

Alastair MacEwen: Oral History Transcription

Name of interviewee(s):

Alastair MacEwen

Reasons why chosen for an oral history: Award winning cameraman and director with an extensive career in natural history filmmaking.

Name of interviewer:

Mike Birkhead

Reasons why interviewer chosen:

Longstanding colleague and friend

Name of cameraman:

Bob Prince

Date of interview:

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Place of interview:

Somerset, United Kingdom

Length of interview:

2 hour 10 minutes

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1. The early years

Int: *Good morning, Alastair.*

AM: Good morning.



Int: *Just refresh my memory; name, rank and serial number.*

AM: My name's Alastair MacEwen. I was born in 1947. We're currently sitting in a studio on top of a hill in Somerset. I guess I've been doing this work for about close on 40 years I should think.

Int: *That's an impressive figure. I was actually thinking, Alastair, the other day, when did we first meet each other and why have we known each other since 1983? So I thought it would be a good point to start so we could leap forward, back and forward from it. So why did we meet, if you can remember, in 1983?*

AM: Yes, that does take me back to the beginning. A long time ago I, having taken a degree in zoology, I very quickly realised that I wanted a career that took me outside a little bit more in to the field and really concentrate on that sort of thing. I had from the start a great interest in the small cameras that were coming out then and the **Super 8** cameras and things. So I went to a film school and learned the trade of cinematography really.

When I was coming to the end of that particular course I was very aware that nobody was going to give me a job, just like the same thing happened when I left university. So I was very, very anxious to make a film to establish that I could do something. I talked to an ex-colleague of mine from college and he suggested that he knew just the right person that I should meet and who actually had a subject that he wanted filmed. He was working at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine which might have given me a hint. But anyway in desperation I said yes and what's the subject and he wouldn't reveal this subject to me. He said just come along, have a few drinks and discuss it.

The next morning I woke somewhat a little bit hazy about what had happened the night before but tried to start remembering the course of events and then I remembered. I'd actually committed to make a film on head lice. Anyway it wasn't quite the most glamorous subject in the world but it met the bill in terms of the fact it was a film, it was a serious film. It did possibly lead to funding and there was the world expert on the subject who was a friend of this friend who took me to the pub, who wanted to advise and guide me through the subject.

Int: *So you went straight from college to making a film, that's really unusual. There'll be a lot of people listening to this who will be very envious. How did you manage to do it then? College was zoology not filmmaking.*

AM: No, but then I went to do a two year film course and it was at the end of that. It was really desperation because I didn't really feel that I could be the permanent student. I was very serious with a girlfriend at the time and life was passing by, and I really had to persuade people that I could do what I was being trained to do.

So anyway we discussed the subject and we got this film together. It involved all kinds of really hideous extremes which brought me to the interest of Mike because he was looking for lunatics who'd go to pretty much any extent to, I suppose, make a film happen. Probably the most extreme I've ever had to do in the whole of my career happened on my very first film, when I had to culture head lice on my arm in little boxes which was absolutely appalling. You had to move the boxes around because the biting of the head lice caused such large blisters that they burst and drowned them if you didn't move their little capsules around on





your arm. So that really was one of the more extreme things I've had to do to make a film happen.

Int: *I have to say that level of commitment was what made me want to get to know you and made me think you were my man for future things because it was even worse than that, Alastair, if we get down to the detail. The level of commitment involved your wedding day too, didn't it?*

AM: Yes. On the day of my wedding I actually had one or two of these boxes still strapped to my arm, would you believe it?

Int: *I couldn't believe it really.*

AM: That is a part of my life which I can occasionally wake up at night and think how the heck did that happen but anyway it did.

Int: *The thing I remember was that you were also game enough to let me make a Michael Aspel 6 o'clock Show (1) item on you walking up the aisle with Hilary with head lice strapped to your body, and expose it to an audience of about 10 million people. So every aspect of that made me think you were definitely going to be a great guy in the future. But that film was actually hugely successful, wasn't it?*

AM: It was very surprising. The film was made and everybody seemed to be very happy with it. It was essentially a little public health film we made for schools and it was told in an entertaining and fairly interesting manner. We did quite a lot of head lice biology and such like. But it was really made for health professionals and people who had to deal with the problem in schools. Little known to me it was picked up by The British Council and taken to an international scientific film festival.

I didn't know anything about this whatsoever and I was rung about a couple of months later and I was invited to a banquet at Shell, and I thought this was very nice but why am I being invited? He said but you're one of the British prize winners and I said what? He said, yes, didn't you know about this festival and I said what festival? He said, well, obviously there's been a breakdown in communication here, you actually won the Grand Prix.

So suddenly from being a little film on head lice (2) I was a serious filmmaker with credentials and it catapulted me into my first job which was with the Health Education Council, as an independent filmmaker for them. I then got subsequent commissions on the back of that first success.

Int: *It was a cracking start then.*

AM: Yes.

Int: *So just going back, what year were you at college then? What were the two years you were in college?*



AM: I suppose it was mid 70s and everybody at the film school was basically I suppose being wiped out by Stanley Kubrick's films and all that sort of thing. Whereas there I was beavering away trying to learn my trade as a potential wildlife filmmaker. But the course was, of course, excellent because you had grounding in **16mm** and **35mm** and a full professional background to the work I was later to do. So it stood me in very good stead. Also, of course, in making this independent film, which I did in my last year, they were very, very helpful with equipment so I could borrow cameras and I could use cutting room facilities and all that sort of thing.

To finish the film off we actually got a professional editor, Chris Lysaght to do it and he did such an amazing job. He actually created the film that kicked me off really. I had a friendship with him for many years after that.

Int: *Hilary forgave you for nearly spoiling the wedding day.*

AM: Yes, we never did tell her parents.

Int: *Or the people standing next to you at the wedding.*

AM: No, quite.

2. London Scientific Films

Int: *But it is actually true, isn't it, that level of commitment. Well, the two things that impressed me is the formal training. People don't appreciate what formal training you had because it just happened to be your interest was natural history but you could have worked in any aspect of movies, TV. Is that correct?*

AM: Yes, that's right. I was trained as a documentary filmmaker essentially with a certain amount of information also on feature film making. We were working with Mitchells and that sort of thing. So it was a very, very good grounding in the film industry and I knew how to use lights and all the other sort of aspects, and I was used to working with crews.

After that I actually was approached at some time after the success of the film by a medical filmmaking company in London who I'd done a little bit of work for, who actually offered to set me up with my own company. It was very curious. I just had this phone call from one of the directors one day: 'we would like to talk about your future'. Having just done a job for them I was wondering what on earth this would mean and turned up full of nerves for this interview. I was wondering really what I'd done wrong and they made this amazing offer. They financed the first five years of the company and set up.

I suppose really we were specialists in **microscopy** and microscopy. We did our first work in supporting sequences for medical films for doctors and things like that. But we very soon came to the attention of the BBC for their science programming and started expanding. Then we made a lot of our own programmes,



mainly industrial documentaries on medical subjects and veterinary subjects, and that's how we started, that's how we made our money.

Int: *It was a dream start, wasn't it? An unbelievable start, especially this man. Who was this man who rang you up then? Do you know who it was?*

AM: Yes, it was a very brilliant Polish guy who was one of the founders of a company called Medi-Cine, a man called Vitck Tracz, and, yes, I owe him a great deal.

Int: *But it's interesting because it shows me that you'd got great dedication, you were thoroughly professional about your set-up. Then it also shows another side of your character that not many people know about, which is that you'd actually got a huge degree of business acumen as well because your company was very successful. I was fascinated to know how you actually decided what to call it, that was a very astute bit of business thinking.*

AM: Well, at the time there was a company I admired hugely called Oxford Scientific Films and I would have sold my soul to have joined Oxford Scientific Films. I actually managed to get to look round the place on one famous occasion. I was shown round by Gerald Thompson who was one of the founder members of the organisation and he was extremely kind to me. I was so impressed by the place but they didn't give me a job.

Anyway when I started the company I had in London I was asked what would I like to call it and I thought, well, what would really annoy them so I called it London Scientific Films. I understand that it achieved the objective admirably.

Int: *You mean they never spoke to you again?*

AM: Well, we did make contact over the years and actually whatever association we had was very friendly. It had a strange ending because not so long ago myself and the ex-head of Oxford Scientific Film, Sean Morris, he was actually commissioned to make a film in Botswana and he approached me to work on it with him. He being the ex-head of OSF and I being ex-LSF we made a film which was probably the most successful film I've ever worked on in my life. It won nearly every festival it was entered into, it's amazing and it was such an enjoyable film to work on.

Int: *What was the name?*

AM: It was called *The Elephant, The Emperor and The Butterfly Tree* (3). It was so nice that the two very competitive companies kind of got together and had a bit of a success together. It was a kind of fairy story.

Int: *Yes, it's good to end that way after all those years, to actually work together and merge together.*

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AM: Yes, and do something really good together.

Int: *But going back, Alastair, LSF lasted a long time. Tell me a bit more about LSF because it was an impressive set-up you had there. It was a big set-up with lots of different parts of it.*

AM: Yes, it was a time that was very exciting indeed because it must have been the golden age of wildlife filmmaking. In fact, in the weeks following my initial establishment in London with this company the very first of the absolutely mega series was taking off, *Life on Earth* (4) We actually managed to get a few commissions for that so my career really took off in wildlife filmmaking with the start of that era of major wildlife film series.

Int: *You had a lot of luck, didn't you? What about timing? So that was around 1979?*

AM: Yes, that's right and, of course, it was also time because of that huge up-welling of interest in natural history filmmaking, a lot of the independents - Thames Television and London Weekend Television - also were taking a great interest in making wildlife series. Of course, that's how we met.

