

MEET THE "ANT MAN"—NOVA PROFILES NATURALIST AND CONSERVATION CRUSADER E.O. WILSON

Lord of the Ants

Tuesday, May 20 at 8pm ET/PT on PBS

www.pbs.org/nova/eowilson



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At age 78, E.O. Wilson is still going through his "little savage" phase of boyhood exploration of the natural world. NOVA profiles this soft-spoken Southerner and Professor Emeritus at Harvard, who is an acclaimed advocate for ants, biological diversity, and the controversial extension of Darwinian ideas to human society, on *Lord of the Ants*, premiering Tuesday, May 20 at 8pm ET/PT on PBS (check local listings).

Actor and environmentalist Harrison Ford narrates this engaging portrait of a ceaselessly active scientist and eloquent writer, who has accumulated two Pulitzer Prizes among his many other honors.

Says fellow naturalist David Attenborough: "He will go down as the man who opened the eyes of millions 'round the world to the glories, the values, the importance of, to use his term, biodiversity."

Wilson is also renowned for two seemingly unrelated roles. First, he is the "ant man," whose infectious enthusiasm for his scientific specialty has encouraged many house dwellers to reach for a magnifying glass instead of ant traps when faced with these tiny invaders. NOVA films Wilson exuberantly plunging his hand into a bed of fire ants and then calmly observing that each of the scores of stings he is receiving feels like "the touch of a hot needle."

Second, Wilson hit the headlines and became a lightning rod in academic circles for his 1975 book *Sociobiology: The New Synthesis*, which held that evolutionary principles could explain social behavior throughout the animal kingdom, including in humans.

At the time, critics warned that Wilson was promoting a dangerous idea with roots in biological determinism, which in the past had fueled the eugenics movement. Wilson was even physically attacked, when a pitcher of ice water was poured over his head as he stood up to make a presentation. Thirty five years later the controversy has since calmed as experimental evidence now shows that genes do play a role in aspects of human behavior.

In fact, these two elements of Wilson's work, ants and sociobiology, are intimately connected, since it was his understanding of the social nature of ant society that gave rise to his ideas of sociobiology. Characteristically, Wilson's wide-ranging mind could look beyond one domain to another. "He is able to step back not just one pace but three paces and see the entire panorama of not just invertebrates, but of the whole magic complex web of organisms - animals and plants," marvels Attenborough.

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Wilson's latest step back shows him that the complex web of life in which he has delighted since he was a child is under threat in many of the most biologically diverse regions of the world. Accordingly, he has become a tireless organizer and spokesman for preserving the world's threatened species.

And he has his own research to back him up. NOVA visits a tiny island in the Florida Keys where Wilson and biologist Daniel Simberloff started a unique experiment in 1965. They first made an inventory of every living species on the island. Then they hired an exterminator to wipe them all out.

Over the next few years they documented the recolonization and rebirth of life on the island, showing that, in general, the smaller an area of land, the fewer species it can support and the higher the risk of extinction. "This is one of the reasons why conservationists have a sound scientific basis for trying to get larger reserves," says Wilson. "It's good insurance. It means we can save more species over the long term."

And he's not stopping there. Wilson's ultimate dream is to catalog every species of life on the planet, a number that probably vastly exceeds the current inventory of life. He calls it the Encyclopedia of Life, and he now has the backing of Harvard University, the Smithsonian Institution, and several other organizations to make it a reality.

The young naturalist who never grew up surely has even more up his sleeve.

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Production Credits

Lord of the Ants

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