David Schechter Brings Climate Change Home for Viewers of CBS News

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CBS News National Climate Correspondent David Schechter. (Photo courtesy CBS News)

WASHINGTON — David Schechter is a master at making the biggest story of our time tangible and relatable to everyone from the youngest viewer to the most hardened of mature skeptics.

And perhaps never has it been more evident than this past April, when Schechter, in his role as CBS News' national climate correspondent, led the network's extensive Earth Day coverage.

The project was called "Protecting Life on Earth," a daily, multi-part **Climate Watch** series and a half-hour Earth Day documentary, that began running on CBS-owned stations in 14 markets April 16, and continued with a series of special reports through the end of the month.

Schechter, as both consummate reporter and guide, took his viewers on a series of journeys to illustrate how the effects of climate change are more than just the higher temperatures, increased prevalence of wildfires and strong storms that we all read about in our morning paper.

Because of these and other factors, like carbon-rich emissions from human activity and habitat destruction, 1 million species on Earth are in jeopardy.

Schechter, tells this story, accompanied by long-time partner in news Chance Horner, a senior photographer, editor and producer at CBS News, by focusing on one unfolding crisis at a time, letting the small reveal the bigger picture.

Such was the case recently when the correspondent ventured into the Mule Mountains of southern Arizona to bring his viewers into the dwindling world of Yarrow's spiny lizard.

The species has lived in the region for millions of years, but it is now, in the words of John Wiens, an evolutionary biologist at the University of Arizona, on "an elevator to extinction."

The problem, as Schechter explained in his report, is that the lizard has a very distinct temperature sweet spot that long ago forced it from the sun-drenched valley's below and into the mountains.

As climate change has made Arizona winters shorter and warmer and summers downright brutal, the spiny lizard has had to climb ever higher for relief.

In 2014, as Schechter reported, Wiens and a team of researchers found a small population of Yarrow's spiny lizard at about 5,700 feet. Eight years later they went back, and couldn't find a single lizard below 7,100 feet.

Because each population of spiny lizards is now unique, cut off from those on other mountains due to the heat below, it is now estimated the species could be extinct by as soon as 2025.

"This is what the future looks like," Wiens told the correspondent. "This is climate-related extinction."

For another report, Schechter traveled to the El Yunque National Forest in Puerto Rico, where the Puerto Rican parrot now teeters on the brink of extinction and is considered one of the most critically endangered birds in the world.

With only 300 of the parrots existing in the wild, the reason they're still around is due to the efforts of the men and women of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service who oversee an active breeding effort at a forest facility.

"When I'm old and I die, I want to be able to say I did something for my country," Marisel López Flores told Schechter early one morning, as 22 young parrots were being released into the wild.

López Flores is the leader of the National Forest's Parrot Recovery Program.

"This is the way I think I'm contributing to my island," she said.

Recently, The Well News caught up with Schechter as he was preparing yet another climate report, this one involving the human body's response to extreme heat.

A day before the conversation that follows, Horner rolled film as the correspondent climbed into a chamber at a lab in Penn State in State College, Pennsylvania, in which the temperature rose to 120 degrees.

Seemingly none the worse for the experience, Schechter graciously retraced the career arc that led to his being a major network's major climate guy, during a Zoom session the following morning.

"Well, it's been an overnight success; after 30 years," he joked.

"Seriously, though, I started in local [television] news reporting in Dubuque, Iowa, and then I worked at a series of local news stations in Youngstown, Ohio, Kansas City, Missouri and Minneapolis, Minnesota, before ultimately winding up in Dallas, and it was in Dallas that I did my first climate change story," he said.

The station was WFAA-TV in Dallas, and it would be Schechter's broadcast home from 2006 to 2022.

Over the years he covered fertilizer plant explosions and banking scandals and scores of other local news stories, and often anchored WFAA's evening news program.

The turning point in his career came in 2016, when he and Horner developed a documentary news segment they called

"Verify Road Trip," in which they would bring a skeptical viewer along with them on a road trip to challenge the skeptic's previously held beliefs.