Int: *It's an amazing story. When you think about it, although you had something charted out, there's a huge amount of serendipity involved, isn't it, to have set up your business. Someone rings you up and says I want to help you set it up. You pick a great name and you're setting up when *Life on Earth* (4) is just about to kick off. But the one thing that probably was serendipitous but do you think it helped you in your career was, your first film was head lice and small animals. So for quite a long time you became known as Mr Head Lice.*

AM: Yes. I mean that is one of those things that is inevitable. In this industry you get incredibly typecast and, of course, in the early years of London Scientific Films we were doing a great deal of medical work. So microscopy loomed large in our brief. Also we were doing quite a lot of work for the *Horizons* (5) of the period and it was almost invariably macro stuff of one sort or another, whether it was butterflies, *Helius galpins* or whatever. Cellular slime moulds, you name it. A huge variety of completely fascinating animals but usually rather on the small side.

As LSF grew and developed the subject range obviously we wanted to expand quite a lot but unbelievably difficult to break the mould. Once people put you in a matchbox to fight your way out of it is incredibly difficult.

Int: *But you didn't feel that at the time, did you? You didn't feel frustrated like you have perhaps for a 10 year period, after that you've got a bit fed up of being typecast but at the time you were thrilled.*

AM: Completely because in fact the small animals of this world and the place they live which is a place well outside our sensory perception. Going down there it's almost like visiting another planet, it is quite extraordinary. I did have a very deep excitement and fascination with all these small creatures we were filming and the various worlds that they lived in.

But as we became more interested in the wider television subjects of course we had to break ourselves away



a little bit more from the very, very small things we were filming for medical films like bacteria and things like that. So at that stage we had to really persuade people we could do more and that's where it became very difficult.

Int: *That's where we met. I remember that kind of conversation. We came to see you because we were doing a series called City Safari (6) which was anything but about the kind of things you were filming. But you were superbly impressive and managed to convince us with your facilities. But the other thing that was really relevant was you're very good nurturing unselfishly, which is what you should be remembered for, other people's talents. There's one guy that we've both worked with for as long that you brought on that kicked his career off but also helped you because it convinced people like London Weekend that you could do the other things.*

AM: Yes. One of the great things about the fact that we were reasonably successful in the early days was the fact that we could start taking on other people. At the time when we started it was just myself and a colleague called Mike Coburn. You suggested I had some business acumen, well I tended to leave most of that side as far as I possibly could to Mike. But as we expanded we also took on obviously other colleagues who were filmmakers and cameramen. I had the enormous privilege of actually working with some of the finest wildlife cameramen around. People like Martyn Colbeck, for example, started off at London Scientific films, and I've always been proud of the fact that he was one of our star people.

Of course, it was skills of people such as he that got us to the notice of LWT and other companies, and allowed us to expand outside our rather small specialisations into the realms of bigger animals like the size of rabbits and dragonflies even. I believe things as large as deer were allowed as well at times.

Int: *But I think it's fantastic for people to listen to this kind of development or evolution of a career like that because there is an awful lot of thought that goes into it. We both discussed that you get a lot of random calls from people that want to get into the business but have done nothing about it. But there was a lot of direction in what you wanted to achieve. So did LSF in any way constrain you or did it help you in that process to reach what you ultimately wanted to achieve?*

AM: Well, I came up against when I started out exactly the same problems that everybody else did. It's often said that in the old days it was easier to get into the film industry or the wildlife film industry. I don't think it was because although there were fewer people trying to do it there were just so few programmes being made that the industry was tiny. There was still that level of competition trying to persuade people to make films so to go after the very small pools of money available, or to persuade people to risk the large sums of money that they were paying to make films to put that responsibility on your shoulders.

Nobody was going to employ me and I had to actually go out and figure out a way of actually providing employment for myself. So I completely sympathise with people coming in now who are finding it difficult. I had exactly the same desperations and anxieties.

Int: *But why didn't you go and ask to get a job at the Natural History Unit then?*

AM: I guess I did and got turned down by everybody just like everybody else and then thought, well, the only way to persuade somebody you can make a film is to darn well go and make one, even to the extent of

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letting rather unpleasant animals feed on you. That was a measure of desperation.

Int: *But all this work in the early days, a lot of it was sequence based, was it?*

AM: Yes.

Int: *You weren't given the responsibility to make the entire film, you were providing sequences for films?*

AM: That was the camera work. LSF in fact made its money mainly from veterinary and medical documentaries. Of course, my training at the film school was very helpful there because the first films I made, including the head lice film (2), although I did the specialist filming for them, my major job on them was writer/director. I've made an awful lot of industrial documentaries as writer/director without filming a single frame of them. In fact, some of the personnel we took into London Scientific Films we weren't just all cameramen. I was one of the writer/directors and we had two or three others, and we were just full-time churning out films to persuade doctors to prescribe antibiotics or rheumatoid arthritis drugs, or all the other kinds of things that are sold by pharmaceutical companies who were financing us.

One of our biggest clients was the Medical Foundation who are one of the more ethical organisations. We made a lot of their big medical films. It was a very good relationship. But that's really what kept us afloat because the work at London Scientific Films on its wildlife side was really not profitable at all. The studios were incredibly expensive, the equipment was incredibly expensive. The personnel obviously had to be paid a living wage. The trouble is television actually won't pay for a facilities company to operate those kinds of facilities. So it was essentially a loss leader.

For a long time LSF was prepared to pay for that because the ability to put footage into a medical film which showed the influence of antibiotics on bacteria, for example, or **polymorphonuclear leukocytes** rushing around slides mopping up bacteria was very exciting for the doctors to see. But it wasn't enough to keep the company afloat. What kept the company afloat was making I suppose what now would be called corporate videos but essentially films to persuade doctors to use certain drugs, or to persuade vets to use certain drugs, or to persuade farmers to carry out certain farming practices. Whether it was to use certain fertilisers or use equipment of various sorts. It was all standard industrial documentary stuff.

Int: *I remember in those early days you did get somewhat frustrated by the burden of the business side which did eventually help you make a decision. But you were beaten to it a bit by Martyn who we both know really well and Martyn made the break for pure natural history filmmaking before you. Did that influence you as well?*

3. Partridge Films

AM: Martyn really split from LSF when LSF was closing its wildlife unit down and it's about the same time that I disengaged as well. The difference was that there was a project I'd been commissioned for and I persuaded the producer to take Martyn on because I wanted to kick Martyn off. That was *Wildlife on One* (7).



Int: *Kick him off. You mean start him off?*

AM: Yes, exactly, in the industry.

Int: *So you wanted to help Martyn start off?*

AM: Yes, that's right. Yes, I wanted to help Martyn start off so basically this film on cave swiftlets (8) came up.

Int: *In Borneo.*

AM: In Borneo. He did a fantastic job on it and of course that was the start of his career. It is actually quite difficult to disengage from a company when you have the deeds of a house lodged with the bank as part of the company's collateral and all this kind of stuff. So it took me a long time to get free of London Scientific Films. Also at the time Survival Anglia had taken me on for a year to look into a series they wanted to make which I'd actually suggested to them. I was working with them on trying to do a promotional film to try and kick the series off with.

In fact after that I didn't go to the Natural History Unit directly, I went to Partridge Films and started working with them, and I had about at least a four year stint with Partridge Films.

Int: *So you made the break from LSF and that definitely influenced me seeing the burden of overheads and it shaped my life really. I saw how bad the burden of overheads can be. But did you feel liberated once you actually made the break? You'd got rid of the company and you moved out here, didn't you, simultaneously?*

AM: That's right. The trouble is London Scientific Films primarily was obviously a servicing company and it was completely dependent on the buoyancy of the market it served. When the recession came in the 80s everybody was contracting, nobody was making these kinds of quite expensive promotional films anymore and we lost a large proportion of our income.

So at that time the company had to retrench quite seriously and one of the first things that had to go was the wildlife unit. By then I was so committed to it. Corporate video filmmaking is all very well but it's not the most exciting thing on earth and it wasn't what I wanted to do with my life. So rather than spend the rest of my life filming professors in front of bookshelves I wanted to get out there and do the sorts of things I was really starting to get heavily involved in, with the development of our wildlife side.

So I then had to disengage my shareholding and everything else in London Scientific Films. Unfortunately as a director you become liable for the various debts of the company, and so trying to extract myself from all that was quite a major exercise and very complicated. But after all that was through and I sold my house in London we moved here, and there was just a huge sigh of relief and almost a euphoric freedom. Because actually working for the company you had so many responsibilities, for the people, for the kit, for all the debts, and when the company was starting to run into trouble obviously the banks then were hovering.

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Basically Hilary wasn't aware that her house was really one of the things that would be the first to be foreclosed upon because I didn't want to worry her. To get free of all those sorts of worries was very complicated.

Int: *It's a huge burden, isn't it, to have to carry all that and to do the job at the same time.*

AM: Yes, because the job itself is difficult.

Int: *So after that exciting phase of your career you then moved into more conventional natural history filmmaking. Was the first film that you were actually given the responsibility to film the whole project?*

AM: That was amazing actually. I did a very short stint, a shoot for the *Flooded Forest* (9) series for Partridge Films and I got on extremely well with the scientist and the producer on that particular series. They had just been commissioned by ABC (Kane) with a very large budget to do a series of three or four films on the Amazon, again the *Flooded Forest* (9), a follow-up series. It was put to me that I should be the cameraman on it. So from working in London I suddenly found myself going off to Brazil. I remember, and will remember to my dying day, the day I got on this riverboat which was to be my home for the next 15 months. Going out from the hotel seeing the light of the jetty sinking behind me, lying in a hammock with all these cases of kit all strewn across the deck of the boat. It was just so amazingly romantic.

Int: *This is an interesting aspect, Alastair, that there you were, relatively young I should add, going off with an attractive lady in a romantic location. Does this ever have a bearing on how Hilary might look at these things?*

AM: Well, Hilary has been absolutely totally amazing over the years it must be said. She's been so supportive and I'm sure she's had many, many moments of doubt but she's been so steadfast, it's been incredible.

