



Series Review

Program: Animal Atlas
Episodes reviewed: “Elephants Recall All”
“Animals 101”
Program length: 30 minutes

Animal Atlas continues its tradition as a series that blends animal images with information on a wide range of life science issues in a manner that is entertaining and clever. The episodes from this season again combine facts, comparisons, and reflections on broad concepts with an engaging narration that targets the 13-16 year-old age range in both vocabulary and interest level. The “Elephants Recall All” episode uses animal mass as a launching point for information about prehistoric animals, oceanic mammals, non-mammalian species, and African animals. The series is rich with interesting details that support examination and curiosity. Examples include these: The whale shark, not the elephant is the biggest animal (30,000 pounds); Dolphins have moustaches (nearly invisible); Giraffe are the tallest animal (at nearly 20 feet, 3,000 pounds) while African elephants are the biggest animals on land (14,000 pounds). The narrative keeps viewer interest with non-pedantic information imaginatively chosen--such as the close relationship between bears and dogs, the note that an elephant trunk has more muscles (40,000) than the entire human body, and the differing number of toes in elephant species.

The program maintains educational integrity while remaining entertaining to its target age group with such devices as intercutting facial close-ups of a gorilla and a chimp as reaction shots, a narration that often addresses animals instead of the human audience, and a wonderfully whimsical musical score. Visuals, not facts, lead the content. The use of clear and colorful graphics is excellent as support for concept clarity. Size comparisons are done in silhouette, typical in state-adopted textbooks and the global map with highlighted ranges elephant species is necessary for geographic context at the 13-16 year-old age range. Additionally, there is a wide range of visuals that support viewer interest from underwater photography to close-ups of animal morphology and an editing style that includes fast cuts and split screens to better make comparative points.

The compare/contrast method of looking at mammals, lizards, invertebrates, and extinct species, while educationally sound, is kept entertaining with humor and an irreverent tone—perfect, again, for the target age. This blend of authentic educational value with target-age entertainment is typical of the Animal Atlas series.

The entertainment value of the series may make the educational value nearly invisible to the viewer, but it is there. Examples include the “Animal Facts” quizzes before and after breaks, the closing footage of faux outtakes with voiceover, and the sweeping worldview that can make animals fascinating through comparison—for example, comparing tentacles and trunks. These elements combine to create an enlightening way to hold viewer interest while delivering real-world information. The consistent humor of the narrative never ridicules any animal species or morphological trait—a difficult balance this series consistently maintains.

The “Animals 101” episode is specifically worthy of note for combining educational content with entertainment. Dedicated to animal classification (kingdom, phylum, class, order, family, genus, species) the program never seems instructional. By using hundreds of entertaining cuts from across the animal world before bringing the viewer finally home to the pet dog, the episode does the near miraculous job of making scientific jargon alive for adolescent viewers.

Summary:

Target audience for tone, program content, and learning concepts:

- Middle and high school (ages 13-16)

General Category of Learning:

- Life Sciences

Underlying Science Content Standards addressed:

- Animal morphology
- Animal behavior
- Animal classification
- Environment and Adaptive Characteristics

Secondary-specific science content standards addressed (*examples drawn from the National Science Education Standards and the California State Science Content Standards, Biology/Life Sciences - Grades Nine Through Twelve*)

- Structure and function in living systems
- Animal regulation and behavior
- Students understand the classification of living groups of organisms by shared derived characteristics
- Students recognize a great diversity of species increases the chance that at least some organisms survive

Hall Davidson served as Director of Education Services at PBS station KOCE-TV for 15 years, where he also was executive director of the media consortium Telecommunications of Orange County (TOC) serving over 200,000 students. Prior to that, he worked in educational media at PBS station KLCS-TV in Los Angeles. He was president of Video-Using Educators and is currently chairman of the school site council at a public elementary school in Los

Angeles. He is director of the nation's oldest student media festival, the California Student Media & Multimedia Festival, and on the board of directors of California's largest technology user group, Computer-Using Educators (CUE). He is an Emmy-nominated producer of educational programs. He was classroom teacher in the public school system and began teaching on television at night on an Emmy-winning program before leaving the classroom for a position providing staff development for teachers on media use in the classroom.

**HALL DAVIDSON
2428 CANYON DRIVE
LOS ANGELES, CA 90068**

