Andrew Buchanan: Oral History Transcription

Name of interviewee:

Andrew Buchanan

Name of interviewer:

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Name of cameraman:

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Wells, United Kingdom

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c.110 minutes

1. The early years and influences

Int: Please give your full name, your nationality, your current job title and today's date, to set the scene.

AB: I'm Andrew Buchanan, I'm British, I am a freelance producer now and it is the 8th January 2007.

Int: Thankyou. What was the first contact you had with wildlife filmmaking Andrew?

AB: Watching Hans and Lotte Hass and Armand and Michaela Denis on a 9 inch black and white TV. It's something we tended to do as a family because I think my father had a desperate crush on Lotte Hass, but that was never admitted. So it was always part of my childhood, just watching wildlife programmes and then later on when I wasn't at school we sometimes watched Zoo Quest (1), obviously Look (2) with Peter Scott and all the classic [wildlife films] – I can still see the images now - black and white images from **Slimbridge** and Peter Scott in the studio with Johnny Morris. I never actually took to Keeper Morris.

Int: So you would have been how old at that stage?

AB: I would imagine 6 through to about 14/15.

Int: OK, so that's what – late 50s, early 60s?

AB: Yes, through the 50s, late 50s, early 60s

Int: What was the first series or programme that you can actually remember as an event, as a story, rather than just memories of vaguely seeing Attenborough or Hans and Lotte Hass?

AB: Probably the Cousteau films – as a kind of running series. Though I suppose they were individual films. And not a wildlife film. I mean, the first big event film that I can remember is Civilisation(3) by Kenneth Clark. Which of course as we all know is a fore-runner in a funny way to Life on Earth(4) but I don't remember a major series. I think maybe is that because wildlife didn't really do major series? They were one offs or they were, you know, Jacques Cousteau taking you round different bits of the world and you had almost like a complete story in itself and then a complete new story the following week. I'm not sure about that, maybe there just weren't series then?

2. Getting involved with the BBC NHU

Int: But I think it this way also. I think you are a bit different from some of the other people who might be interviewed for this archive. Because as I understand it, it wasn't a love of wildlife programmes that got you into wildlife programme making. What did get you into it?

AB: Oh completely by mistake, or rather by luck. And it was a concatenation of circumstances. My love was theatre and I started out working in theatre as a stage manager and things like that working at places like the Bristol Old Vic and in London and wherever and then I ended up in feature films as a location manager and then, by complete chance ended up doing costume drama for the BBC and at that stage I lived in Bristol. And I didn't do documentary; I didn't think about wildlife as a career because I wasn't a scientist.

Int: So what sort of dramas were you working on?

AB: Oh I did everything. I did Crime and Punishment(5) starring John Hurt and I did Shoestring(6) with Trevor Eve, I even did Doctor Who(7) at one point, so everything from classic period drama right the way through to cops and robbers, you know private detective stuff and some other bits and pieces along the way. And so what happened was I was living in Bristol and because there's no tradition of drama production in Bristol to speak of I was going to London, Birmingham, Paris, wherever, to get work. And I was at home between jobs actually mending the roof, putting new lead in the gully in my house in Montpellier and the phone rang and Angela [Andrew's wife] called up. I went down and basically the conversation went roughly like this "Hello this is the BBC Natural History Unit (BBC NHU). Would you care to come in for a chat?" [Mimics holding a phone]

Int: And who was that on the other end of the phone?

AB: That was John Sparks.

Int: OK so that was John himself?

AB: I think it was John, it might have been a PA, but certainly the person I met was John. And what had happened was John was setting up a series called The Discovery of Animal Behaviour(8) which was one of the earlier attempts, perhaps not fully successful but nonetheless one of the earlier attempts to combine dramatic reconstruction with wildlife. And John needed somebody with a drama background and had been mentioning to somebody in the canteen at the BBC that he was going to have to bring somebody down from London who knew about drama and this was going to cost him rail fares and hotels this would affect his budget and this person who I happened to know said "oh no but there is someone in Bristol, here's his number". And that was how I ended up working in the NHU - simply because I lived in Bristol and somebody mentioned me to John and I happened to have a drama background. It wasn't the plan.

3. First impressions and opinions on the wildlife filmmaking industry

Int: So you came in for a chat with John [Sparks].

AB: I came in for a chat with John —

Int: How did the chat go and what where your first impressions of him, and of the unit.

AB: Oh and of Mike Salisbury. Oh just what wonderfully nice people they were! And how committed. I think compared to drama where there is a lot of really interesting people, the thing that I remember particularly was here was a group of specialists who were, as well as being specialist, and very knowledgeable, unbelievably nice people.

Int: So noticeably, markedly, different sorts of people than drama people?

AB: Yes, very different sorts of people. Partly because I think all of them were doing it out of a passion for wildlife. Because they were zoologists or they had a deep knowledge and love of the country. In those days the NHU was full of ornithologists. It seemed to me that one of the qualifications for joining the NHU back in the 70s / early 80s, was being an ornithologist, which of course I wasn't. But nonetheless these were people that had an absolute passion and that passion came through in the way that they approached their work. Some of the work was perhaps a little bit drier than one might like now but the passion, the general niceness of the place. And of course Chris Parsons I met very soon because he at that stage was head of the unit and was I think a great influence on many people including me and John was an influence and also Mike Salisbury.

Int: Sorry to interrupt, because Mike was actually alongside John the main director wasn't he?

AB: Yes, basically John was the Series Producer and Mike was a Producer and Marion Zunz was the AP [Assistant Producer]. Pelham Aldrich-Blake was the other AP. And I did much of the setting up of the dramas and helping Mike and John with that side of things.

Int: Just before we go off this subject of drama people versus wildlife people. I'm wondering, because you've also had the experience of producing films that are scientific films, historical films, I mean you're not in any sense a specialist, do you think that wildlife people are different from other documentary makers for example – or is it just that drama people versus documentary people there is a difference there?

AB: I think that the differences are breaking down but I do think that until fairly recently the whole issue was about the way that wildlife filmmakers were selected. You tended to recruit people who were zoologists, or at the very least biologists - and scientists and this I think meant that people recruited, not perhaps in their own image but people with a similar sort of background in a way particularly in wildlife that I don't think happens perhaps in other genres – perhaps history it does. Whereas science documentary generally – which of course you know a lot about — it seems to me there is a broader selection of disciplines that people come into science documentary that certainly traditionally has been the case in wildlife.

Int: And you would say, still on this sidetrack, this is a distinction that is beginning to break down?

AB: I believe it is. My perception and one of the reasons that I ended up stopping taking contracts with the BBC – I was always contract, never staff – one of the reasons I left the NHU was a perception, at least in my mind, that because I wasn't a zoologist, and because I came up through the Production Management side that yes I could be manager of the NHU – which by the way isn't a job that I think anybody should ever want – but I didn't feel there was a chance that I'd be allowed to Produce or even laterally Exec [Executive] Produce because I wasn't a Zoologist. Now I honestly believe that's breaking down now to some extent. Of course we couldn't make the programmes without the Zoologists but I personally feel that a mix of people who are story tellers, Egyptologists, doesn't matter what they are, with scientists who've got the deep and absolutely accurate knowledge I think that's a very good way of putting a team together. And that is increasingly happening.

Int: Yes I agree. And maybe this is also linked up with the changes, the diversification of wildlife output isn't it?

AB: Yes, when I started working in the NHU what was the output? Well World About Us (9) as it started out – then Natural World (10) and The Really Wild Show (11) eventually

Int: But The Really Wild Show (11) didn't come in until the early 80s, that was a few years later.