Int: *But it must be very difficult, apart from the obvious aspect man and woman go off down the Amazon, it must be very difficult maintaining your home life and your work life. Especially in those days it wasn't uncommon to go off for a year.*

AM: Yes, that's right.

Int: *A whole year. No one really twigs to that nowadays. Nowadays if you get a young cameraman to do four weeks it's tough.*

AM: That's right. No, I suppose I never did a year at a time but the longest single shoot I have ever had to work on and those shoots would literally be relentless. Day in, day out, you'd never have a weekend off, not a day off. The only time you might have off is if the weather was so bad you simply couldn't do anything and that was six months continuous. That six months was spent on the mountains of East Africa so it was a very, very hard project. But, no, you don't really expect people to put up with that anymore.



Int: *It's incredible how it's changed but you were loving it. Tell me more about the Amazon. Was it a series that you did was Andrea Florence?*

AM: Yes, that's right. It was one key film which was called *Secrets of a Golden River* (10) and there were three other films. One was on the aquarium trade because it's a part of the world where the most incredible variety of aquarium fish come from - the Cardinal Tetras and the Neon Tetras and the Angelfish and the Arowana, and all the others, the Oscars. The list goes on endlessly.

It was an extraordinarily exciting place to go and visit. You'd go up the river and the river dolphins would be puffing and blowing in the water beside you. You'd have macaws flying over the treetops. The promise of all that unbelievable adventure and experience ahead of you is just almost too much to take in. Nowadays we just go everywhere by air and it's just a long bus journey and that sort of thing. So to be sitting in a hammock on a Brazilian riverboat and knowing this is my home was just extraordinary. It was like following in the footsteps and living the same way almost as Wallace and Bates and the other early Victorian naturalists who were the pioneers of that part of the world. They went out to discover all those extraordinary things they reported on.

Int: *But how does it work on a day-to-day basis that when you're making these long-term projects, Partridge Films was the production company, Andrea Florence was the producer. On a day-to-day basis how does it work?*

AM: The actual mechanics of it are very, very hard work. We took out into the forest with us I suppose two or three tons of scaffolding towed in a boat behind us. We'd use the boat as a base and we'd moor it in a stream or something off the main river body, and then we'd go to the places where we had to film the very sequences we were targeting. For example, one of the things they wanted to film was the Amazonian umbrellabird. This was such an obsession this bird with the producer and Andrea Florence that if I'd been up that scaffolding tower and a unicorn had floated by and I'd filmed it, I don't think it would have been quite as exciting as filming the Amazonian umbrellabird.

So everywhere we went they asked for reports of this mythical beast and eventually we came to a place where the bird had been seen. Essentially there was only one small monograph on it and it was reported obviously by people like Wallace and Bates. But it was one of those incredibly rare animals that featured very highly on their list of musts but wherever we went we just couldn't pin it down.

Eventually we found a place where we might get a chance of filming it and we had to put up a scaffolding in three metres of water which is quite a challenge. It means you hang on the side of a boat, you're handed a very heavy piece of metal and you just go down instantly to the bottom. You try and hold it there as long as your breath can last and move it around a bit and try and put it in place, and then you go up. But our Brazilian colleagues who were just so hard, they were just unbelievable, they were very, very tough people, just made light of all this work. In fact I probably got in their way more than anything else but I just wanted to be part of it.

The scaffolding then would rise up to about 30 metres or so above the water and just be tied to the forest trees. The riverboat was actually moored about two hours away. So I'd have to get up about 3 o'clock in the morning, go on a speedboat for a couple of hours to go to where the scaffolding was situated in the forest to

be able to get there before daylight. I'd get up there before daylight, sit in the top and be munched by the sand flies and midges and everything else for a while. Then, of course, the sweat bees moved in and then nothing could get past the sweat bees because you were so coated in them. Then you'd sit there and, of course, would the Umbrellabirds turn up? Of course they didn't and then the electric storms would start. Of course, you happen to be on the only piece of metal in the Amazon for 500 square miles and you're towering above the treetops. The first thing that happens, of course, is that the gales come through, those very, very severe winds that travel round the edges of all these massive storms that come through. They make the trees move like crazy.

So you're sitting on a scaffolding tower, on a thing that starts to feel like a fairground ride and you can't climb down and walk away because you're in three metres of water. Then the lightning starts. Every day you think, oh well, I've survived that one. Three weeks later we saw our first Umbrellabird. That particular thing actually ended in the most amazing way with a flock of these Umbrellabirds appearing in front of us, doing all their calling routine and even filming a mating. The whole thing was just a complete first. I actually survived the electric storms to tell the tale which was amazing.

4. Wildlife filmmaking in the 80's

Int: *Well, it's a great story but it shows so much, doesn't it, how much time and money was put into these projects then. Was there more money put in then do you think in that period, in the late 80s?*

AM: They were prepared to put in quite large sums of money into individual programmes then. Nowadays they're putting in even more money into projects but they tend to be part of mega series, the *Planet Earth* (11) syndrome. But the budgets overall for the individual programmes are probably almost the same, so in total value they've gone down quite a bit. We had a very big budget for the Rio Negro project because of the incredible expense of actually working out there.

We had to buy this boat and it was big enough to sleep eight people. We had to buy all the scaffolding and we had to buy a barge to tow the scaffolding in because this is a huge commitment in terms of logistics. The reason you had to buy the boat was because the river would rise and fall about 40 feet, so you'd go up a river and you'd pass by a cliff, a sandbank, and you'd look up this cliff and you'd see on top of this cliff a house on stilts. You'd think that's odd until six months later you'd actually go into the living room of that house in a canoe because the water rose so much.

Int: *It's hard to imagine, isn't it, when you're not there?*

AM: Yes. We would put cameras up in the canopy of this forest, a quite high canopy, and the water would be like three foot underneath the camera in the wet season. You'd look down 50 feet, 60 feet, to dry leaf litter and then six months later you could jump from the canopy and you'd be falling into the water only 6 feet below you.

Int: *It's amazing. One thing I was thinking about, in the 80s of course there was no question about what the project would be made on, what it would be filmed on. Tell me about what you were working with, the tools of your trade.*

AM: It was always film then. The cameras at the time were incredibly robust, they had to be given the conditions they had to put up with. Extremely high humidity, high rainfall, and extreme cold, extreme heat, all those sorts of things. They just had to keep on motoring and, of course, quite often when you were out in the field you had to effect small repairs on the camera equipment and most of us were quite adept at that. These days it would not be possible because cameras are so sophisticated, so electronic that if a camera goes down you're basically left with a piece of plastic round a lot of metal and that's it. Not much you can do about it, you have to replace it.

Int: *The other thing that was fascinating then was although you'd come out of this business, London Scientific Films, you didn't get away scot-free with having to make some commitment to financial outlay, did you, because as a cameraman you were expecting to come fully kitted out. Tell me about that. How did that work?*

AM: In those days certainly we were expected to provide practically all the camera equipment and we weren't supposed to charge for it and camera equipment is not cheap. The level of involvement might be anything up to £100,000 worth of kit because when you go through all the lenses required, especially for wildlife work when the lenses might be costing anything up to £10-15,000. Mind you a lens at that time at that price, of course, would be considered quite cheap these days with the high def lenses we use. Nevertheless for an individual a huge investment.

Int: *So it was like a mortgage you had to take out?*

AM: Totally, yes, and the range of equipment you were expected to provide because, of course, wildlife filmmaking has always been very heavy on the special effects equipment, the probes, the scopes, all that sort of thing. The things that allow you to get inside nests, the equipment that allows you to get underwater. In those days as well the health and safety aspects weren't quite so severe. So when I was asked to take on the project, the first question they asked was 'Can you dive?' and I said, yes, of course I can and immediately went off to take a diving course and got my sport dive certificate. Well, these days I mean that would not be nearly enough. Armed with a sport dive certificate, my first experience of diving underwater was in the Amazon filming dolphins and piranha and things like that, which is quite an unusual project for a beginner.

Int: *So the big projects would rely on all your equipment?*

AM: Yes.

Int: *You'd have to take out all the equipment?*

AM: Yes, pretty much.

Int: *Was that something that everyone accepted then? All the cameramen were happy with the quid pro?*

AM: Yes, pretty used to that. If there was something very specialist the project would hire it in and obviously we weren't expected to provide scaffolding and that sort of stuff. If there was a very special lens or something they'd hire it in. But the deal was that the fee for the cameraman, his daily rate would cover his equipment.

So in many respects the documentary cameramen at the time would be earning their daily rate in their socks so to speak, and they'd be able to charge on top of that for camera equipment which was based on the cost of the camera equipment. So it meant that they could buy new equipment, charge it against projects and essentially make their money back, so they were quite well off. Wildlife cameramen essentially were subsidising the industry by buying the equipment and not charging for it.

Int: *This was always a bone of contention, wasn't it?*

AM: Yes, it has been for cameramen. It's documentary cameramen and having been trained as a documentary cameraman I was well aware of all that.

Int: *But wasn't that because you could lie on the barge at night watching the stars go by and drinking your Pina Colada?*

AM: Yes, I always thought of those pleasurable moments as I was getting up at 3 o'clock in the morning, heading for my lightning tower and eaten alive by sweat bees. The sweat bees were so horrible because they'd cover every inch of skin and they'd get into your ears and up into your nose and they'd always fly into your eyes. So you'd end the day almost unable to see because your eyes would be so red and just completely insane from this crawling sensation all over your skin all the time. Unbelievable things.

Int: *I'm trying to avoid thinking as you're telling me that how many situations I've put you in that were probably life threatening, make you go financially bust or anything else. So I'm trying to avoid those. But I think there's one that I can't avoid that was probably your worst story of all but I don't think I was directly responsible for, it involved a trip to the Congo.*

AM: My goodness, were you involved in that?