"The premise was we'd take a viewer with us, kind of as a co-reporter, as we reported on a subject we knew they were skeptical about," Schechter said. "They would meet with all of the experts on a given subject I was reporting on and they'd have all of the experiences I had, and at the end, they'd reach their own conclusion about what they'd seen and heard."

One episode, "Borderlands," brought a conservative viewer to the Texas-Mexico border to examine the implications of expanding the border wall. The report garnered Schechter his third Edward R. Murrow award for outstanding achievement in broadcast and digital journalism.

And the segments also brought him face-to-face with climate change as subject matter for the very first time.

"Up to that point, everybody at the station was sort of avoiding climate change," Schechter said. "Nobody around me knew much about it. I certainly didn't know anything, really, about climate change, and it was kind of a big moment for me when I said, 'I'm going to take this on.'"

For the segment, Schechter and Horner invited a roofer from suburban Dallas to accompany them on a road trip to talk to some of the top climate experts in the country, and then took him to Alaska, to see, first-hand, the melting glaciers.

"I didn't really intend to change his mind; I just wanted to challenge his point of view. But the experience really did change his mind and it changed the trajectory for me because I realized,

if I go down this road with this guy, I'm going to have to learn a lot of things," Schechter said.

"I thought, you know, if this situation is as bad as I think it is, and as bad as all the articles I read tell me it is, then continuing to report on it will probably change my life, and it has," he said.

In fact, the work led to an offer to join the CBS Local News Innovation Lab, which at the time, was looking for someone who could come up with new concepts, new executions and new ideas, but also wanted to cover climate change.

"It was an opportunity that seemed to fit me perfectly, and it was a great opportunity to join CBS," Schechter said.

Climate Change an Intimidating Subject

With the perspective of hindsight, Schechter said he believes one reason climate change hasn't traditionally been seen as a local news story is that people are simply intimidated by the material.

"I mean, I started out as a general news reporter, then worked as an investigative reporter and a special projects reporter and I found [reporting on climate change] to be intimidating," he said.

"It's a totally different language; a totally different set of information that you have to become familiar with, but what I've found is that it's not impossible to gain what I call climate confidence," Schechter said.

"I mean, there are a certain number of documents that you really need to be familiar with, and then you need to stay on top of what's going on, but you can learn it. I had to learn it. I had to learn how to read the reports from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change and the national assessments and be able to understand them enough to be able to tell people what this curve in the chart means and so on.

"In a sense, it's like learning a new language, but I think that's what makes it fun. I enjoy a challenge. But a lot of people, I think, couldn't get past that intimidation factor early on," he said.

Schechter said this is one reason there appears to be "a great divide" when it comes to climate journalism.

"Some of it is excellent. There are some news organizations that are doing an exceptionally good job covering climate change and have been doing so for a really long time," he said.

"But then, it just falls off really fast from there," he continued. "I think in some news organizations there's a feeling that the audience just doesn't want to hear about it. Other news managers shy away from it because they're concerned about getting the science wrong.

"That leads to situations where if you have a choice between a climate story and something else, you choose the something else," Schechter said. "The other big factor, however, is the hate factor.

"There is an intimidation factor out there that I think, particularly local journalists will face, when they open up their Twitter or X feeds or whatever, and see all this hate coming at them because they reported on climate change.

"I mean, you know what it's like to be a reporter. You might not get feedback on a story or a bunch of stories, but you write one climate story and you're going to get some feedback from the deniers and the skeptics," Schechter continued. "People don't want to go to their social media feeds and face that and they don't know how to deal with it.

CBS News Correspondent David Schechter on location in Arizona in what proved to be a vain attempt to find a climate-imperiled Yarrow's spiny lizard. (Photo courtesy CBS News)

"I mean, if you look at the Yale research, it shows that probably about 10% of the public is dismissive of climate change, but they're the ones who make 90% of the noise," he said. "I think that's something more editors should explain to their reporters — no matter how vitriolic the feedback is to your climate story, it's coming from a small minority of people."

Schechter admitted he knows this from experience.

"Oh my, yes, in the beginning, it was overwhelming to me. I mean, it's so much hate," he said. "And I remember thinking, 'Can I respond to this person?' And then when I did, when I said, 'What you just said is inaccurate and here's why' or 'Here's my source document,' they don't care. They're just looking for a fight.

