's ability here to identify and include lead experts in reports and present a balanced account of scientific research, often lacking in other broadcasters' work, was particularly commended. In some cases however, the BBC was considered too overzealous in its aim to achieve balance; for example in its coverage of climate change, which was seen by one contributor as overlooking the majority view within the scientific community for the sake of achieving balance. Another contributor reported a disproportionate amount of air time being dedicated to some marginal arguments when reporting some scientific issues, regardless of the small proportion of experts ascribing to these views.

We received a very small number of negative comments about radio programming; one referred to a Radio 5 presenter's inability to interpret, and accurately refer to, the findings of a scientific paper in an interview with the author, whilst the



other commented on the system of recording and distributing interviews within the BBC; which was deemed cumbersome and costly due to a duplication of interviews for various BBC-run radio stations. The reporting of environmental issues on programmes themed as such was considered unfocussed by one contributor, who also found the current affairs programmes poor; highlighting the assumed ignorance amongst listeners on science issues, which sits in stark contrast to the assumed level of knowledge on economic issues.

### Television broadcasting

Regards television coverage, there was a general feeling that this was not as thorough as that on radio, and more specifically, that despite good use of clear, jargon-free language and images, there was a comparative lack of sufficient and detailed scientific *content*. This perhaps reflects the high expectations placed on the Corporation in comparison to other broadcasters, who were generally deemed to be below the BBC's standard. One contributor felt the BBC dedicates a greater amount of overall airtime to important ecological issues than others, yet another described the coverage as 'very narrow', largely ignoring, for example, the primary producers and decomposers that make the planet function, such as fungi. Another contributor felt that sustainability, climate change and environmental impacts, such as over-fishing, are key topics to communicate to the public, but that much of this content is still missing in BBC programming.

Positive feedback on scientific and environmental content in television was also apparent in the responses, with a widely expressed view that programmes are well-received and, in some cases, well-researched. The scope of coverage in terms of subject matter was commended; however some concern was expressed for the focus, particularly during wildlife programmes, on visually stimulating images which did not correspond to equally stimulating content. There were some negative remarks made about television news, which was considered by some as 'dumbed-down' at best, and at worse prone to misrepresent the facts. In terms of factual programmes, Panorama was commended by one contributor (for the thoroughness of its research), as was the content in Aubrey Manning's Earth Story, and that within the programmes presented by Richard Hammond (on engineering) and Brian Cox (on astronomy).

### On-line news reporting

In terms of online news content, this was considered by some as well-researched and more in-depth than in other mediums. One contributor particularly welcomed the constructive and mutually beneficial relationship built up with a BBC journalist. Some on-line stories however were reported as having inaccurate or inflated conclusions, with misleading 'attention-grabbing' headlines. Another problem reported with this medium, and others, is the interpretation of statistics by journalists, which one consultee considered problematic due to most journalists' lack of scientific training; the presentation of statistics with little regard for mean and standard deviation for example was reported to risk causing a misinterpretation of the facts by the public. As with other mediums, on-line reporting was not considered flawless by all those consulted.

### General assessment



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Finally to make some more general comments about the BBC's science reporting; most contributors to the BES's call for evidence agreed on the impartiality and depth of the Corporation's work. However the overall scope of coverage of science as a subject area has been criticised by some members. Although the BBC is seen as giving a good account of the subjects it does cover, there is much more in science, and ecology particularly, that is overlooked due to the perceived lack of relevance to a general audience. One contributor emphasised the shortcomings in focusing on 'fur and feathers' in ecology stories, whilst another found coverage as a whole to be weighted by journalists' eye for a 'story', which often results in 'trivial' topics gaining coverage. However there was approval of the wide range of topics that are covered under the umbrella of 'science', which have in the past too narrowly focused on medical breakthroughs.

We hope these comments will be taken into consideration during the review process, and urge you to contact the Policy Team if you require further input. Taken as a whole the BBC's science coverage is often compared favourably to that of other broadcasters, despite some negative feedback. Although there have been some cases of a perceived failure by the BBC to deliver fully accurate and impartial scientific reportage, the BBC's *efforts* to achieve impartiality, balance, accuracy and precision have rarely been questioned.