Int: *I think I was running the series was I not, that was the sixth series. I may have left by then or I may have left as a result of the thought that you had disappeared up the Congo. That was a shocker, wasn't it?*

AM: That was a huge adventure. In fact, it was practically one of the first things I ever did. My goodness, yes, that takes me back a bit.

We arrived in Kenya expecting to fly in to the Central Congo and film Pygmy chimpanzees, the Bonobos. We discovered very shortly after we arrived in Kenya that President Mobutu had impounded all private supplies of Avgas and it was quite impossible. He had banned any flights into the interior. Well, at least you could fly in there, you just couldn't fly out because you couldn't get the fuel, you couldn't refuel. So we decided how do we get there? Well, to drive there was just impossible, just a ridiculous thought.

Int: *Who was with you?*

AM: There were two students from Oxford so it was quite an inexperienced crew to put it mildly. I was hardly experienced myself at that time. I could operate a camera but that was about all. Anyway we decided, well, why not, we'll drive in, we'll just do it. We hired this person from a safari company to do the driving and we got in this Toyota Land Cruiser, little realising that it would take us two weeks to get to our destination. We drove right across Kenya, Uganda. We drove across the border into Zaire. I think it took us about three days to get to the Zaire border and the rest of the two weeks was in Zaire.

We were travelling on roads that really looked like washed out river bed, they were just unbelievable. We were pushing the vehicle along roads which I think a car probably last travelled about six months ago, literally through reeds and grasses so high they were above the top of the Land Rover, and we weren't entirely sure whether we were on the right track. We were just so far away from anywhere and it was very daunting. On one or two occasions we had to hire whole villages to lever us along the road with logs. I think we travelled that day all of nine kilometres because the road was so bad and so muddy that we just couldn't make 50 metres an hour practically.

That was what the whole journey was like. We had to cross bridges which consisted simply of two logs. So one person would get out and walk over the bridge and then you'd stand there with your two hands like that, and the driver would be looking at your hands because if his wheel slipped off those logs you were there forever. There's no walking out of there, we were too far away from anywhere.

Int: *But it didn't get even worse? Did you run out of all your money and food?*

AM: Yes, we totally ran out of money and everything practically. We had to be rescued eventually. We managed to get into Rwanda and then we were rescued by the British Consul.

Int: *You ran out of food and everything, didn't you?*

AM: Everything, we didn't have anything.

Int: *You were eating grubs.*

AM: No, it wasn't quite as bad as that.

Int: *You told me you were eating grubs at the time.*

AM: I think the report went back that we were getting very short of finance but nobody could get anything out to us because we were in too remote a place. But we were eating rice and stuff. The food was very, very poor but it was okay, we weren't dying. But when we got to Rwanda we just simply ran out of everything.

We'd spent our last \$10 getting on one of these matatu things into the airport. When we got to the airport we thought we were home and dry but they wouldn't accept our plastic because it was Barclaycard or something. We didn't have anything appropriate at all, they wouldn't take our cards and that was Sabina international airline because it would offend the country.

Int: *But did you get the Bonobos?*

AM: Yes, we got them. We did get the film.

Int: *The lengths people would go to in those days. Actually just talking about it makes you think that it's incredible because they wouldn't do it nowadays like that. It's incredible but I was just thinking that your son's now doing the same job and absolutely I don't think your son, although as robust as he may be, would ever do anything like that. He's 33, isn't he, Mark, and he's just gone to film oranges in Borneo.*

AM: Yes.

Int: *But if that crew were exposed to anything remotely like that they wouldn't even set off, would they?*

AM: I don't know. I think probably if my son had been in the same position as I'd been in that day he probably would have done just the same thing. He's actually a lot bigger and stronger than I am anyway.

Int: *But he's probably more sensible too.*

AM: Yes, probably.

Int: *He wouldn't even have gone. But there is a huge difference though, isn't there Alastair? I don't think we would expose people to those levels. Actually I didn't send you on that trip, I'd left by then.*

AM: Glad to hear it, we can still talk then.

5. Memorable collaborations

Int: *I think I took you to a chateau in France, that was awful. Those were more the trips we did. I think we did rather luxurious trips. You nearly did kill our wives though with snakes.*

AM: No, we've had one or two quite fun ones I seem to recall. A very nice one in Canada too.

Int: *But they are incredible, aren't they? I think the 80s was for me the peak but when you think we didn't*

work with the Natural History Unit, did we? I came from ITV and you were involved with Survival which was ITV and Partridge. Of course Partridge were the biggest player in those days and really kicked off the independents. There was a very charismatic boss in those days, Mike Rosenberg, who helped us both enormously, didn't he?

AM: Yes, he was an extraordinary character and one of the very big characters of wildlife filmmaking altogether, Mike Rosenberg. Just totally committed but so idiosyncratic and kind of whimsical. One of these people who always said exactly what he thought even when it deeply offended people. But he was such a great filmmaker and he actually managed to commission and finance and see through some of the very great wildlife series of the times. *The Flooded Forest* (9) series was one of them. That was a very famous series and, of course, his *Fragile Earth* (12) series was absolutely unbelievable. Every single one of the major, major film festivals had films from Partridge Films and they walked away with the top prizes almost on a routine basis.

Int: *But you did a lot of films with them, didn't you?*

AM: Yes, I worked for a long time with Partridge Films.

Int: *After Flooded Forest (9) didn't they set you up to do a lot and didn't that lead to a collaboration with another well-known filmmaker?*

AM: Yes, indeed. I went to Africa to really work on my first African film after the Bonobo sequence in collaboration with a man called Hugo Van Lawick. He was an extraordinary character who'd lived for about 30 years on the edge of the Serengeti, in an area called Ndutu. He'd made a number of absolute landmark films. One of his most memorable ones was called *The Blood Brothers* (13) which was an extraordinary film about cheetahs which stands up to this present day as one of the very great wildlife films.

Int: *That was with Partridge as well, wasn't it?*

AM: Yes, indeed. I worked on a film which came to be called *Islands in the Africa Sky* (14) on the mountains of East Africa with a producer called Patrick Morris. So my first real experience of working on films in Africa took me to every single mountain top in sight, it was just extraordinary. There I was fighting to try and film things like hill chats and little brown mice while the plains below were teeming with wildebeest and all the richest game in Africa, just literally a few miles below where we were situated. We were struggling to film the smallest and most boring creatures on earth.

Int: *Before you even got there didn't you have Patrick working with you here? Rather like with Martyn Colbeck you set him off, didn't you find Patrick?*

AM: Yes, Patrick came to me shortly after he left university and I was working on the project with Survival Anglia at the time. So Patrick came to work with me as a kind of trainee assistant. Of course, now he's an extremely well-known filmmaker in his own right at the BBC and quite senior there, and working on the follow-up to *Planet Earth* (11). He's made a number of very, very good series in his own right.

Int: *But the two of you together have worked on a lot of exciting films - Islands of the African Whist (skies) (14) that was a really good one but then you did People of the Sea (15). Tell me about that. That was a hugely successful thing.*

AM: Yes, that was a film in Newfoundland and it was actually just after I'd finished my stint in East Africa because Patrick and I worked there for about five years. The visit to Newfoundland, of course, couldn't have been more of a contrast. Here we were in a land completely surrounded by sea. It was very much Canadian Arctic type landscape. Most of the wildlife consisted of things of the sea basically of course. I mean the sea birds and the sea mammals, the whales and even otters, the eagles and the other things of a coast. The film, of course, was largely about the fisheries. So *People of the Sea* (15) was essentially about both the animals and the human beings that made their lives out of the water.

It just grew and developed that film in a way which was very organic. The chief wildlife biologist was a poet in his own right and had an absolutely magnificent voice and actually was signed up as the person who did the commentary on the film. Of course, he introduced the film and spoke from the heart, and it was an extraordinary powerful film in that respect. It featured many of the fishermen who'd literally gone out of business because they'd fished the oceans empty. They'd made all the mistakes that fishermen had made worldwide in terms of just not listening to people. If you keep fishing these waters and you keep taking the fish out there won't be anything left. You'll fish yourselves out of a job. You really do have to pay attention to the scientific information and the recommendations, and if there are quotas you shouldn't break them. You're killing your own industry and they did up in Canada.

They just wiped out the cod completely and they put thousands of people out of work. Of course, people were leaving Newfoundland by the thousand because there was just no future for the children, it was a dying place. Now the tourist industry has picked up a bit and it's a very beautiful place and it's got the most fantastic sites. The whale watching is fantastic there and the sea birds are wonderful, and that's what we went to film.

It was a very poignant film because we obviously filmed the fishermen and they voiced their regrets on what they'd done, and actually completely admitted that it was their fault. They were totally aware of the situation and how it had arisen.

Int: *So you do get emotionally involved in the films you work on?*

AM: Always, yes. It doesn't matter what it's about. You can't help it. I think you get so saturated by the beauty of the places you go to and the animals you film. It's just a very seductive way of life even if sometimes it can be a bit harsh.

6. Conveying a message through film

Int: *So do you think, Alastair, the films that you get passionately involved with give you a good chance to voice your concerns about the natural world?*



AM: It's something which obviously most of us working in the industry feel very strongly about. I know with your work with the tigers in India you've actually done more than most in terms of trying to promote their plight. So many of us have been to places that no longer exist. They've been concreted over, burnt down, chopped down, clear felled or whatever. So the only record of them is on celluloid and that's always devastating because you remember the time when they were just alive with bird calls. Those hundreds of macaws that were in nests and calling to each other as their comrades flew over ahead and the sheer vitality and buzz of them, the beauty of that place and now it's just a charred wasteland.

Int: *But do you think we look in too much when we're so involved with our esoteric filmmaking, it couldn't get more esoteric than head lice or how the cuckoo lays its egg which we're tackling now. But do you think our films give an opportunity to reflect what's happening in the natural world? Are you satisfied at 60 years old nearly that you've done that?*

AM: Well, I don't think it works to stand in front of a camera and whinge. Nobody wants to see that and the kind of doom and gloom films just don't have an audience. I think the best we can do is just to show the kind of films we can make in the most beautiful way we can make them, and try and persuade people to share our pleasure in the places where we're working.

