



Journey to Planet Earth

**Transcript for Episode 04:
On the Brink**

Abridged Version

Journey to Planet Earth is produced by

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(Matt Damon On-Camera)

Hi, I'm Matt Damon and welcome to *Journey To Planet Earth*. In this episode we investigate a growing national security threat -- how environmental pressures can lead to extreme violence. We will journey to places where waves of terrorism and regional conflict have touched people, both rich and poor. But our program is not without stories of hope and courage -- and we will find them in some of the most unexpected places. So please join me now -- as we begin our journey.

(Countryside)

In Bangladesh, life has never been about half measures. It's more about extremes. This is a country of rare and exotic beauty -- a place with exceptional moments of sheer magic. But living in a country of extremes can also be exhausting.

(City Streets)

Bangladesh's population is extreme. Nearly 132 million people -- roughly half the population of the United States -- are packed into an area the size of New York State.

Simply surviving from day to day is extreme. And given the unyielding hardness of life, reactions are often extreme -- sometimes violent

Thomas Homer-Dixon

One of the things that you find in many societies that are on the brink of violence is that things can change suddenly in a very sharp, sudden way. And often we're very surprised by what happens when the violence occurs because it just explodes in our face.

(Celebration)

But on this particular spring morning, an entire nation is celebrating. Here in Dhaka -- Bangladesh's capital -- over one hundred thousand people are gathering for -- *Pahela Baishakh* -- the Bangla New Year. Though the country is 90% Muslim, this is a secular holiday -- one that honors their common and cherished thousand year old culture. It's three minutes before nine and though the festivities are scheduled to continue for another ten hours, the celebration is about to end. A bomb goes off -- and then another. Nine are instantly killed -- more than thirty are badly injured. No one claims responsibility.

Anger quickly surfaces.

Venkateswar Ramaswamy

It's because of years and years of deprivation, poor sanitation, scarcity of drinking water, general degraded environment, that a kind of rage builds up, and it just needs small sparks to set it on fire and riots can break out.

How did this happen? How could a country's national security become so closely linked to severe environmental problems?

(Map)

Computer-generated models help visualize Bangladesh's place in the world. Located in South Asia, the country is virtually surrounded by India and the Bay of Bengal to the south. But in many ways, the nation's fate is dictated by the world's highest mountain range looming to the north -- the Himalayas.

(River)

Nourished by enormous amounts of snow melt ---- Bangladesh's heart and soul is a complex highway of hundreds of rivers and streams that carry more water through this tiny nation than flows through all of Europe. The Himalayas also act as a barrier, protecting the land from the frigid Siberian winds. But the protection comes with a price -- a highly volatile tropical monsoon season.

(Monsoon)

Only a few feet above sea level, for two months each year floods sweep across much of Bangladesh. Hundreds of thousands of acres of precious farmland are washed away.

Ironically, in a country that suffers from massive seasonal flooding, Bangladesh's biggest problem is the lack of water. For ten months each year, there is little or no rain.

(Farming)

Sources of water used for irrigation are scarce. Though rich alluvial soil makes Bangladesh one of the most fertile nations in the world -- it's useless without water.

(River)

As the demands of land and water scarcities increase -- more and more people flee the countryside.

(Dhaka Streets)

Many come to the teeming streets and back alleys of the country's capital. But Dhaka's government doesn't have the resources to cope with a crumbling infrastructure and a growing population. Of its nine million citizens, three million live in extreme squalor -- with no electricity -- no running water -- no toilets. An open sewer empties into the city's river. Disease is rampant

(Street Violence)

In recent years, violent demonstrations have become commonplace. And as the burden of political instability and poverty become intolerable -- many Bangladeshis are left with no other choice than to flee their homeland.

Venkateswar Ramaswamy

The sheer lack of services and the degraded nature of the environment all the time itself constitutes a kind of violence on the dignity of these people--so it isn't surprising when suddenly, something provocative can lead people to a frenzy.

(Wildlife)

Fortunately, there are places in the world where much is being done to ease the pain of environmental inequities -- places like South Africa. This is a country dominated by the timeless rhythms of nature

(Montage)

South Africa is also a tired woman selling corn by the side of the road -- an immigrant father struggling to provide for his family -- South Africa is anguish -- South Africa is joy despite its pain -- but above all else -- South Africa is defined by the legacy of Apartheid.