AB: Early 80s – that's right, yes. So you had basically The Natural World (10), Wildlife on One and you had Survival coming out of ITV so it was still the very traditional **blue-chip**, even Wildlife On One tended not to have people in it.

Int: And so you would choose a place, or an animal and the whole film would be based around that.

AB: Yes, and if there were any people in it they would be completely incidental.

4. Early productions

Int: So going back to The Discovery of Animal Behaviour (8), tell us an example of a shoot you organised, the sorts of things that you were involved in – what was the nuts and bolts of it?

AB: The nuts and bolts of it was — obviously there was a lot of stuff going on which was pretty standard wildlife filmmaking. It would be either in a tank or a set or on location. One thing I ended up doing which was actually wildlife filmmaking, rather than drama was we were trying to film *Philanthus triangulum* which is the bee wolf. And this is a little wasp that lives underground in a burrow and it has chambers off this burrow and it lays its eggs in the chambers. It then flies out, goes off and in mid-air attacks a bee, hence the name bee-wolf. Stings it and then flies back [imitates flying bee], because it is only about half the size of this thing I think, goes back down into the burrow.

Int: With the bee in tow?

AB: With the comatose bee sort of clutched. And it leaves the comatose bee, sorry I've got this wrong, it puts the comatose bee in the chamber and then lays an egg on the comatose bee

Int: On it?

AB: On it. And the idea being of course that when the egg hatches it's got live food. I mean one of many examples of this sort of thing but we were supposed to be filming *Philanthus triangulum* and there was a charming Dutch researcher who has researched them down in the Landes down in south west France and I went down there with Roger Jackman. Of course one of the things we didn't know was that *Philanthus* only fly at 20 degrees centigrade and of course yes, you've guessed it, we hit the week where it never got above 19.5 and so we'd get up early in the morning and we'd find these *Philanthus* little burrows and we'd wait with a thermometer and it would get to 19 degrees, it would get up to 19.5 degrees and a little wasp come out and go [imitates wasp checking temperature then shaking it's head] and go back in again. And the number of times we turned over! Anyway eventually it got to 20 degrees absolutely textbook - up they come and the fascinating thing was that we also wanted to show that these wasps remembered landmarks so what you did was you put a row of fir cones round the little burrow entrance then while the wasp was away you moved the fir cones and put your finger in to make a fake burrow entrance. It's a classic bit of reconstruction I think of work that Niko Tinbergen did. So it was pure wildlife but we were reconstructing it from Niko Tinbergen's work. And then later on we then got Dutch youngsters, because I think Tinbergen was in his early twenties or maybe when he did this work and we filmed in the Netherlands basically the wides to intercut with the close ups on the behaviour which we had done down the Landes.

Int: Ok you've got to tell us the answer to the riddle then – when you moved the fir cones while the wasp was in flight did it come back…

AB: Absolutely, it came back in and tried to get into the little fake hole that we got

Int: So it was using the fir cones as geographical landmarks?

AB: It was a classical reconstruction of Tinbergen's experiment. Another one we did was, I've forgotten the guy's name, but he was a British Zoologist who did a lot of work on **altruism**.(12)

Int: Will it be Bill Hamilton?

AB: Bill Hamilton, I'm pretty certain.

Int: On his bike

AB: On his bike as a teenager with cinebar moths.

Int: That's right – going out into the woods near Oxford

AB: Ah no, perhaps when he was younger. Well if it was not Hamilton it was somebody like that. We actually went to the house in Kent where he lived as a child.

Int: Sorry, that was Bill Hamilton

AB: OK it is Bill Hamilton then. We went to the house in Kent. My job was to basically to find the house, negotiate with Bill's mum, Mrs Hamilton, to allow us to film there and she was only too pleased to do this. I also helped with Mike Salisbury I think it was, cast an actor that looked as much like Bill Hamilton as possible – aged 18. We arrived and Mrs Hamilton welcomed us and said oh yes, he got on his bike and his satchel was like that and the actor arrived, because we had costume and make up with us and Mrs Hamilton said "oh no no he didn't wear clothes like that" and disappeared upstairs and rummaged around in the attic or in the chest of drawers and came back with an airtec shirt and a pair of shorts that would have actually been Bill Hamilton's and so there's the actor portraying Bill Hamilton, wearing Bill Hamilton's own clothes! With his mum looking on to advise "oh no, he didn't leave his bike there when he came home". It was great fun and that was the fairly typical sort of thing that we did.

Int: Well actually I can finish that story because I was talking to Mike Salisbury a few weeks ago and apparently in the end when Bill Hamilton saw this sequence he nearly dropped down with shock because there was him – it was like him – in his own clothes riding his own bike in the very woods where he had been you know, ten or fifteen years earlier.

AB: I hadn't heard that bit of the story.

Int: And Bill Hamilton said he got the shock of his life when he saw himself on the telly.

AB: Well that was thanks to his Mum giving us the right clothes.

5. Characters at the BBC NHU

Int: Now this was your first moment in at the deep end with the NHU and with wildlife programme making. Were there any characters that stood out for you at that stage? You know, larger than life characters, odd characters, interesting, inspiring characters?

AB: Well I've already mentioned Chris Parsons – inspiring to me and a whole generation / generations indeed of wildlife filmmakers. John Sparks, Mike Salisbury. I mean, people who I suppose instilled in me that what was important was getting the science right, but what was also important was telling a story. In terms of characters there were a lot of characters. I'm sure many people will have mentioned Jeffery – Jeffery Boswall - the classic of Jeffery with his safari jacket. And - I've seen it, so I know it's true – the lists that Jeffery had of what to take on location and whenever Jeffery started a show he'd give each of his members of his team a copy of this list. And, no joking, the list even said which pocket in your safari jacket what had to go in - including top right hand pocket spare copy of list! I seem to remember Jeffery had a military background – might even have still been in the territorial army at the time, perhaps not. But that kind of, I suppose eccentricity - or so it seemed to me. Yes planning and all the rest of it is important – but to that level?? I think also there were a number of people in the unit who were still on the… where do I want to go? For instance, Richard Brock who I worked with, the joke was that you knew when autumn arrived, well, when winter was going to arrive in the UK and when it was over by when Richard set off to go on a filming trip somewhere nice and warm.

Int: Yes absolutely

AB: It happened every winter! Richard would find himself a nice film to make for Natural World (10) or Wildlife on One and off he'd go – and then come back when the weather got better.

Int: That's right – East Africa — somewhere near a beach I seem to recall.

AB: Yes! So, characters – yes. And then obviously I worked quite closely with Adrian Warren - who was fierce in his determination to get the shot but on occasions at some risk to Adrian, indeed to the crew around him – but then Adrian's a guy who's done more parachute jumps than most red devils.

Int: Didn't Adrian produce the programme where he wanted everyone to —

what is it —skydive onto—

AB: Yes - onto a teepwee

Int: Well, Rima, this amazing South American mountain – and didn't half the crew break legs?

AB: I think one person did and they got ordered off – they were going to base jump off it, or something like that – or abseil off it at the end and I don't know, something went wrong with the permits and they had to evacuate half way through – but it was amazing – no-one had actually been up there so fair enough probably

the only way to on was to skydive, and ever one for knowing what's going to look good visually. I mean it was Adrian who got David Attenborough into zero gravity – which is one of the classics that people still remember.

Int: Absolutely

AB: Of course that was on Living Planet – or rather the first Living Planet (13) – which was what I ended up doing after animal behaviour (8).