Int: *Isn't that an opt-out though?*

AM: No, because I think no single film can make enough of an impact. Single films have saved locations, that's true, and they've sometimes instigated enough interest to set up a wildlife reserve here or there. But in the round if you want to get people to take pleasure in the natural world you've got to persuade them that it enhances the quality of their lives and it's their lives basically. It's not something out there that's somebody else's responsibility or something out there that you should care about only between games on the television or whatever. No, it's basically something that's important to you for all sorts of reasons. One is because it partly creates the air you breathe.

The other thing is that the health of the landscape will definitely affect your health one way or another. It's essentially by trying to conserve beautiful places and the trees and the plants and everything else in them because they are places that are indicators. If they start dying or wilting you know there are bad chemicals out there. It's the voice of the people that actually persuade governments to change policies, wildlife films won't do it.

So we have to get out there. We have to make these films and we have to by making those films transmit our passion for those places. You have to make films that other people will enjoy seeing, they are entertainment for them.

Int: *So that's how you see that role, is it, you're in the entertainment business?*

AM: I try to persuade by entertaining if you follow me. It's the only way I know how to do it. If I can make a film which a few million people will look at and take huge pleasure from and it actually persuades them maybe to go to those places and see them, then they'll come back and not want to lose them. They'll be kind of committed to them. You simply can't go to the sorts of places I've been to and watch them being turned into a car park, you just can't do it. They are just too precious. But you can't get that notion that they are





precious unless obviously you've been there, or you've actually been persuaded in some way by maybe a brilliant film that's been made on the area that they are worth preserving because you feel personally they are precious to you.

Int: *But over the last 30 or 40 years what is your take on the natural world then? What would the lasting message be to the people who've watched all your films?*

AM: Actually one of the most memorable comments that have been made to me about the natural world and its plight was made in the last few days by a very eminent Cambridge scientist in your presence. He said that every generation because they haven't seen what used to be expects less. So every year fewer swallows come to England. They haven't seen those clouds of swallows and swifts that used to circle buildings so they don't expect them. Yet in days gone by those were just great sights that gave pleasure to everybody who saw them. They were huge wildlife phenomena these numbers of birds that used to come to us and that has happened all over the world with a whole variety of different animals and birds. Each generation sees less so they expect less. It's just in a way so important that these visual archives are kept going and people visit these archives because they're the only record of how things used to be.

Again, the films we make as cameramen and producers hopefully will add to that archive of how things were so people don't have to expect less, they can see this is how it should be. In certain parts of the world there are efforts being made to restore these things to how they were and that's the thing that gives me hope.

So if you want to really fully appreciate how incredible the world used to be you can actually check out what should have been there, and if you can raise the money and interest enough people and get the resources together, it is possible to bring it back.

Int: *But you've been in a remarkably privileged position, haven't you, for 30 or 40 years being able to in your own way document what's gone on. Do you think you've done it justice? Are you happy with your legacy?*

AM: All you can do is the best you can do.

Int: *What I'm getting at is that you film what's left rather than the bare picture. We've probably got our glasses nine-tenths empty.*

AM: Yes, it's very true, we do give a little bit of a rose tinted glow on the world as we see it for real. When you make wildlife films you try not to show the row of pylons or the factory or the smoking chimneys or whatever. You try and make your landscape look as beautiful as possible. I think that's forgivable because to a certain extent you do want to show what you would like people to have, and if people actually like that and care about it then maybe, as I said earlier, they can be restored.

There have been great moves afoot in various parts of the world, including England, for setting aside areas of land so that habitats can be restored. There are a lot of very, very dedicated people out there who work in these areas and actually put their whole lives behind trying to recreate the habitats that are most threatened or have been lost, and trying to regenerate them.

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Int: *Your legacy is one of glorious pictures but never tackling issues because you don't want to upset people.*

AM: Well, we tackled issues in *People of the Sea* (15).

Int: *In a pretty way.*

AM: Yes, of course. But, again, if you're trying to promote something obviously you want to show it in the best light you possibly can. I see my role in trying to promote the beautiful places of this earth and trying to do justice to them. In fact, on many occasions you feel that you've hardly done justice to them even if the pictures look nice. The actual being there is just extraordinary.

Int: *So that is an accurate way of describing how you'd like to see your legacy. It is a beautiful representation of planet Earth during the time you've been here rather than painting a doom and gloom picture of the planet.*

AM: Yes, I've found planet Earth to be a joyous and beautiful place and basically if I've been able to transmit some of that feeling over in the films I've worked on, or contributed to creating that feeling, then I'll be very happy.

Int: *But you're passionate about certain issues, Alastair. For example, in certain parts of the world we know that they're not very keen to talk about Darwinian evolution and this is something that gets you steaming, me even more so. But why don't you as one of the most experienced filmmakers in our genre tackle this issue?*

AM: It is quite extraordinary in this day and age with people as educated as they are now that we still have a problem with something like evolution. Now it's the celebration of Darwin's bicentenary or certainly it's been 150 years since the publication of his work. Everywhere I go I see incredible examples of the process of evolution, everything is an extraordinary expression of it. I have absolutely no problem with accepting his theories and it strikes me that what's lying out there to be seen, the fossils and the shapes of animals and plants and the behaviour of animals and plants, just shout the word aloud all the time. I cannot understand why religion has any difficulty with it. If you believe in a god and he gave you eyes to see and a mind to think you would have thought that he might expect you to use it, both of them. So why should a god be upset if you believe in what you can see and reason.

7. Striking a balance

Int: *Absolutely. But the Alastair MacEwen that I know is a very much more thoughtful Alastair MacEwen than just a guy who can film a brilliant sequence. But people won't know that unless they've spoken to you in detail. You feel passionately about certain issues, don't you, like that? But you seem to have come to a happy compromise, a commercial happy compromise born out of pragmatism of 40 years in the business.*

AM: Well, I think a lot of us have come to this business through science. These days it's a little bit out of fashion to try and introduce scientific concepts and notions into our programmes. Apparently it's too complicated or too boring. I'm very sad about that because the excitement of scientific discovery is just as great as the excitement of going out in the field and watching all this wonderful behaviour. To actually know why animals perform like that and to actually read a little bit more into the behaviour than simply saying, oh, that's just how we do it. You shouldn't be **anthropomorphic** about it. You should give animals the dignity of their own place in the world and they see the world in a very different way to the way we see.

So applying scientific concepts and notions to a natural world I think is a perfectly reasonable way to proceed.

Int: *But don't you think we are dumbing down?*

AM: Yes, I do find that extremely frustrating. Some of the films that actually got me into the industry in the first place, the early *Horizons* (5) for example, were extraordinary in the way they took you through scientific discoveries step-by-step, very much like a detective story. The process of unravelling the layers, partly by reason, partly by just observation, and it was that sense of discovery that actually made me think, well, I can be a zoologist and operate a camera and have everything by being a wildlife cameraman.

So when I go out into the field and I watch behaviour I do watch it in a rather more maybe thoughtful manner than simply saying wow.

Int: *But the business only wants the wow factor now. They're not interested in the why, it's just the wow factor.*

AM: I'm not sure I totally believe in that.

Int: *Well, Planet Earth (11) was the most successful thing since ever and was only wow, there wasn't a single why and you were filming it. Do you just give in to their desires, Alastair?*

AM: Not entirely. It must be said that a good story has stood the test of time, I would imagine, since human beings could first speak. *Planet Earth* (11) didn't have very many stories in it, or didn't run a good story, but having said that, of course it was a fantastic, visual representation of plant Earth and I think there's room for that kind of film.

What I think is incredibly dangerous is when commissioning agents get very formulaic. They see something that in the short-term has succeeded and been very successful, and they think that's how all their films should be. You will never discover the next big thing unless you experiment, unless you give some room for the unusual films or the committed films or the experimental films because it will be one of those films that will be the next big thing. It won't be just a formulaic reversion of the same thing because people get bored. They get very, very bored even of the things that caused the bandwagon in the first place.



I think the BBC has played fairly cleverly in the past years anyway by providing such an incredible variety of different approaches to wildlife, anything from very popular to very scientific.

Int: *Though we're not so much interested in the way the Natural History Unit or the BBC has pushed it, what about you? You have taken some responsibility in the business, haven't you? You haven't just opted out. You've been involved politically in the business and you've been involved in helping wildlife filmmakers generally, haven't you?*

AM: Some years ago there was a feeling that wildlife filmmakers were a bit out on a limb. They'd go off into the hinterland for quite large periods of time and be completely out of communication with both their colleagues and their wives and everything else. So many years ago a group of us got together and we formed the International Association of Wildlife Filmmakers, as a kind of support group really. I've certainly been associated with that from the very beginning. It's still going strong and it's still a big meeting place for professionals in the industry, and also people who are starting out to come for advice and as much help as we can give. The IAWF is not a job agency obviously, it's really an association of people currently working in the industry.

Int: *It's mostly cameramen.*

AM: It's mostly cameramen, yes, and it's a self-help, self-support group. It discusses various issues with the people who employ cameramen and try and get a decent deal for them really.

Int: *So it's a trade union?*

AM: In the early days it was discussed whether we should call it a trade union but wildlife filmmakers are such a group of individuals that collective action just didn't seem to be within their brief at all. So we don't really think of ourselves as a union although I dare say if we were more militant we might have done better for ourselves.

Int: *So you're the Arthur Scargill of the wildlife filmmaking world?*

AM: I don't think so somehow.

Int: *A Boris Johnson? Where would you place yourself in the political side of things because that was a big thing, wasn't it?*

AM: Yes.

Int: *It gave you more power as cameramen jointly when you collected together and do you feel satisfied with what that has done in the industry?*

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AM: No, of course not. I'd like it to have achieved a great deal more but it's very, very difficult because wildlife filmmaking is a little bit of a special case. We go out for very, very long periods of time into the field.