(Apartheid)

It meant fifty years of bloodshed and violent protests against an official government policy of racism. For blacks -- who are 75 percent of the nation's population -- apartheid meant the separation of races -- years of sorrow -- and the tearing apart of families. Men were forced to live in overcrowded work camps near large urban industrial centers. Women and children were relocated to rural settlements on environmentally marginal land where life was hard and brutally cruel. In 1994, the long struggle was finally won and blacks took control of a newly elected democratic government.

(Alexandra)

Today, the work camps are long gone -- replaced by urban centers -- like Alexandra. In an area less than a square mile this is a vibrant city of nearly half a million people. Not long ago, blacks couldn't own shops -- no one could enter or leave the city without written permission. Yet, Alexandra has become a success story -- a place that makes the most of post apartheid freedom. But the city is not without problems. Each year tens of thousands of migrants from the impoverished countryside pour into Alexandra. They ring the city with illegal shanties.

Obed Bapela was a hero of the anti-apartheid movement. Today his mission is to rebuild the city.

Obed Bapela

Alexandra has a number of challenges, and the immediate challenges is to deal with overcrowding in our area and also develop the houses that are as old as 50 years old--some--and to build new houses so that people can live in habitable places.

The shanties were torn down. It's part of a hundred and eighty million-dollar government initiative to build new homes, schools and health facilities.

Today, Alexandra is empowered with a renewed sense of pride. What makes it different from Bangladesh is its ability to cope with environmental pressures. The same kind of pressures that tore apart a country 6,000 miles -- and a world away from South Africa.

(Parade)

Today, the people of Lima are commemorating the city's 466th birthday. The celebration reflects a mixture of Spanish and indigenous customs -- with a touch of contemporary commercialism.

(Tourist areas)

Thanks to an increase in tourism, Lima has undergone a major face-lift. An architectural refurbishing of the city's center has restored the colonial look that always distinguished Peru's capital. But economic revitalization never reached the remote highlands of the Andes.

(Andes)

This is an area of exceptional natural beauty. But looks can often be deceiving.

Cynthia McClintock

That part of Peru is a kind of terrain that we in the United States wouldn't even contemplate trying to cultivate. It's arid, it's wind swept, it's extremely mountainous, so this is a tough area to cultivate under any circumstances.

(Agriculture)

For years farmers have toiled on marginal land and lived in unforgiving poverty -- often the perfect conditions for igniting a revolution.

(Shining Path)

And that's exactly what happened more than three decades ago. They called themselves "Sendero Luminoso" -- "The Shining Path" -- its leader Abimeal Guzman, was a charismatic university professor. From the beginning -- in the early 1970s -- Guzman was supported by peasants -- those made desperate by environmentally based grievances.

(Rural Battles)

For nearly 20 years, Guzman's Shining Path waged a brutal guerrilla war. Violence and torture were directed at anyone who disagreed with the revolutionary movement.

(The Battle Of Lima)

On July 16, 1992, the Shining Path mounted an attack on Lima. At the peak of the violence, the Shining Path came close to capturing Lima and taking control of the nation. Several weeks later security forces discovered Guzman's hiding place.

(Prison)

Without its leader, the Shining Path movement ultimately fell apart. Guzman was sentenced to life in prison -- but not before leaving behind a legacy of 30,000 deaths and a climate of fear that drove nearly a million people from the countryside.

(Slums)

Over four million peasants now live in the shantytowns of Lima. Most came in search of economic opportunity -- today they still live in poverty with even greater scarcities -- and a government unable to come up with solutions. This raises a delicate question -- is Peru ripe for a new revolutionary movement?

(Children)

Is there among the next generation another Abimeal Guzman? Unless the issue of environmental inequities is resolved, millions of Peruvians have few choices -- they can continue to live in poverty -- start a new revolutionary movement -- or join a mass migration north.

(Haiti Beach)

It's not unlike the drama unfolding on the Caribbean island nation of Haiti, located 600 miles off the southeast coast of the United States. Thirty years ago the seaside town of Jacmel was a thriving resort for the rich and famous. Today, its beaches are badly neglected.

As a tourist destination, Jacmel is a total disaster -- and as a nation, Haiti is steeped in poverty -- a case study of a country verging on complete environmental and economic collapse.

(Deforested Hills)

Eighty years ago 60% of the country was covered with trees. Today less than 2% remain. Satellite imagery of the border with neighboring Dominican Republic shows a dramatic difference in land cover. Uncontrolled logging and the conversion of forests into farmland has contributed to an environmental nightmare.