Int: I'm just going to go back for a moment to Mike Salisbury because at this moment as we're recording this it's just been announced that Mike has been awarded an OBE for his contributions to broadcasting – what was it 25 years ago that impressed you about Mike in particular? Why do you think, with hindsight, he's been awarded an OBE – the first person in our business to have been awarded this since Chris Parsons himself about 20 years ago?

AB: Because I think Mike is not a man with ambition, other than to make the best possible programmes he can. I'm not aware that Mike ever considered, for instance, going to become head of the unit, he might, but he always seems to be absolutely bound up in the project that he's doing. And yet at the same time the other thing I learnt from Mike is that he's also very bound up in his family. And I think that's the thing I admire about Mike – he manages to actually make his professional career and his family life work – and work really well. And yet when you look round a lot of the other people of that generation, you know, the number of marriages or relationships that haven't really panned out — I think that's one of the things. I think also just Mike, like John and Chris, all, as I said earlier, unbelievably nice people. Genuine, honest people who didn't have high opinions of themselves – or rather not overwhelming opinions and would take advice, or would listen to your opinion – and it was that I think that made Mike, or makes Mike the man he is - unbelievably nice guy and very talented. I think of all the people I think he's one of the nicest, with Chris Parsons who again would be more concerned for you then he would be for himself.

6. Stories from foreign shoots

Int: Now, you went on Andrew to work in various areas of wildlife – and we can tackle different parts of it at different stages. But for the moment I want you to think about some of the foreign trips you've been to – exotic places – Africa, the Sahara, South America wherever - are there any particular events that happened on those trips where - you suddenly realised you've been parachuted into some ridiculous other planet or you met people, or situations which have stuck with you always?

AB: The classic one was when David Attenborough was determined to get me fired – what it was, was — Living Planet (13) had been going for a while, I was working on Animal Behaviour (8) and we were just coming to the end of Animal Behaviour (8) and I was asked to go and talk to Richard Brock because I happened to speak French and they wanted someone to go to Algeria and Niger to do a recce to see if it would be possible to do two things – one is to get out and follow the salt caravans across the Sahara going West to East from Agadez across to Bilma and Fachi and then the other thing was to go into the Tassili Niger — can't remember exactly what it's called – but the Tassili mountains anyway in Southern Algeria because one of the things that David and Richard Brock wanted to show in the programme was how climate has changed. And up in the Tassili mountains there are some really good examples. I mean here we are slap in the middle of the Sahara and you've got cedar trees which are 2,000 years old but there are no young cedar trees because the climate has changed and therefore the seedlings that fall from the cedar trees can't germinate. And even more dramatic, under rock overhangs there are absolutely beautiful rock paintings -

painted by the inhabitants of this area about two / two and a half thousand years ago. And there are mouflon, there are crocodiles, there are giraffes – and there are cattle.

Int: So in the space of two thousand years it's changed entirely?

AB: It's changed. So there was certainly enough rainfall there, enough vegetation for people to be pastoralists with cattle. Beautiful drawings of cattle, obviously drawn by the cattle herders because each cow had it's own slightly different markings. Anyway, so I was sent off to go and see - Was it possible to get there? and was there enough light to film there? - because obviously there was no power. I came back and reported yes it would be practical. At that point the previous organiser of Planet Earth [Living Planet (13)] had finished his attachment and was due to go back to the technical department so I was asked if I'd take on the wonderfully named job of "Organiser – Planet Earth [Living Planet(13)]". I did and about a year later I end up with a crew and David going off to get them on the caravan.

Int: The very same spot?

AB: The very same spot. And to get up to these trees and this rock art what you have to do is leave the oasis at about 5/6 o'clock in the morning, drive in your four wheel drive across the desert towards the Tassili mountains. And there is something like a 3,000 foot cliff and you meet, with a sense of relief, the donkeys and the cook and the donkey boy and the guide who set off a couple of days beforehand to get there that I had arranged – and you load the kit on the back of the donkeys and you start walking up 3,000 feet of cliff path and when you get to the top you just walk, for a day, towards the Libyan border. And I'd done the recce and I'd come back and said "we have to walk guys…"

Int: So you had done this yourself?

AB: I'd done the recce, I'd been up there.

Int: You had walked up the mountain, you'd done that?

AB: Yep, no way you could get a vehicle up there. So anyway off we set—

Int: With David? —

AB: With David, with the film crew

Int: With his bad leg?

AB: Well his legs were fine in those days I think.

Int: Yes I suppose they were still.

AB: Anyway so off we go and I'm up the front with the guide because the guide speaks Tamajaq, Arabic and French and I'm the only one who speaks French so I'm interpreting for everybody and through the guide to the donkey boy and the cook and all the rest of it. I'm up front with the guide, chatting away and we're walking along. We stop I think every hour for 5 minutes and I notice that David is a little bit cool towards me, and he's perfectly normal with everybody else – but this distinct coolness - and I've no idea what I've done. So we set along, another hour goes past and David's still very cool when we stop for a rest – and I break up nuts and raisins and everyone has some and David is still not being very friendly— turns out David is seeing tyre tracks.

Int: So a vehicle he could have taken, he could have driven?

AB: Not only could he have taken a vehicle, typical David, he's actually thinking that the crew didn't need to walk either

Int: With all the kit?

AB: With all the kit.

Int: Yes

AB: So it's clear that I have not done my recce properly. And rather than upset the filming trip – because it was an important part of the show and David had always wanted to see these frescos – this rock art – David decided to keep quiet about it until we got back to Bristol, at which point he would talk to Chris, who was head of the unit, and Derek Anderson and I would be fired.

Anyway that evening we're sitting under a rock overhang with a campfire going. I'm sitting opposite David and David's got his back to the rock. And I'm sitting there with my feet stretched out and David suddenly bursts out into laughter.

He's noticed that the soles of my shoes are made of tyres – old tyres. So what he had been seeing all day was my, because I was up the front, was my shoes, not the tyre tracks from a vehicle. So anyway David admitted and I believe used to tell this story about how ecologically minded the production manager was that he even used recycled tyres!

Int: That's a great story.

AB: I mean, just picking up from that another story was we were going to Austria to reconstruct for the Animal Behaviour (8) series the experiments that Karl Von Frisch did where he deciphered the language of the bees. And it was my German that in one case got me into trouble and in the other case failed me completely.

So we are there and I'm driving this VW van full of costumes and make up and all sorts of things and I arrive at the German / Austrian border and of course they want to know why I've got all this stuff in the car and I'm explaining in my best German that, you know, dis is her un einencultur film beinensud rayen and that I'm from the BBC and this is terribly important and there's a certain amount of sort of giggling, or slight sort of smirking going on from the customs guys – and what I didn't know was that beenen, the plural of bees, is

actually also, in southern Germany in any rate, the slang word for prostitutes. So here am I saying "I'm from the BBC we're here to make this very important film about prostitutes" – and this is why we need all these clothes, sort of 1930s lederhosen.