"Most people who criticize climate reporting and comment on a reporter's work in social media are not approaching them with any sort of intellectual curiosity," he continued. "It's just dogma that they are spewing. It's 'this isn't happening.'"

In Schechter's case, he said he initially tried to answer people, but quickly found the back and forth "would kind of spiral out of control."

In response, he developed a personal social media rule.

"If I respond to someone, on those rare occasions that I still do, I'm only going to respond once. I'm not going to come back and keep it going," he said. "My attitude is they're going to say what they're going to say, and there's no reason to waste any time trying to have a dialogue with someone who is not interested.

"Now, if there's a hint that somebody really wants to talk or has a question and they're sincere about their conviction, then yes, that's a conversation certainly worth having. But if people are throwing bombs, just stay away from them," he said.

A Different Approach to Storytelling

When it came to crafting his early climate news segments, Schechter said he had a strong sense of what he didn't want to do.

"I had by then worked in a lot of places and learned there's just sort of this sense of what it is to be the perfect reporter or the perfect anchor or whatever," he said. "It was like, you were always talking to this vanishing point, to that one person who was 'out there' watching or listening.

"And everybody wants to be exactly alike … looking off toward that vanishing point, using the same tone of voice and the same structure of story," he said. "It's formulaic. It's very prescribed. And this is what our industry tells us is perfection," he continued.

"My attitude was, I'm never going to be as good as any of those people at any of those things. So I don't want to go in that

direction. I don't want to go to that vanishing point. So when Chance and I got this opportunity, I said, 'Let's just make up some new set of rules.'"

Schechter referred to these as "brand attributes" or "core tenants" on how they were going to tell their stories.

"To begin with, you are always going to go somewhere with me. We're going to see some things. So many stories start off with a conclusion — 'we discovered fentanyl is bad' or whatever. What we do is start with a question and then look for the answer and kind of wait to reach a conclusion at the end," he said.

"So it's a journey of discovery, which I think people want to go on. I think adventure is good. We always try to give you a sense of place in terms of where you are and what's unique or extreme about it," he said.

"The other thing is to capture my natural reactions to things and for me to be your guide. That's another premise we operate under — that this is guided journalism. It's a guided tour and we are going to go through this together.

"And then I think there's always a sense of fun and camaraderie between the scientists and myself or between me and Chance, whoever's around," he said.

The idea, Schechter said, is to make people feel like they've experienced a travel show about climate change.

"We don't come at you with this sense of doom, as serious as the subject is, and we don't come at you with too much information. We give you a lot of space to participate in that journey, and then we'll say, here's a piece of information you really need to know to unlock this next idea. Then we go on to that next idea.

"So, in a sense, it's telling a story while giving you information only when you need it," he said.

Schechter said before beginning each segment, he and Horner spend a lot of time "chiseling the story out of the block of marble … striving to find where it is."

"There's a lot of throwing away pieces in this process and continuing to refine and we go through a lot of versions," he said. "We spend a lot of time reviewing what we've done and asking ourselves, 'Is this landing?' 'Are people going to hear this?' Because there's a tendency with a story to just put in as much as you possibly can.

"There are a lot of people who say, 'I learned all this and I'm putting it in the story,' but I don't think that's necessarily a service to the viewer," he said.

Schechter acknowledged that he's been fortunate in working in places where his bosses embraced the idea of "different" and gave him the latitude to make some mistakes and learn from them.

"There has been a lot of trial and error to all this," he said. "We didn't develop our approach overnight and we're still asking questions of ourselves and asking other people what they think. It's kind of a work in progress and a product of evolution.

"You're always asking yourself, 'Okay, how are we going to tell this story?' 'How can we bring out the personality of the professor that we're talking to?' 'How can I participate in the story?' and 'What interesting ways are there for us to help the audience understand what we're doing without having it become a circus?'

"Everything should be in service of the audience and helping them understand and feel," he said.

Striving Not to Bore or Distract Viewers

Schechter said when he sets out to do a story, even one with a potential government angle, he doesn't set out to do a "policy story" per se.