Int: *And you're in the hammock, drinking Pina Colodas, with lovely ladies. Where's the problem? You're away from your wife, you're away from your colleagues, getting paid £400 a day*

We really have the most influence by talking to individual producers and trying to make our case, rather than having meetings and collectively bargaining because most of us obviously tend to make friends with the people we work with. Many of us have worked with producers who have become more and more senior in the industry. We hope they're reasonably sympathetic to our cause having seen what we are put through.

8. A changing industry

Int: *That's actually quite an interesting point though, isn't it, because we talked about what it was like in the 80s. You left your business behind. You were London Scientific Films, huge financial burden for you. You cleared that debt. Then you had to remortgage and buy all your equipment which cost hundreds of thousands of pounds, a huge commitment, and now it's all changing again, isn't it? You are responsible for a lot of kit but a cameraman nowadays can make it without buying his own kit, can't he?*

AM: Yes. In some ways it's a better move actually. I would have thought that if anything it's a little bit easier to get going these days because in the past you had to use film, that's hugely expensive, very, very expensive.

Int: *But best quality, brilliant quality?*

AM: Well, we couldn't pick up a handycam or some sort and just go out into the field. When I was kid I used to stick a magnifying glass, a reading glass thing on the front of a lens of my father's 8mm camera and go and film waterskates on the pond. But now the little video cameras are so sophisticated, you can get **macro** attachments and all kinds of things. So you can very, very easily make an extraordinary little film on your own with very, very little cost.

Int: *This is the digital revolution?*

AM: Yes. It's actually by going and doing something that persuades people you can do it. You really do have to. You can't just expect everybody else to do it or get yourself associated with a cameraman who'll teach you everything. It doesn't happen like that. We don't really go out into the field with camera assistants. We go out into the field with producers and we work with local people who help us. So if you want to learn wildlife filmmaking you do have to do an awful lot of it yourself. I was never apprenticed to anybody; I had to do just about every darn thing that I ever learned about wildlife filmmaking. I had to make it up as I went along and that's how wildlife filmmaking has always happened.

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Int: *But going back to the HD thing, the biggest revolution probably in our business for a long time. A young cameraman nowadays would he get his kit given to him by the production?*

AM: Yes, you'd have everything financed from top to toe.

Int: *So it is not only much easier for you son because he's not going to get starved in Zaire but he's also going to be given his camera when he sets off for wherever it is.*

AM: Yes, but it's not so easy so to speak for other reasons because obviously if it's so much easier to do all these things you have to be noticed for one reason or another. So you've got a heck of a lot of competition now.

Int: *Is that true?*

AM: I would have thought so, yes. Certainly every cameraman out there gets a large number of emails from people who want to get into the industry.

Int: *But there aren't many new people in the industry, are there? It's still you old guys who are dominating. The old silverbacks are getting more silvery. I'm employing the youngest guy I think I've ever employed for filming this time on a project but I still come to you or Martyn or the old guys. The young guys still haven't got much of a chance.*

AM: Unfortunately it's not an industry that easily generates a pension so us old guys have to keep going. Also because it's an industry which only really tolerates completely committed people because people who aren't get weeded out very, very quickly. It's not all pina colodas. The dedicated people tend to go on longer because they still want to do it even when they're decrepit.

Int: *I think the youngsters are better off. They've got their own equipment, rules are clearer. I think they're less likely to make a good job of it because they're not going to explore in the way that you explored. I don't think anyone will have the kind of experiences you and lots of other people had in the 80s and 70s and things. I think it's a much more cosseted environment they're all working in now.*

AM: It is quite a bit more so.

Int: *The nannyng state has just gone into our business too. You need a health and safety for everything.*

AM: Yes, you do.

Int: *But how did you inspire Mark, your son, to get into it? Was it because it's going to make him rich and famous?*

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AM: I'm still slightly puzzled by that because I never tried to persuade him to enter the industry. In fact, I think as a teenager it was more along the lines of 'Oh God, do we have to watch this rubbish, Harry Enfield's on the other side'. But I always remember that comment because now he's in it I can start to get my own back.

Int: *But does he actually like wildlife films? As a 30 year old bloke does he actually watch wildlife films?*

AM: Well, yes. I think probably a little must have rubbed off a bit because he was forced to watch the things whether he wanted to or not. I think one of the sea changes came when he went along to Wildscreen and he suddenly realised it was quite an industry, and it was buzzing with people who he liked and who he found interesting. I think it effected a sort of sea change in his attitude altogether. It's no longer just a thing your dad did, it's a thing which actually there are some younger and more dynamic people out there doing it as well.

Int: *It must be very nice to have your son doing it because it must have invigorated you to some extent?*

AM: We've together on a couple of productions now and we're still speaking at home which is quite a testimonial really. Yes, we get along extremely well because when you're working in wildlife you do gain an expertise in special areas. I've actually been able to get advice off him on various aspects of things just as hopefully I've been able to give him advice on various aspects. He at one time was quite a specialist in camera traps and small cameras, and has produced some quite outstanding stuff with those devices. So if I need advice on that kind of area he's a darn good person to go and talk to about it. He also does a lot of **sync** work and, of course, even though I was trained in a film school as a documentary cameraman, because I've done wildlife filmmaking for a while I can't do sync filmmaking anymore because I'm a wildlife cameraman and they don't do sync filmmaking.

Int: *Just so everybody realises, that was you being cynical. That's about as cynical as you get, Alastair. The good thing about you is that over these years you haven't got particularly cynical, have you?*

AM: No, it's quite hard not to be but there's enough out there to quench that desire.

Int: *Son apart, would you recommend to youngsters, people looking up to you, you must get hundreds of emails a year asking for work and to get into the industry. Would you recommend it to youngsters?*

AM: If they want to get into it they've got to take a long, hard look at the realities and it really is not an easy life. It's very, very competitive and you don't work easy hours. You've got to be incredibly committed and you cannot expect to make any money out of it. So given all that, yes, welcome.

Int: *You paint such an attractive picture.*

AM: I wouldn't do anything else but it's not to everybody's taste, not the real live version of it anyway.

Int: *Why is it that you look at it in that way? It puzzles me. Why can youngsters not expect to make a good living out of it? What do you mean they won't make any money out of it? You mean they won't be retired by the time they're 35?*

AM: They certainly won't be retired by the time they're 35. They won't even be expecting a pension by the time they're 60. No, the fact is that people nowadays want more for less. You're under a huge amount of pressure to cut your rates and they're already cut to the bone because although it may sound quite a lot of money per day, you don't work every day. You might not even work half the year and you do have commitments. Even in this day and age you have to buy stuff to make it as a wildlife cameraman. Even if it's buying your digital stills kit and such like it's not cheap if you want to buy professional stuff.

So there are outgoings and there's a heck of a lot of commitment, and there are a lot of people out there who want you to do it for nothing and will pressure you in every way possible to make you do it for nothing. There are lots of people who will do it for nothing and who will undermine everything you do and will take work away from you. It's just nature in tooth and claw, you're not protected. You're a freelancer and you're facing the real world and it's very, very competitive and to make a living is extremely difficult. It has changed the whole of my career.

9. Wildlife films as a genre

Int: *Do you think our industry within television, our genre, is taken seriously?*

AM: I think quite seriously because of the audiences it can command. When it's done in a very popular way the audiences can be huge and completely international because a lot of wildlife, of course, is apolitical. It doesn't touch any of the sensitive spots unless you're a government who's chopping all your trees down.

Int: *But that's not quite the same thing really, is it? Do you think we get the reviews in The Guardian that we get for our programmes that they get for Blind Date (16) or The Apprentice (17)?*

AM: No. Wildlife did go through a period and has occasionally gone through periods where it's been right up there but I suspect sadly it'll never be the same as the kind of World Cup or anything like that. It is a shame because basically it's the world we all have to live in for our stint here and the health of it is totally dependent on people caring about it, and wildlife films can show you what a fantastic place it is.

Int: *But why is it the wildlife films and the people associated with them can be the most popular thing in the media yet we're not analysed or dissected or considered as a normal part of TV?*

AM: What exactly do you mean by that?

Int: *Well, we've got David Attenborough, haven't we, probably the best broadcaster the planet's ever seen. But we don't often get our programmes dissected or treated in the same way as a drama or lots of*

other types of TV. Do you think we get a fair crack of the whip in terms of natural history filmmaking or are we always held as something slightly different?

AM: I think natural history filmmaking in the past certainly has been almost put up on a pedestal. I think it's because it's considered worthy. It's not out there to try and really sell a product apart from our own planet and it's aims and ambitions are usually to the benefit of everybody concerned. So I don't think it's really attracted the kind of criticism and analysis. A lot of our most popular programmes these days, the chef type programmes and the dancing programmes and the 'get people in the West End' type programmes, have a streak of cruelty running through them which I find quite hard to tolerate.

Wildlife filmmaking has never gone down that road. It's always been I suppose really trying to encourage people to support something by showing its best and most lovely aspects, almost interesting aspects.

Int 2: Wildlife films are on the fringe. I think they maybe thought of as a bit nerdy actually and also people, reviewers, may not understand or may not be able to dissect the programme because they simply don't know whether you're telling the truth or not anyway.

That's a good point, isn't it? I would have never said they're nerdy. I think they're just frightened of trying to analyse them and, as you say, we've been put on a pedestal and worthy and held to one side. But I don't think we're ever treated properly as a genre. But I wonder how our industry would have been throughout your total career if we hadn't had David Attenborough in it.

AM: Yes, it's true. He has made a huge impact. Now he's really beginning to speak up on some of the really important environmental issues as well and people listen to him. He's one of these people who have become really, really trusted and I think to a certain extent that is an issue with wildlife filmmaking. I think people do trust wildlife filmmaking and wildlife filmmakers, and I think it is a responsibility to live up to.