Anyway, the other time when my German deserted me was — the way that Von Frisch did the experiments was he had a whole load of helpers – one of them were down at the bee hive, another one half way up the mountain side and another one up in the flower meadows at the top and what they'd do is if they found a bee in a particular meadow they'd put a code of paint dots on it and would then blow a trumpet or yodel or whatever to let them down in the house by the bee hives know a bee was coming. And down it would come and the researcher down at the bee hive would note that a bee with this particular code of colour paints danced in a particular way – that's how they deciphered the bee dance. So of course we needed to do the shots of various Austrians yodelling or blowing trumpets or putting dots on bits of bees. And there's one shot, where I think John Sparks was actually directing, and he wanted the shot looking up at this Austrian in lederhosen who was going to yodel a message down and this Austrian turned up – lederhosen, great yodelling, but he'd brought his dachshund with him and every time he started to yodel the dog would start to howl and of course this sent the sound recordist absolutely berserk. So as I was kind of supernumerary at the time, you know, we were in the middle of nowhere, I was sent with the dog on a lead 500 yards down the road so that when at least the dog howled it wasn't picked up on the audio. Anyway, I get a walkie talkie message – could I come back please because there's a problem. You've got the yodeller up here and the camera down here, and what the cameraman had noticed was that, whether it was traditional or not, under his lederhosen, the yodeller wasn't wearing any underpants. And as the translator I had to go and explain to the yodeller that he was showing more than he should under his lederhosen! And of course sadly A-level German doesn't equip you for all circumstances. So anyway I seem to remember sort of basically arranging his legs gently so that slightly less was revealed than beforehand. It's things like that which—

After Animal Behaviour (8) then I did Living Planet (13) and if you are going to talk to Adrian Warren you should do that about getting David up trees on climbing ropes, getting David weightless with the help of the —

Int: Sure, or up in the balloon —

AB: Up in the balloon oh gosh yes!

Int: 18,000 feet — were you involved in that?

AB: I was involved in that. Because I was on the ground. It was one of those ones where we had a balloon pilot, Don Cameron, who for some reason seemed to get awfully nervous about it all. And hot air ballooning at any time is a pretty hit or miss thing, it depends what the weather is doing – and if you're trying to get to a certain height you need very particular things. We had the Met Office, we had everybody involved and suddenly there would be a window and I got into a van with a balloon in the back and everything else and high tailed it off up to Scotland overnight and the crew came up and we all set off and off they went up into the sky and disappeared of course up into the clouds. We lose radio contact, and eventually, I can't remember how, but we ended up getting a message they were up at some farm. And what had happened is they'd eventually come down, up on the moor on the highland hills up above this farm, Perthshire somewhere I think it was. And while Don the pilot and the crew started putting the balloon into its basket ready to be collected they sent David down to try and find somebody to let them know where they were. And of course there's this sheep farmer and his family having breakfast when David Attenborough walks out of the mist towards them – it was a bit of a shock but they were really nice about it! But that was one of those shoots where you had everything set up but you didn't know where you were going until the weather forecast

came in.

7. Making wildlife dramas

Int: Now you've worked on many series over the years, maybe you could give us a sort of brief run through, more or less chronologically, of the high points that you recall – starting with The Discovery of Animal Behaviour(8).

AB: OK, Discovery of Animal Behaviour (8) then Living Planet (13) then I got a bit fed up with working with animals and so went back to doing drama for a bit and so through the '80s I'd do a drama then I'd come back and do maybe a Natural World, a one hour, that involved dramatic reconstruction or a script so I worked on the Edward Lear show with Mike Andrews, Edge of the Sand(14), I worked on the *Gregor Mendel* (15) one with Peter Crawford and I, did I do another one? I might have done.

Int: Did you do Corbett? (16)

AB: Oh I did Corbett (16) yes.

Int: With Peter Jones.

AB: Peter Jones. Ah, that was a difficult one in India. That was hugely complex but it was worth it. I mean in some ways it's a classic example of how things just come round again - 20 years later Corbett is done yet again – I like to think not so well.

Int: But can I stop you there for a moment because if you have made a particular contribution, well in fact a couple, one of them is very much working on drama documentaries in the wildlife area.

AB: In the early days yes

Int: And I don't think you'd mind me saying they've had a checkered sort of history and I don't really think any of them have particularly set the screen alight.

AB: No I don't think they have

Int: Why do you think that is – what is it about wildlife drama documentaries that has proven so difficult to crack?

AB: Because I think directing drama is a very specific job.

Int: So the wildlife boffins shouldn't be attempting it themselves?

AB: I think there are few who can do it.

Int: OK, who can do it, who can't? Who could do it, who couldn't?

AB: Well, if I was to do it what I'd do is I'd hire a drama director.

Int: And this was the mistake of these producers – that they didn't get drama directors in?

AB: Well, for the Edward Lear one they did.

Int: So why didn't it work even then?

AB: I'm not sure

Int: But if you were to generalise about why these wildlife drama docs haven't really taken off generally it would be, I assume, because you feel that the wildlife producers haven't been willing enough to forego the directing bit?

AB: I think that could be part of it. I think also drama is blindingly difficult and wildlife film is blindingly difficult – but there are a lot of dramas that actually don't make it. So, out of three wildlife dramas The Edge of the Sand (14), the Edward Lear one, that actually wasn't bad – that one worked in it's own way. Not much wildlife in it. The Corbett one was OK, actually no they brought Alex Kirby in and he was a good drama director, I think there they learnt their lesson but India was just so difficult and the Mendel (15) one, I can't remember who directed that —

Int: It wasn't Peter Crawford himself?

AB: It wasn't Peter, Peter produced. I can't remember who directed that one.

Anyway, I think it was partly because it was difficult combining genres. I think also we've learnt a lot more about dramatic reconstruction since then – probably by watching the mistakes that we made back in what I suppose were the early days in trying to combine the two.

Int: Yes I guess the whole genre has evolved hugely since then

AB: Yes I think it has – I think also we might have been trying to do too much on too low a budget.

8. Thoughts on projects and the commercial side of wildlife filmmaking

Int: I'm going to skip ahead in a way – and ask you to look back on all the projects that you've been involved with, in a intimate way, what do you feel you're most proud of, which one do you feel least proud of, and tell us why.

AB: Well, I suppose, before I go into that Brian, I think what happened was that I started out working the NHU and then from the early '90s onwards — working NHU on things either like the Natural Worlds (10) or big series. But in the '90s and through into recently what I did was much more commercial stuff, particularly using archive and so if you like there was a completely almost sort of change of focus—

What's the one I'm least proud of —

I can't remember the name of the series but basically the reason I'm least proud of it was because it was quite simply a rip off attempt to do for another customer what we'd already done for a another, different customer.

Int: So this was a purely commercial —

AB: Purely commercial decision —

Int: Mass —

AB: Thirteen part series —

Int: High turn over, low budget—

AB: Low budget and basically we'd done a very successful series for one of the American based channels and we basically managed to sell the same ingredients but with a slightly different mix, slightly different topping, to another American channel.

Int: So you felt like the ice cream manufacturer who'd invented the ultimate ice cream flavour and then selling something just a little bit different to the competition?

AB: Yes, but instead of being rum and raisin it was vodka and raisin. That I think is the one I'm least proud of. I mean bizarrely both series, well not bizarrely, both series worked, both series delivered what the channels wanted to do but I personally felt that was a slight rip off – but it was a commercial decision.

Int: Before you go on to the one that you're most proud of I'm just going to go on a side track here for a moment because this is another area that you are hugely experienced in. Very few other wildlife producers or executive producers are familiar with and that is the comparison between commercial broadcasting and

non commercial - and you and I have worked together on the commercial side for a few years and it is a different planet.

AB: Completely different.

Int: Tell us how different a planet it is…

AB: On occasions I've even been known to refer to 'the sausage factory'. What it is, is, you're no longer making programmes for commissioning editors or for channels or for public service where what they are interested in is good stories and informing the public because that's what the royal charter or whatever it is says. What you're doing, — they want stuff which will get the biggest audience and fill the gaps between the commercials. So instead of being able to tell the story, and I'm sure other people talk about this as well… instead of being able to tell the story – with the ebb and flow that you want you find that you have to break it here – you have to get to a high point or a cliffhanger just before the commercial break – and you know they now want five commercial breaks in a one hour so in terms of structure and story telling you've got this straight jacket of when you have to get a commercial break in, can't be longer than 16 minutes, you know, part five has to be six minutes or less but can't be shorter than 4, those press huge strains on you. You get the feeling that you're making programmes, as I said, which are designed to attract the highest possible audience for that channel at that time.