(Charcoal)

But the use of wood as an energy source -- in the form of charcoal -- is the major cause of deforestation. Sold on nearly every street corner it's easy to use -- and inexpensive. For the impoverished, there's simply no alternative.

And so deforestation goes on -- causing additional environmental and economic stress.

(Fishing Village)

Deforestation has also affected the lives of the fishermen of Luly. Once, catches of snapper and spiny lobster were abundant and able to support a family. No more. Haiti's waters are over-fished. Worse, every time it rains, eroded soil washes into the sea, polluting the water, wreaking havoc on marine life.

That's why so many of Luly's young people have gone to Haiti's Capital, Port-au-Prince in search of work.

(Cite Soilel)

Many end up here, in Cite Soilel, the city's poorest slum. This is where 400,000 thousand people live in the worst conditions imaginable -- sanitation and health care are non-existent -- residents are forced to pay exorbitant prices for clean water -- poverty and frustration lead to instability -- the streets become a battle ground for rival gangs.

(Boat People)

Over the years, 2 million Haitians have fled to the United States -- legally and illegally. Many were returned to Haiti -- where living conditions deteriorated -- and people became victims of extreme human rights violations.

The problems of deforestation and poverty remain. The people of Haiti are no different than millions of others around the world -- those who seek refuge from severe economic and environmental stress.

For many, that refuge comes after a frightening and often dangerous journey that begins along the 2,000-mile boundary between Mexico and the United States.

(Mexico Ferry Crossing)

There are places where the border seems benign, almost bucolic. Located on the Rio Grande River, this ferry crossing between Texas and Mexico has been in operation for 60 years.

(Border Checkpoint)

At more traditional checkpoints, traffic is often backed up for hours, as customs officials carefully check for illegal cargo -- particularly narcotics. For most, it's merely an inconvenience and like those that take the ferry, they have documentation.

(Desert)

But for the undocumented, a border crossing into the forbidding wastelands of Arizona can be much more dangerous. This is where the Rio Grande River gives way to the Sonora Desert. It's one of the most isolated regions in North America. -- Yet, in places it's littered with debris -- left behind by thousands of migrants who attempt to cross into the United States each day.

(Vigil)

In the border town of Douglas Arizona -- religious leaders and civil rights activists gather each week to honor the dead -- those who died trying to make the illegal crossing

Like the poor of Bangladesh, Peru and Haiti, most migrants are being pushed from their homes by acute poverty associated with environmental degradation. Driven by desperation and armed

with dreams, each year more than 400 will die from exposure to the harsh climate in the wastelands along the border.

(Agua Prieta)

On the other side of the border is Agua Prieta. On an average day thousands of migrants are hidden away in back alley shanties—waiting for nightfall.

(Border)

Hundreds of law enforcement agents are waiting for them. The border patrol has the advantage of remote cameras to direct the action. By nightfall, the migrants have both desire and numbers on their side. On average, only one in three migrants is apprehended. Thousands of others escape into the desert -- desperate to make their way to friends or family in distant cities.

(Detention Center)

On any given day, 20,000 illegal immigrants are held in detention centers all along the border. Many have journeyed thousands of miles -- the majority are from Mexico's drought stricken interior. Others are fleeing from Central and South America. Grinding poverty leaves people with very few choices. They are given back their water containers and whatever meager possessions they carry. Tonight most will attempt the crossing again. They have nothing to lose. Each year one and a half million illegal migrants successfully make it into the United States.

(Closing Montage)

Clearly there are tens of millions of environmental refuges throughout the world -- shaped by forces well beyond their control.

Thomas Homer-Dixon

We have to recognize that the rich countries on this planet have a significant responsibility to the poor countries and the people who are miserable on this planet. And to the extent that we don't deal with those gaps that are developing to rich and poor, we are going to suffer. Our societies are going to be less stable and less safe as a result.

In a world where recent waves of violence have touched all countries, rich and poor, we cannot ignore the fact that the environment has become a major foreign policy issue of the 21st century. In the end the fate of those living in places like Bangladesh, South Africa and Haiti, in Peru and Mexico, will directly affect the security and well being of people everywhere. This new reality presents us with new challenges -- requiring new ideas -- new attitudes -- new hope. Planet Earth. This is our home -- this is where our journey of discovery must begin.

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