Int: Do you think they still trust them as much as they used to? Snakes in a bag, all this kind of thing. Bring on the hyena, bring on the tame cormorant.

AM: Yes, there is that aspect of it which can be very suspect but it's an area which is quite grey in many respects. The manipulation of wildlife and such like, there's huge ethical debates about that all the time. I think that's again one of the reasons why perhaps it does hold a level of trust which we ought to earn because we examine our own navels quite extensively.

But manipulating natural history is one of those things which are often open to debate and I make no bones about it. There are a lot of situations where you cannot tell the stories you want to tell without actually using sets, for example. If you're filming insects in particular making sets and filming insects on sets is quite normal. You try and do it wherever possible actually not only in the country where the insects are found but often on the very locations where they're found.

But people who think that we make sets and film animals on sets because it makes life easier are completely and utterly mistaken. Filming animals on sets is really, really difficult because they just don't like being on



sets very much. The only way you can make it work is to make them really comfortable, as comfortable as you can possibly create conditions to simulate where they normally would live. I can tell you from experience that it is one heck of a lot of easier to go out and put up a hide and film an animal in its natural environment, doing natural things which it does every darn day, than try to make that animal do it on a tabletop. I would prefer to do that any day of my life.

But there are stories which you cannot tell in any other way. So what do we do? Do we say if you have to do it on a set you can't film it? I think that's absolutely crazy because some of the most exciting and interesting stories you can possibly tell about this earth are about quite small things. Those are the things that you have to create, the special sets that you give you the impossible shots. The shots that get right inside something and create areas of incredible revelation where you can see extraordinary aspects of behaviour that are impossible to reveal in any other way.

If you actually manage to create a set where the animal is comfortable and also that allows you to give a deep insight into its behavioural life and actually reveal an aspect of its life that's never been seen before, you do feel a huge sense of achievement. It brings all these things out alive and in front of people which I think they should know about. I was certainly stimulated to enter this industry because of the incredible work by Oxford Scientific Films who did a lot of work on sets. Whether they were making a film about an obnoxious fish parasite or a pelican, they would do it in such a revelatory way that I thought, well, these are scientists telling stories about the natural world and showing what science has done in terms of understanding their behaviour. That's what I was most excited by.

Int: *I think that is a big difference between past and present then in terms of, say, for example Mark, your son. Do you think they can contribute in the same way or are they even more involved with entertainment rather than education?*

AM: I don't know. I think this industry has gone through so many different sea changes, the tides have come in. Every show has to be presenter led and then that tide has receded. Then you've got the *Planet Earth* (11) scenario where suddenly we're right back into incredibly well financed, **blue chip** natural history. Okay, fair enough, that was all sensational pictures. I believe storyline led programming is still very much alive and maybe will gain the ascendancy again. It's quite possible that programmes of high science contents will suddenly become incredibly popular again.

There is absolutely no predicting public taste and it's only by keeping all these programmes out there that suddenly that one of them will become enormously popular like *March of the Penguins* (18). You can't predict what film's going to do it, it's quite extraordinary. But it will happen and that is the only thing we can predict for absolute certainty. Somewhere out there is a completely unexpected angle that will capture the public's imagination and it'll be because somebody's made an unusual film about the subject in an unusual way. That'll become the next norm, the next template for everybody to make every other darn film that follows it for a while until everybody's bored out of their minds with it.

Int: *Have you got a desire to find the next March of the Penguins (18) yourself then?*

AM: Obviously my life is largely made up of projects which other people have had commissioned and I'm asked to do the camerawork on. Obviously there are ideas I suggest to producers and sometimes there are groups of us who get together to do projects because somebody's come up with an idea and they've thought,

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well, he'd be a useful man on it. But the sort of projects I love working on are very much those projects which tie in the natural world with human beings and have all kinds of facets to them, and that show a whole variety of different subjects. In other words, I love the *Elephant and The Emperor* (3) film and the *People of the Sea* (15) film and that sort of thing because they showed anything from plankton to hump backed whales. That is quite a wide variety of sizes. Each one of those animals were quite extraordinary in their own right and fascinating to try and film.

10. Career Highlights

Int: *So tell me you're top three films in your career, Alastair, for you? Of your own I'm talking about.*

AM: The films I've worked on that were top as far as my experience is concerned are certainly *Secrets of the Golden River* (10) was just so full of incident and discovery. That was just an extraordinary part of my life. Then the five years I spent in the Serengeti, there were one or two films there. That is such a rich ecosystem. There was a film called *Thorn Tree Country* (19) which is a film I really loved because it again dealt with every single aspect of the ecosystem. It covered the very tiny things as well as the big things. I find that interesting because it gives you an insight into the whole habitat. It's not just to look at cheetahs because they're a little bit like furry human beings which is the fashionable thing these days. Every darn programme about animals has to have some kind of human analogy associated with it. But I must confess I prefer the films that actually tell you about something a little bit less than I encounter every day and more revelatory in terms of the science and the background to it.

Int: *So that's two - Thorn Tree Country (19) and Golden River (10).*

AM: *Islands in the African Sky* (14) again took me to places on earth which I'd never experienced before, the mountains of East Africa. That was absolutely fascinating.

Int: *But those are your top three?*

AM: There's a whole bunch of them.

Int: *All right then, I'll make it easier then. You have to pick out one.*

AM: *Elephant and The Emperor* (3) obviously.

Int: *Okay, one film that you think has made the biggest impact on your career.*

AM: Well, probably the early films. The Rio Negro film made one of the biggest impacts because that was really at the start of my career. But the most successful films I've ever worked on and the ones I've enjoyed doing, things like *Elephant and The Emperor* (3) and hornet films of various sorts, I've worked on several.



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Int: *Come on, Alastair, nail your killers.*

AM: *Buddha Bees and the Hornet Queen (20)* was a very nice one.

Int: *Alastair, this is going down forever. They're going to put this in the soil, in a DVD, and people are going to dig this up. Is that the one?*

AM: I think probably *The Elephant and The Emperor and The Butterfly Tree (3)* is the one.

Int: *I think you're now going to be known as Mr Indecisive. What's the one film, Alastair, that's made the biggest change to your career?*

AM: You obviously have one in mind.

Int: *No, I don't.*

AM: It's very difficult to say how a single film has affected the course of my career because certain films have kicked off certain parts of my career. Like the head lice one kicked off a whole period where I was filming small things and medical subjects and that sort of thing.

Int: *If you could relive one and remake the whole thing, go back in time and do it all again, what would it be?*

AM: I'd love to do *The Elephant and The Emperor and The Butterfly Tree (3)*.

Int: *Why was that so special for you then? What was it that separates it out?*

AM: There were so many different factors. Partly it was the people involved because the one great thing about wildlife filmmaking is you meet so many different, incredible people and in this day of emails and such like you can keep up with them very easily. You don't have to write letters and things, it's just the odd note here and there. It was partly the landscape and the place and this particular area of Botswana was quite beautiful, absolutely gorgeous landscape. Partly because it was a process of complete discovery. We actually found out things while we were out there which featured in the film that were never in the script, and they were little minor discoveries of our own. I dare say there will have been scientific papers about them in various places. But having said that, we'd never come across those resources and actually discovered them for ourselves while we were filming and they made big scenes for us.

Partly because it was so varied. You got to learn so much about the landscape that we worked in and why it was there and why it was shaped like that, and basically why the plants were like they were and why the animals behaved like they did. It was so immersing in terms of experience.

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Int: *So is that a coincidence, do you think, that it was the most successful for you in terms of festivals and things, and it was the most rewarding for you mentally? Is that a coincidence?*

AM: I don't think so. I think you probably give of your best when you're most excited by something.

Int: *So you'd put it the other way round?*

AM: Yes, I think you make it.

Int: *That's interesting.*

AM: The more you're engaged the better you do.

Int: *So it isn't looking back with rose tinted glasses, you actually you performed better? Everything about it helped make it a better film?*

AM: Probably, yes.

Int: *So for people looking on they can learn from that, that the better environment you create for everybody concerned the better end result.*

AM: Yes, I think the more you are engaged with a project the better you make it.

Int: *What's the worse project you've ever been involved with?*

AM: Probably my most exhausting and harsh trip I ever did was my trip to Zambia. That was at times quite kind of life threatening and that was certainly very, very uncomfortable for most of it.

Int: *What was that for?*

AM: That was for the Bonobo sequence.

Int: *Zambia?*

AM: Not Zambia, Zaire. Yes, the Zaire trip was probably my harshest and it was one of my first.

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Int: *Is **The Elephant and The Emperor** (3) the highest point, the happiest point in your career do you think?*

AM: Yes, I think it was one of those really great moments basically when it won Wildscreen, a very kind of fulfilling moment because I was very happy with that film in many, many ways and the fact that other people liked it as well. It was a kind of justification in a way.

Int: *But there must be quite a few films tucked away in your repertoire now that you feel equally passionate about. Which are the ones that have slipped the net?*

AM: Actually not done as well?

Int: *Where you think they're just as good as that film but didn't get the recognition.*

AM: Something like *Thorn Tree Country* (19) is I think a film which had quite a high level of achievement in it. Quite often films that you've seen that other people have made that you think, my goodness. Because you're a professional in the industry you know how difficult certain things are to do. You can tell that they actually were done incredibly well and what a high level of skill is involved, and you find actually they don't win the festivals or they don't even get in because festivals are sometimes judged by people who look at a film and they think that's nice. But you go along to Tim Clutton-Brock's place to film meerkats and it's fairly simple.

But if you want to film an Umbrellabird. It's the one sequence in the *Rio Negro* film which quite frankly nobody ever remembers. Probably it was the harshest and nearly cost my life on many occasions.