Int: And for the lowest possible budget—

AB: And for the lowest possible budget, which is one of the reasons why so many of them, particularly the ones that I started making, have been made using archive. And I know, and I have some sympathy with, a large number of cameramen who feel quite hard done by – they went out and spent ages sitting in a hide somewhere to make a programme for Partridge / for Survival / for BBC about, the Capybara or whatever it is – a detailed intimate portrait – and the next thing you know is I'm busy taking this and using a bit of their Capybara film to show it being eaten by a boa constrictor which was not what was intended and so I have some sympathy with it. On the other hand —

Int: But can I just clarify? – Are they feeling hard done by because their footage has been used out of context, or are they feeling hard done by because they are not [chuckles] being paid for the use of their footage or both?

AB: I think mainly not being paid but also the fact that the footage is used out of context.

Int: Did you ever feel, in this very important part of your life, did you ever feel that creatively this was a sort of cul de sac?

AB: Erm… I didn't feel it was for me. I know a lot of people felt that working in Wild Vision or doing archive programmes was, you know, that was something you did as a part of the necessary bit of working your way up

Int: A penance?

AB: A penance – if there was nothing important happening or you were waiting for the big series to come up you'd get stuck into Wild Vision for a bit or you would do an archive show. I think that actually archive shows are a) a really good training ground because I honestly believe that you learn a lot more in the research in picking images and in the cutting room – that's a really good training ground and maybe everybody should spend a couple of years in the cutting room before they're even allowed out in the field.

Int: Yes I agree with you completely. I also think it's a great training for story-telling.

AB: Yes. Absolutely.

Int: Where you can actually envisage the story and you can put it together without having to spend the sort of money that you would not be allowed to spend until you were much more senior in, say the BBC.

AB: I think also the other thing is, is that you're not bound, as sometimes happens, particularly where you get a cameraman producer or a producer that has been on location – with what really happened. You're just taking disparate images of the same species from any one of 10, 15 different sources – and you're using this to tell the best story you can and I think that is a really good way of learning about story telling because you're using the bits that other people have left over. Different companies have different traditions – some organisations allow you to use intakes, other organisations don't, by and large in Partridge or later Granada, United Wildlife Granada, the rule was you never use intakes so you are always picking over the outtakes.

Int: The leftovers?

AB: The leftovers – and if you can tell a story using the leftovers that keeps an audience then actually that's quite a skill.

Int: I agree with you. You and I between us, and you long before I joined Granada – we've been responsible for a fair few Killer/Death/Jaws programmes

AB: Haven't we just.

Int: I don't know about you but I got fed up pitching them and attempting to pretend they were new or different. What was your own feeling about this endless thirst – in particular in the early 2000s 2002/3/4/5 – for just more and more killer, deadly, death programmes?

AB: It was a whole number of reasons for going in and getting all excited about shows – firstly those who know me I naturally tend to get excited, I can get enthusiastic about almost anything actually and so I suppose almost I let my imagination or my excitement run away with me. There were clear commercial pressures firstly you had a team of people – a team of people who in some cases I might have recruited or in some cases I was responsible for them arriving in Bristol who I'd been working with for a long time. And the

loyalty that they'd shown to the company and to me, the very least I could do was to keep them in work. So you'd actually look at what was coming up in the pipe line and you'd think hang on, wait a minute, we haven't got enough work for everybody we'd better go out and dream up some ideas. And because at that particular time "The Killer This" was doing really well then boy did you go out and pitch "The Killer That" because that was what was working particularly for the cable and satellite channels which is the area which I was mainly working.

How do I justify it? [coughs] I give the following arguments [coughs] one, outside the public service broadcasters, of which the BBC is the best example, you're driven by what the audience is after – or rather what the commissioners think the audience wants. And if killer this and killer that gets an audience have no doubt about it that's what you as programme makers are going to be asked to do. So, justification one: I was fulfilling a need.

Int: Giving the customers what they wanted?

AB: Giving the customers what they wanted. And in the commercial world - forget all this arty farty nonsense about "oh, this is the film I want to make" – it's not like that.

Int: Yes, I agree

AB: It's what does the focus group, what does the market research, what do the latest audience figures—

Int: You're selling ice cream or motor cars!

AB: Yep, it doesn't matter, you could be selling anything. So in a commercial world you have to deliver what the customer wants otherwise you go out of business. So we were delivering what the customer wanted. I believe, and I have no scientific justification for this belief but I believe, and have often told myself and told other people that one of the reasons for doing shows like this – Built for the Kill(17) or whatever, was you could just about see it as 'trainer wildlife'. We were always as scientifically accurate as we could be so everything there that we said, particularly for the Nat Geo [National Geographic] shows, we had two scientific references that backed up every single word we said. If you're saying the sky is blue they need two post grad or above papers to say the sky is blue before you can put it in the script so we were scientifically accurate We're telling it in a rather sensational way but the hope is that it's trainer wildlife – people who see that will be amazed by the particular quirks or the particular behaviours of an animal and will think "oh that's interesting" so when they see a more considered, a less "wham bam" show on the listings they might think "oh, well I remember watching a programme about boa, you know constrictors – you know, about how they killed things, that's really interesting so maybe I'll—"

Int: So by trainer wildlife you mean you're trying to sort of spoon feed an audience so that their tastes will develop —

AB: Some of them might —

Int: — into a more sophisticated—

AB: Into more sophisticated shows

Int: OK, I'll pick you up on this with one sort of thought that—

AB: Oh please do yes

Int: Well, surely no matter how accurate individual facts may be we were / we are, ending up by painting a portrait of nature as if it is just constant death and killing? Whereas you know as well as I do that you go into the rainforest, you're not going to see death and killing – you'll be very lucky to see anything.

AB: Yes but at the same time surely all we're doing with say Built for the Kill(17) is we're at one end of the continuum. For heaven's sake – even Natural World(10) in the Serengeti is edited.

Int: Yes.

AB: So you go out you spend weeks there and you know, the American tourists arrive in the minibus and say "well hang on why haven't we seen a kill in an hour?"

Int: So it is misleading in that sense

AB: But as indeed all films are misleading because all films are edited.

Int: Yes, I agree

AB: Yes, perhaps we were more misleading but then on the other hand I go back to the answer – it was commercial, that was what the customer wanted.

Int: Yes, I agree with you. I think this is the big difference between the BBC and the commercial world. The BBC is still a bunch of filmmakers basically doing what they think they would like to do.

AB: As indeed was Survival.

Int: Yes. And sometimes doing it beautifully well,

AB: Oh unbelievably beautiful!

Int: But with no real accurate sense of what the audience wants.

AB: Yes, because this was a passion – I go back to what I said earlier. It is not a film that I have a desperate passion to make; this is what the customer wants.

9. Films Andrew is most proud of and working with newcomers to the industry

Int: Okay, well I'm now going to lift you to the other extreme. A moment ago you told us what you were least proud of and that was, if you like, being forced into recycling footage yet again to tell a rather weak a story that was rum and raison as opposed vodka and raisin – what are you most proud of having created?

AB: Strangely it's the two children's series I did – again both of which used archive.

Int: Which ones?