"I think there are really good, obvious ways to tell interesting stories, and I think as far as policy and policy debates go, we — meaning CBS — react to those on a more daily news or ad hoc basis," he said.

"Now, that doesn't mean we avoid the policy aspect of our climate stories, but hope at the end of the day we're telling visual stories about a given issue, with elements of the policy story wrapped up inside of it," he said.

CBS News David Schechter in a tropical forest in Puerto Rico. (Photo courtesy CBS News)

"Remember earlier, when I said the challenge is always, 'How can I make this a journey you want to go on?' Well, that's kind of the antithesis of a straight policy story. What we would do instead, say, is cover what it means to have a battery plant open in a town, and why that's important and where and how it came to be.

"That way, even if what you're talking about is government policy, it doesn't feel like it. And people respond, hopefully, by feeling 'That's pretty interesting.' 'I didn't know that was going on.'"

Schechter said once they decide on a story idea, planning occurs at his computer. He uses Trello, a visual project management application that uses boards and cards to represent the stages of work and tasks.

"It's how I organize the projects," he explained. "I collect as much information as I can about a topic, and then I work down to the three or four points that I think will really illuminate the story we're working on.

"Then the question is what elements work best to get the point across. Obviously we rely on a lot of visuals, but there are times when you judiciously want to use a graphic," he said. "For instance, while working on the parrot story, we included a graphic Chance made about the number of bird species that have been lost in the U.S. since 1973.

"It was a statistic from a report by Cornell and it just seemed like a piece of information that we would really like to share. We wanted to show that extinction isn't just happening to this species in Puerto Rico, it's happening on the mainland U.S. as well.

"So, we looked at impacted bird species on the East Coast; we looked at impacted bird species on the West Coast and we identified a species that was readily familiar to viewers on both coasts.

"We then built a quick graphic representation that illustrated the species range and the decrease that had occurred over time —

and then we checked back with Cornell to make sure what we'd done was accurate, because we were sticking various sources of information together in the graphic," he said.

Schechter stressed that for all the effort that goes into collecting and figuring out how to use data, graphics are used sparingly.

"The thing you don't want to do is overload the viewer with information. Our kind of rule of thumb is that in each scene, there should be only one or two major pieces of information … stuff that's really supportive of the idea you are trying to get across. Then it should be visualized in a way that's really easy and compelling to look at," he said.

Schechter said he and Horner will start assessing whether graphic representations of data will stay or go from a report as soon as they have a "minimally viable graphic" to look at.

"You plug it into where you think it should go and ask if it's working. 'If I have it here, are people going to hear the line I'm saying under it, or will they be too distracted?' 'How much can we take out?'

"The point I'm trying to make here is that the graphic is just as important as any other aspect of the story. You have to ask, 'What are people going to take away from this? How complicated or how simple can we make it?'"

CBS Climate Coverage a Team and Multi-Platform Effort

Though Schechter is often center stage on CBS News' climate watch, he said he was particularly proud of the collaborative, whole team effort that went into making "Protecting Life on Earth" a success.

Schechter was joined, for instance, by CBS News senior national and environmental correspondent Ben Tracy on a series of Climate Watch reporters that aired on the CBS News streaming service, as well as its network programs, "CBS Sunday Morning," "CBS News Sunday Morning," "CBS Mornings," and "CBS Evening News with Norah O'Donnell."

Highlights of Tracy's work on the project included his conversation with billionaire Bill Gates about his investments addressing the climate crisis; his look at how marine protected areas are rarely enforced; and an interview with nature photographer James Balog, whose work explores the relationship between humans and nature.

Every report featured contributions from the CBS News climate unit and the CBS News and Stations data journalism team, and CBS Newspath provided network-owned stations and affiliates with additional Earth Day-related packages throughout the month.

The driving force behind it all, Schechter said, was Wendy McMahon, the president and CEO of CBS News and Stations, the division of CBS television that runs the news operation, its owned and operated stations, as well as CBS Media Ventures, its domestic syndication arm.