Int: *But it sounds to me like, as someone looking on objectively, you've got it completely wrong and the people doing **Meerkat Manor** (21) completely right. Mug going to film **Umbrella Birds**, three weeks for **Umbrella Bird**, bitten to death, completely wrong. So, Alastair, who's influenced you in your career in wildlife filmmaking? Who's the one person, when you think about, who's influenced what you've done and what you've become more than anybody else?*

AM: I think probably Oxford Scientific Films influenced me more than anybody else. As soon as I saw the first of the films that I ever saw that came across on television, I pretty much knew that's exactly what I wanted to do and I was quite young at the time. It just so matched everything. My heroes at the time were people like Conrad Lorenz and Tim Bergen and the behavioural scientists. The people whose writing excited me were people like Wallace and Bates and Darwin and those others who explored the natural world, and then actually had the intelligence to sit down and formulate theories on how it worked. It was that sort of thing that fired me up and those were the people I liked, the people who were thoughtful about the natural world.

Int: *It sounds to me as though you're actually quite a thoughtful chap, you're not just a cameraman. Have you been frustrated by being a cameraman rather than being given the credit for producing or whatever the right word is, making your own films completely separately? Has it satisfied your desires?*

AM: I've just to a certain extent been grateful to be a part of anything because I must say when I started out I never dreamed that I'd ever end up with a company, for example, like London Scientific Films. That was just so totally beyond any ambition I could possibly have imagined, let alone work with the ex-head of Oxford Scientific Films. So the process of actually making a living and such like, to survive in this industry has been a kind of reward in itself really.

Yes, sometimes you complete a film and you think it would have been so nice if they'd been able to do it a little bit differently because your take on a particular subject is obviously completely individual. But having said that, I've had the great privilege to work with some extremely good filmmakers.

Int: *You seem like an obvious candidate for doing your own films entirely on your own which there are few people out there, sometimes couples, sometimes individuals, cameramen/filmmakers. You never seem to bridge that gap. You've always worked with producers or teams. You've been a big team player. You've done all the big series, especially recently.*

AM: Yes, I think to a certain extent it was my experience at LSF that left me a little bit wary about trying to go back into production. It was both an exhilarating and incredibly traumatic part of my life, particularly towards the end because as the company starting getting into trouble obviously you really wondered whether you were going to survive it. It left me with a feeling that being a cameraman ain't so bad because you didn't actually have to take the responsibilities that you had to take on a daily basis as a producer, a company director and everything else.

So, yes, I was very content to be a cameraman even though perhaps if I hadn't had LSF I might have gone that route. I might have been much more proactive as being a producer selling projects.

Int: *It's quite interesting, isn't it, that that early experience at that stage you don't realise that, it's shapes your whole career.*

AM: Totally, yes.

Int: *But you've had a great reward it seems to me that you've got more and more successful, if we can quantify success, but your success has grown and grown, hasn't it? Everything you touch turns to gold now.*

AM: Well, I don't think so.

Int: *But you're working on all the hugely successful - Life in the Undergrowth (22), your Elephant and Emperor (3), Planet Earth (11). You've had a great run.*

AM: I've been incredibly lucky. I've just been thankfully fairly continually employed and hope to remain that way for a while to come.

Int: *But does that mean you get better at your job as you get more and more experienced? Do you feel you've got better?*

AM: I do, very much so because I'm much more relaxed now than I used to be. I used to be really quite wound up. Every time you came back with a heap of film you can't review obviously until you get home, it was almost like retaking your finals and it was really quite stressful. Being a cameraman, of course, you're being judged every minute of your life. You never get away from that. You're never secure. You can be sacked in a moment and you're only as good as the last job you've done in the old cliché but it's true, it's absolutely true.

Nevertheless it does give you freedom. When you are out in the field you may work for 24 hours a day but when you come home time's your own. A producer never gets away from his project and a producer also has the very considerable worry of having to sell the next project. A cameraman can go from one job to the next if he's lucky and if he's employed. I've never been complacent. I've just considered myself extremely lucky to continue to be employed and obviously do as much as I possibly can to make sure that I'm up-to-date with the very, very latest technology. Make sure I'm also skilled in the various things required at the time, whether it's knowing the details of high def technology or whether it's trying to develop new things myself. Because the thing about wildlife camerawork is the fact you're always innovating, whether you're struggling to get bits of odd lenses together and make a new scope or whether you're writing code to drive time lapse motors.

It's a thing you're continually having to learn, having to challenge yourself with and developing.

11. The Future

Int: *What do you think the industry holds for you in the next few years? If you look back for the last five, six years you must get a nice warm glow. Do you think the next five or six years are going to?*

AM: Well, I hope so. I will certainly try and continue to work as long as I can pick up a pack and walk up a mountain, and at the moment thankfully my very job has kept me fit enough to keep going. But I'm also very interested in looking ahead. If I can't do that anymore then I've got a studio here which I can do macro work in, and I've learned a heck a lot now about electronics and all the new technology. The way it's heading it'll be the new ground we've broken with ultra small cameras and things like that. I'm very well aware of what's happening in that area. I think I would try and start to develop various systems that will drive these technologies, in terms of actually putting them in places where they can get the extraordinary images.

Int: *When you close your eyes at night are you looking forward to the next day and the next job with as much enthusiasm do you think?*

AM: Yes. That's the thing about this job. Everything you do in terms of your next project, you're told the story and you just think, God, that's amazing, where did you hear that one. It's always from some scientist who's been doing some work in a remote place or in a very interesting way, and he's unravelled some new and brilliant piece of behaviour and it just never stops. This world is so full of stuff that the more you look the more you get. Certainly my last project which was a shoot about a very small fish was extraordinary and

fascinating. It was about a tiny fish that walks up enormously high waterfalls, hundreds of feet, by just suction with its mouth. It's just a hilarious little creature and it was a lovely little fish. It was a very sort of Nemo like creature with forward looking eyes and it just inch worms it's way up gradually and steadily, and makes this wonderful journey. Like a salmon but on a minute scale but it's this sort of epic combination.

Int: *So Alastair, it's been absolutely fascinating talking to you about your life story. Tell me, what are you working on now?*

AM: I'm working on a *Natural World* (23) on a film about cuckoos which you are the producer of.

Int: *That must be a great project and a great guy you're working with.*

AM: Outstanding in both counts.

Int: *Seriously, is that the kind of film that you like? A detailed story about the natural world with fascinating history and science?*

AM: Exactly. The film is looking very closely at the behaviour of cuckoos, of how the behaviour was discovered and as many aspects of its biology as possible, and that's exactly the sort of film I most approve of.

Int: *It's also great, isn't it, because we've got a professor who's been working on the subject for so long?*

AM: Yes, he's such an outstanding source of knowledge.

Int: *Who is it?*

AM: Professor Nick Davis at Cambridge and he's just written a book on cuckoos which is full of the most extraordinary information about the subject. Of course, when he comes out into the field he's just an extraordinarily valuable source of information and guidance in terms of where to find them and how to see them. He can even imitate the cuckoo in the most realistic way you can possibly imagine, and they respond and actually fly over his head if he keeps calling. In fact, my first meeting with Professor Nick Davis he managed to make us both jump with an extremely realistic cuckoo call about 50 metres behind us.

Int: *They must be very difficult to film but I understand you once got very lucky with filming a very rare sequence on the cuckoo?*

AM: Yes, by extraordinary coincidence many years ago, with you and Mike (Burkett) as well working on a project, you asked me to go down to Oxford and film a cuckoo egg laying which must be one of the most unlikely requests I've ever had in the whole of my life, given the fact I was given one day to do it in.

Int: *Didn't I give you a whole day?*

AM: I'm not entirely sure whether I was even given a whole day but I did have to drive there. I was told to meet up with a Mr Mike Bayliss at 12 o'clock and he would show me to the site and I would set up a hide, get into the hide and then by 6 o'clock I'd be on my way home. This did seem a very, very tall story indeed given the fact that as far as I know by then – had it been filmed before?

Int: *I don't think it had, had it?*

AM: No, this was a first. Anyway I duly drove down on the allotted day, met Mike Bayliss and we walked into this marsh and he showed me where the reed warbler nest was, and he pointed out a tree where he thought the cuckoo would be sitting in a very short space of time. I got into my hide having set everything up and about 3.30 a cuckoo flew into the edge of the reeds, looked me firmly in the eye which gave me pause for thought. The camera was running but I was very scared indeed that he was just going to fly away. But then having satisfied himself there was nothing alarming he flew onto the nest, picked out a reed warbler egg, laid his own egg, posed to camera very briefly because it's all over in about 8-10 seconds, and flew away.

I remember forgetting to switch the camera off because I was so completely and utterly astonished that such an impossible thing had happened in front of my eyes. It was even remarked to me afterwards: we noticed you put a good long hold on the end of that shot, Alastair.

Int: *Well, may there be many more cuckoos in your life, hopefully more than 10 seconds of brilliant natural history to follow.*

AM: Yes, I sincerely hope so too because I'm just off to film some more.

Int: *Thanks very much, Alastair. That was wonderful.*

AM: A pleasure.

Glossary

Anthropomorphic: To attribute human form or feelings to a non-human species or object.

Blue chip: A prestigious style of wildlife documentary which can be described as a depiction of mega-fauna, following a dramatic storyline, using only images of visual splendour, giving a sense of timelessness and with an absence of reference to controversial issues

Macro photography: A dedicated lens system designed to magnify a subject by a minimum 1:1 object to image ratio

Matatu: African mode of transport similar to a mini-bus

Microscopy: Technical methods for using microscopes to view microscopic samples or images

Polymorphonuclear leukocytes: Type of white blood cell that contains granules

Super 8mm film: 8mm wide film gauge with smaller perforations than regular 8mm, allowing the exposed area to be larger. Released in 1965 by Eastman Kodak

Synchronisation (Sync): A signal used in video systems to coordinate timings of lines, fields and frames

16mm: 16mm wide film gauge used in the film industry. More economic and portable than 35mm. introduced in 1923 by Eastman Kodak

35mm: 35mm wide film gauge widely used in the film industry for its high quality. First introduced in 1892

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