AB: The first one was Amazing Animals (18) which we did with Dorling Kindersley. Why am I particular proud of that? Well for the very start, for a load of wildlife filmmakers, because I was the exec and also basically the producer, well the series producer on that, we actually created an animated character that we sold to Disney and I can't think of many people who've invented an animated character and sold it to Disney of all people. So that alone makes me proud of it and the fact is we did, I think 52 episodes - they now look rather dated I'm sure but those programmes went round the world and we know that kids in many many countries round the world really enjoyed them and got this sort of wise cracking lizard Henry and the sort of voice of God narrator so yes there was jokey, yes there were some terrible puns and wise cracks in it but I think that was, of it's time, a really good example of using a CGI lizard and using it in an engaging way for children.

Int: What was the other series that you were very proud of?

AB: The other series was bizarrely Animal Alphabet (20) which is a real low budget series which took me six years to get off the ground. Kids are fascinated by animals and I realised that you could do a whole load of little short songs that would allow children to learn the alphabet – A for Aardvark, B for Bear, C for Coyote, whatever it happened to be. But of course budgets for pre-school, which is what this was going to be, were absolutely tiny. So I did a quick little bit of research and I worked out that if you made 36 shorts – two and a half minute shorts you could actually cover all the five major European languages and get the entire alphabet and it took me six years to persuade people that this was actually a financially ('cause again, commercial) a financially feasible proposition and, lo and behold, working with a wonderful composer and lyricist called Anton Mullan we made Animal Alphabet (20) – and there's an English version, there's a French version, there's a German version, there's a Spanish version, there's a Portuguese version there's even apparently a Mauri version and a Zulu version where they used the little films – two and a half minute films – to tell stories which has got nothing to do with alphabets but that I think was just that thing of hanging in there but again using that to enthuse children – and in fact annoy their parents - we had a few cassettes done and I've got various friends who I gave audio cassettes which they used to play in the car for kids and the kids would really want these songs and of course, like many children's songs they were incredibly annoying to adults, so those I think I'm proud of — anything else—?

I think having made some archive shows that made a fair amount of money over the years and provided very good training and very good experience for a lot of people. That's the thing I'm most proud of.

Int: I'll tell you something that I think you should be proud of – is I think of all the people I know in the business I think you have made a much greater contribution than just about anyone else I know to encouraging youngsters and bringing young talent along and it's something that you clearly enjoy doing.

AB: Oh very much so and I'm actually pleased and honoured that you should say that because it's something that I think matters – we all know it matters but perhaps a lot of people place like lip service to. What's important is new blood – because we all get older, we all get stuck in our ways. And so the more new people you can bring in the better. And so you're right I've always tried to give people chances. Now again, I've been fortunate because I think I've done, I forget how many series, I think it's 320 something programmes as an exec – that's a lot of opportunities that you can give people. So yes I've been fortunate – but I think it really matters. The other thing is that if I was asked to name by ideal team it would be a couple of grey beards, silver backs whatever you call them in the sort of exec and series producer role, a really experienced, time served production manager - and a load of bright youngsters – because that's where you get the inventiveness, the fact of people who haven't been told, people who don't think oh we've tried it and it doesn't work. Or have never been told oh you can't do that – that I think is another reason why I've always tried to work with, tried to bring new people in – because I think it's a way of getting new ideas and fresh blood in.

Int: I agree with you, and I think you've done a terrific amount. Tell us a few of the musicians, researchers, PAs, people / cameramen who you've worked with over the years who have made a successful career in wildlife television.

AB: Well I suppose if I start naming them I'm bound to leave some out. But, I mean —

Int: Well go on, we'll restrict distribution.

AB: Gavin Maxwell.

Int: Yes

AB: Who else can I think of? Not so much cameramen… People like Sean O'Driscoll, Peter… God, I've forgotten his name… you know, he came out of Partridge, David Warner – now a very successful editor. David Poore, who I think David would agree that Amazing Animals (18) was the break that made it for him.

Int: Who was the composer on Built for the Kill (17)?

AB: Oh, that was Alex Stollof. In fact Phil Fairclough I think knew Alex or had worked with Alex on one show but it was, you know that was what really made Stollof's career lift off, was Built for the Kill(17).

Int: Well there are a whole host of researchers and APs/Directors now I can think of

AB: Yes, there must be, yes.

Int: – well Allison Bean.

AB: Allison Bean – well no Allison came through Survival. You see people I worked a lot with were, people like Penny Beeston, who I certainly didn't bring in but worked with, Pete Venn who I worked with, Martin Willis, Sam Rogers – still people who are youngsters. Lou Emerson — oh for heavens sake, I can't think, I mean there's so many I can't think of.

Int: Well it is a huge list and very impressive.

10. Future ideas and environmental issues within wildlife filmmaking

AB: Well, the question you were going to ask but you hadn't asked yet was we were talking about people that I'd given a first opportunity or a first break to. Were you thinking about what was it that made me pick those people?

Int: No. In fact I was just about to move on to a whole question of looking back over your career. Do you feel that there were any missed opportunities? Are there things that you would have liked to have done, programmes or series you would have liked to have seen or to have made yourself, that you kind of felt slipped between your fingers?

AB: Interestingly, the one programme that I've always wanted to make and never made isn't a wildlife programme at all.

Int: And what's that?

AB: It's actually a programme about getting under the skin of India, I mean I just had a particular way of doing it. I know how I'd do it and I know exactly. But I think the problem is it's a rather open-ended programme, and so it'd be one of those ones where this is the programme that I want to make, trust me, and life hasn't been like that for a while.

Int: Well, life isn't like that at all really, except in some parts of the BBC if you're very lucky. But I was actually thinking more in terms of wildlife. Are there any particular wildlife shows that you think should have been done that are missed opportunities that nobody has done?

AB: Well, unfortunately, we're now seeing it but I would like to see more conservation shows, more environmental shows.

Int: Yes, that's been an interesting history, hasn't it?

AB: It's been a very interesting history. Right only at the beginning we said I'm not a zoologist, I'm not a scientist. What I do actually have is a background in environmentalism, and before I even started working in

theatre I actually spent a year in France working with Les Amis de la Terre, Friends of the Earth, in the very early days. Not full-time but we were organising demonstrations against motorways through Paris and this is, what, 1971. So I suppose one of the reasons that I was kind of pleased to be doing wildlife was on the basis that everybody says if you tell people about what a wonderful planet this is and this great species we share it with, people will begin to care about it.

So I was pleased because of my latent and indeed occasionally bubbling to the surface environmentalism to do that, the fact is we seem to be going to hell in a handcart, and maybe we as wildlife filmmakers should have been telling it like it really is earlier.

Int: Well look —

Trying to persuade the commissioning editors, the broadcasters, that actually environmental programming, the issues concerning it, were important. Yes, they're coming on now but maybe it's too little too late.

Int: I think this is a very important issue and I think people will look back and ask seriously whether we did enough.

AB: I think we didn't.

Int: I would agree with you but at the same time you must have had, in fact I'm sure we've had together, meetings where we're saying to a commissioning editor, come on, this really has to be done now, and they're saying forget it. I remember having a lunch with Steve Burns once, and this must not go out before one of us leaves the business. We were very good friends and he put his hand on mine and he said, "Brian, don't even mention the environment. I don't want to know, it's not going to get on our channel", and he just gently steered me away from it, and you must have come across this many times.

AB: Exactly, and in the end what you do is you try and slip environmental messages in. One of the series I did was Toyota World of Wildlife (20), a sponsored series, and we tried to make sure that in every one of the 130 episodes, it was like a magazine show. There were four or five little items in each show, and we tried to make sure that at least one of those had an environmental, wildlife preservation message in it. I'm not saying that sometimes they were fairly overt, sometimes they weren't. But 130 times four minutes is an awful lot of environmental, you know, conservation programming to get out during the late '90s, early 2000s, when it wasn't really so much there. So you were slipping it in almost under the radar.