A climate reporter has to do what they've got to do — including jumping into a frozen lake. (Photo courtesy CBS News)

"When she came into her position last year, one of the first things she said was, 'We're going to break some stuff, we're going to try some new things, and we want content to flow around the company like water,' and I was really down for that," Schechter said.

In fact, he said, though he'd already been at CBS for almost a year before McMahon's rise to her current role at the network, her arrival in the top spot for news was reaffirmation of how "great an opportunity" his position was going to be.

"And that's because it's really hard to develop new ideas and push boundaries when you don't have the support all the way up to the top," Schechter said.

"You might have a couple of people in your newsroom who are like, 'Yeah, keep going in that direction,' but it's a whole different thing when you've got someone at the top saying, 'You can talk about climate change as a fact, not a controversy' — that's an incredible vision," he said.

"Protecting Life on Earth" and "Climate Watch," more generally, also delivered on the promise of the network's E-Team, a two-year-old initiative established specifically to train local reporters and meteorologists and managers at CBS stations in the basics of climate change and how to report on it.

"We meet once a month with them and each month is a different kind of session. We provide story ideas, we bring in experts and then we do these collaborative projects," Schechter said.

"It's not a matter of dictating anything to them, but rather drawing them in as true collaborators," he said. "So I might say, 'I'm traveling to Svalbard, Norway, and we'd like you to help us on this science of warming project; what stories in your markets might be good examples of this topic?'"

For those who don't know, Svalbard, Norway, holds two distinctions — it is both the world's northernmost inhabited area and also the fastest-warming location on Earth.

"So what we wound up with in this package was content I provided, content Ben Tracy and CBS News provided and 14 stories from local affiliates. That's a giant package of stuff and it shows what you can do when everybody is working together," Schechter said.

After a pause, he continued: "These projects are really rewarding because it's no longer two dudes out on the road, putting these things together. There are a lot of really talented people involved and there's a lot of collaboration with the stations.

"It's fun to see," he said. "One day we're saying, 'Why don't we do an Earth Day thing on extinction?' And a few weeks later, we have a dump truck full of stuff."

Of course with so much content being produced, someone has to act as something of an air traffic controller.

Schechter said when it comes to the kind of stories he's doing, that person is Tracy Wholf, who was named senior producer of climate at CBS News and Stations last year.

She came to CBS from ABC News, where she was coordinating producer and helped launch the ABC Climate Unit in 2021.

Prior to that, Wholf worked in news and documentary production for PBS, Nat Geo and ESPN.

"Tracy Wholf is almost like the agent for the content in our climate vertical," Schechter said.

He illustrated her role using his then-current assignment investigating the impact of extreme heat on human health, the story that took him to Penn State.

While Schechter is in the field, Wholf is back at the CBS broadcast center in New York, knocking on office doors, seeing who's interested in the story and who she might have to coax into being interested.

"A lot of her job is breaking down the silos that develop in any large company," he said. "It's like she's got the sledgehammer and she goes in and says, 'We've got all this great stuff and we're all supposed to work together, so let's work together.'

"As a result, she gets our content in places where it probably wouldn't have gone before," he said.

Schechter said as a result, "we'll often have a story that is going to be on the 5 p.m. news in 14 markets, and then it's on CBS Morning the next day, and I'm sitting at the desk with Gayle King, talking to her about the story.

"CBS has so many places to get a story seen — and we haven't even mentioned CBSnews.com, or Instagram or YouTube — that if you can leverage the power of the network, you can draw a lot of attention to the work that you're doing," he said.

One of the ironies of a successful teamwork — especially in a medium like television — is that when it works, the vast majority

of viewers won't be the least bit conscious of the time and effort and many hands that made the project a reality.

"That's fine," Schechter said. "I don't think viewers have to be like, 'Oh, that was a collaborative project.' But for those of us actually working on it and seeing the ideas flow through different parts of the company and things happening between stations, that's really exciting. I get a lot of joy from that."

Speaking more directly of his role as correspondent, he continued:

"The work is hard. There are a lot of masters to serve. You have to go through the same things everybody has to go through at their job. But at the end of the day, I'm excited about learning stuff — and there's still so much more to learn here.

"I am grateful to be in a position where I get to do experiential reporting, where I get to go and see what it feels like to jump in a