Int: I agree with you. But I think, and I'm not saying we did do enough, but I think it's interesting. You look at news and current affairs. I worked on Nature, the BBC's environment strand in the early 80s, and at that time there was no environment correspondent in the BBC, no one was doing environment stories. I think it was breaking new ground at all levels at that time.

AB: I think it's a bit like "why didn't you oppose the Second World War?" Perhaps at the time we didn't know but maybe we as wildlife filmmakers, well, we did try, but maybe we should have tried harder to get environmental and conservation messages onto TV. I mean I forged an early relationship with WWF in the days when we were Partridge and United which eventually, after five years, leads to a series. But it was a long haul because, as you say, people don't want the 'e' word.

Mind you the other 'e' word you could use was evolution because of the American audiences.

Int: Yes, that's right, for very different reasons.

AB: Going back to those commercial pressures that you can't do an environmental show because the commercial channels don't want it, and you can't mention evolution because the American channels don't want the religious right or the fanatics to start writing in their droves. So you talk about change over a period of time and then the audience can take it to be six days or x billion years, as they wish.

11. IMAX and modern wildlife television

Int: I'm going to skip right back to an earlier part of our conversation. Because you worked in key roles in some major new series like Animal Behaviour (8), Living Planet (13), some of the dramas. You then went back to do your own proper dramas, as you put it.

AB: Yes, and then I worked with Chris Parsons on the IMAX wildlife movies which was very interesting. I mean to work with Chris was just wonderful. I helped set up the mountain gorilla one. We did some insert filming for a Blue Planet (21) one. I mean that was just a great challenge because of the sheer size and complexity of working in IMAX. But for whatever reasons, I think there wasn't really a demand for enough wildlife programmes with IMAX, and there was a whole load of issue about soft money. If you made a programme out of Canada, which was where IMAX was based, then you've got government subsidy, if you had a certain amount of Canadian content. Of course, not being a Canadian they couldn't count me. So there were all sorts of subsidy reasons why I think the IMAX wildlife unit, which Chris started, went for a while and then basically stopped.

Int: It's a very interesting moment to look back at IMAX, isn't it? Because here we are, 2007, IMAX is in big trouble and yet 15, 20 years ago Chris pioneered it and he saw it. He brought the IMAX cinema to Bristol. He saw it as the big, bright new future, the way it was all going to go and yet it's kind of beginning to go, isn't it? I would say it's on its way out, wouldn't you?

AB: I don't really know, Brian. I'm not fully up to speed with what's happening in the IMAX world. Certainly there was a period in the late '90s where there more and more theatres being built.

Int: But I think this has stopped now.

AB: It may well have done. But the IMAX world was a very different world because budgets were so enormous, and because you were dependent on the number of theatres. So great, 10 new theatres but, of course, they were built at theme parks or at space centres. So, of course, theme parks and space centres or The Alamo, historical reinterpretation centre, they aren't going to want wildlife shows. So I think that in terms of wildlife for IMAX there was a limited number of theatres that took it.

I mean certainly I believe the IMAX wildlife films that were made were still being shown and, as you yourself said, that the arrival of the IMAX cinema in Bristol was in no small way down to Chris. Interesting. Maybe

this is complete conjecture, has the arrival of HD [High Definition] and huge plasma screens in people's household made a difference, I don't know.

Int: Have you been watching the recent spates of theatric release wildlife films, like Winged Migration(22) or March of the Penguins(23)?

AB: No. To be honest, I actually see very little wildlife. It's now got to the stage where I've seen the stories so many times. For instance, the latest Planet Earth, absolutely beautiful, incredible photography, such skill, but for heaven's sake I know what happens here, with very few exceptions. Yes, I'd never seen lions killing elephants at night but most of it you feel, well, I know that, I've been there, I've seen it, I've done it, I've told that story 10 times. In fact, strangely one of the great reliefs of no longer working in wildlife full-time is not having to dream up yet another way of telling the same old stories.

I mean the classic example. When I was with Partridge we made a lot of programmes for Canal Plus, and then Canal Plus stopped ordering so much wildlife from us. So Mike Rosenberg and I went over to talk to Canal Plus, and they said quite straightforwardly to us, well no, of course we want wildlife but we want wildlife from places that you haven't filmed before, with large, charismatic, megafauna that you haven't filmed before. We gently had to explain to them that basically sort of continental drift and evolution don't work fast enough to create new megafauna and new habitats within the commissioning timescale.

Int: So they made Walking with Dinosaurs (24).

AB: Yes, and basically the fact is that we probably, we as collective industry have told most of the stories, except perhaps for a load of bugs or a load of birds. We all know birds don't rate and with a few honourable exceptions bugs don't rate either. So you're basically rehashing the same old story. Now I know that you could say soccer is the same old story but actually each time it's slightly different.

Int: Well, it's also live.

AB: And it's live, yes.

Int: It is an event that will change before your very eyes and the result will surprise you or could surprise you.

AB: Yes, whereas basically the cheetah sets off after the zebra foal and either it will get it or it won't. That's to me one of the problems that wildlife filmmakers have is that there's only so many possible outcomes, and yes, we can throw more technology at it. We can show it from the dung beetle's point of view. We can see it from a helicopter. But actually it's the same old story.

Int: Does that imply that as you're retiring from wildlife film making, you're vaguely pessimistic about the future of wildlife on television?

AB: No, it doesn't Brian because actually if you think about it there's a new generation of TV watchers arriving. Greybeards like me, we've actually seen the films, going back we've seen Armand and Michaela

Denis. How many times have I seen the cheetah chase, the lion ambush? I don't know, hundreds of times, lots of times anyway, whereas there's a new generation. The audience is continually being refreshed by a new group of, be it children, be it young adults, coming in.

So I think there will always be, I hope, and I think there will always be a demand for wildlife. Quite how big it is, is another matter. I'm sure you could track a cycle of wildlife's ups and downs. At the moment we've been through a little up. We went through a big down because of oversupply in the early 2000s, coming back up again, due in no small part to things like Blue Planet (25) and Planet Earth (26), and because of the technical — just the sheer beauty of them.

But are we entering a two-stage, a kind of almost two different worlds of wildlife film making? The big public service mega series which is stunningly beautiful and the rest of us scrabbling around in the commercial dust for whatever we can pick up. I don't know. That's one possible interpretation of what's happening at the moment.

Int: Are you surprised at the success of something like Planet Earth(26), given that in story telling terms it's really quite thin?

AB: I think Planet Earth (26) is unbelievably thin in storytelling terms. I think it's a triumph of, a) the beauty of the pictures but above all of publicity and marketing. I shudder to think what the marketing budget was for that, probably more than the team got to make the show. But again, anecdotal evidence would say that they'd spend more for helicopter time per episode than I and other people in the other areas of the ecology, we could makes a series for that. Well, perhaps not a series but certainly several programmes.

Int: Absolutely.

AB: So I do think it is thin in storytelling and I think that's one of the slight problems, that if you're not driven by the commercial need to keep an audience, it's possible that the need to tell a story becomes less important and you become seduced by the kit, the gizmos, and the behaviour, especially if you have a load of really clever zoologists working on it. So, and filmmakers, maybe it's a bit like the emperor's new clothes or like asking turkeys to vote for Christmas. To say that a new David Attenborough series or a new BBC series is anything other than brilliant, it's a bit like farting in front of the Queen or whatever. Well you don't do it, and actually the team who have the most incredible level of skill, maybe they're slightly insulated like the emperor with the new clothes.

Int: Yes, I think they are insulated. But I think what has amazed me, and I wonder if it's amazed you as much, is that after spending that amount of money, that amount of time, that amount of marketing, those number of gizmos, they've still got huge, enormous audiences. They have already, and as we speak the series Planet Earth has only just finished transmitting, they have made a profit on the sales of DVDs. It's as if, if you think big enough and promote it well enough you can make it work.

AB: Absolutely and that goes for almost anything, not just wildlife films. If you think big and promote it, promote the hell out of it. It is — I think with some sadness, that I note the lack of any discernable — the lack of any interesting structure.

12. Survival/ Partridge era and the current state of wildlife television

Int: I can't let you go without asking you a little bit more about the Survival Partridge era, and I'm going to ask you first of all how you got into that because you sort of disappeared off the NHU wildlife traditional scene.

AB: Well what happened was, I was doing an adaptation of Somerset Maugham's Ashenden stories, I was the location manager. I was sitting in a hotel room in Hungary and the telephone rings and it's Michael Bright. Michael says basically we're setting up a commercial bit of the NHU, would you like to come back and run it, because obviously at that stage I was known as production manager. I arranged things, I fixed things, I scheduled things, I budgeted things. It so happened that that coincided with my son being, I suppose 10, and, as I said earlier, if I was doing drama I was never, ever at home. People think wildlife filmmakers are always away. Actually if you don't happen to live in a place where they do drama you're always away.

So the idea of contract, because I was always contract at the BBC, which meant that I could be at home and be in an office and could spend time with my son was actually very attractive. I'd known Michael because I'd worked with Michael on previous shows, and so I thought, yes, why not? So I came back and was the first full-time employee of what became Wild Vision. It was very clear, Wild Vision was there to exploit the skills and archive of the NHU for commercial ends, and in the early days it was actually part of BBC Worldwide, BBC Enterprises that was. We were independent of the Unit and it was clearly kept that way.

Int: And if I can just interrupt, I mean you were suddenly like a boy in a toy shop—

AH: Ah, amazing

Int: —Because you had access for the first time to all the outs for a generation of films.

AB: Yes, we could do anything. Of course, the other thing that we did which I think eventually people twigged and got up everybody's noses. We were based in a crypt of the old church up the road from the BBC because we were commercial really it was good that we weren't on BBC property, or rather in the main building. So of course we played the trick of telling the NHU, no, no, we're Enterprises, we do it like this. Meanwhile we tell Enterprises, no, no, we're NHU, we do it like this. So we were ducking and diving through the gaps doing bizarre things.

Anyway I was there for, I think, 18 months and it became very clear first of all, as I said, that Wild Vision was seen as being a sort of secondary, almost very inferior operation but we were making money.

Int: By the purists in the NHU?

AB: By the purists in the NHU, yes. But we were making money, we were doing shows.

Int: In fact, sometimes in the NHU eyes rather worrying about sort of money and inroads even into the British broadcasters I gather.

AB: I think when I was there we weren't doing stuff for the Brits, we were mainly doing stuff for the Americans and that's where I really first came in contact with the American cable and satellite channels.

Int: Nat Geo.

AB: Nat Geo, Time, Life, Discovery. Actually Discovery and Animal Planet did they exist then?

Int: They came a little bit later.

AB: And Reader's Digest, the very commercial end of things and we were encouraged, that was the whole point, to go and think commercially. We ended up shooting commercials. Anyway it became clear first of all that I wasn't sure where it was going to go but also it was going to get taken back into the Unit. I still believe that, it's a bit like you can't be a little bit pregnant. If you're a public service broadcaster you should be a public service broadcaster, you should not have commercial bits inside you. Because I think the danger there is that you're using basically taxation, the licence fee payer's money, to subsidise a commercial operation, and therefore may be able to undercut the commercial competitors.

Int: But I would say at this point I think the BBC continues to walk this tightrope. Look at the sales of Planet Earth (26) internationally. Yet this is money, it's commercial money sitting somewhere within a public service corporation.

AB: But on the other hand you can argue that Planet Earth (26) would not have been made had it not been for the commercial potential of it. They would not have put that amount of licence fee payer's money into it if they hadn't known very clearly of the commercial potential. So I think maybe that sort of little bit pregnant is okay. But really it's also things like at one point they were offering post production facilities, and I seem to remember they were able to undercut.

Int: Wild Vision were?

AB: No, not Wild Vision, the BBC was. So they were able because the equipment was already paid for, in effect by the licence fee, anything that was coming in was basically just additional revenue.

Int: Subsidised.

AB: Yes, it was subsidised. So they could afford in theory - whether they actually did or not is another matter, I don't know - to undercut their commercial competitors. I think that's a dangerous area.

Int: Yes, I agree with you, it is.

AB: Anyway, so I kind of thought that maybe I was getting to the end of line at Wild Vision, and I got into work and about 10 o'clock that morning, it was just after the new year, the phone rings and it's Mike Rosenberg,

was I free for supper? Now supper with Mike is always worth having and so I phoned Angela [Andrew's wife] and said, do you mind if I go out for supper tonight? So I went out to supper with Mike Rosenberg.

Int: And two bottles of Chablis later.

AB: And two bottles of Chablis later I'd agreed to go and meet the rest of the management team at Partridge, to go in as Head of Production. At that stage Partridge was 16 people. Mike had done his absolute classic of making a small fortune out of wildlife film making by starting with a large one, and basically spending money as if it didn't matter.

Int: This was when he was at Ellencroft, was it?

AB: This was Ellencroft, yes. So basically Partridge had started with Mike. He'd then had the big boost from Channel 4 with Fragile Earth and so on, fantastic series, all those, and so Partridge was on the up. They'd moved into Ellencroft, diversified into Partridge film on video and educationals, and basically this whole thing fell apart.

So when I joined Partridge I think there were 16 people and honestly there wasn't enough money in the bank to pay the wage bill at the end of the month.

Int: Already by the time you joined the bubble was bursting?

AB: The bubble had gone. They were already moving out of [Ellencroft]. Basically HTV had, I think a 25% - I forget the exact shareholding at that time - but basically the financial side was really tight. Anyway I joined as Head of Production, and my job was to actually put in some sort of budgeting and scheduling operation effectively and try and control it. I realised, as I said earlier, the chances are I wouldn't be allowed to produce at the BBC because I'd done too many other things and I wasn't a zoologist. So the deal I came to with Mike was that I'd go in and be his Head of Production and try and put the ship in order along with the others. Providing when that was done that I could move into development and then into production, which is eventually what happened.

So there we are meeting every morning at 9 o'clock the four in the management team, trying to work out how we're going to keep this ship afloat. Anyway we managed to, and I think from '93 when I joined Partridge, by late '95 we were 75 people.

Int: Really? So you actually rescued it.

AB: Yes, I with others but I have little doubt in my mind that without me there, Partridge would not have had the expansion that it did because I took Partridge into a different area.

Int: Okay. But let's just look at the trajectory of Partridge for a minute because this is an amazing story. It went from nothing in about 1983 to huge and then the bubble burst completely in the mid-90s.

AB: No, the bubble burst earlier than that. The bubble burst in the early 90s, 1991, '92, that's when they fell off at Ellencroft, and then '94, '95, '96, '97, '98, '99, was back up on the rise again.

Int: At HTV?

AB: At HTV.

Int: And that was on the basis of what? What sort of programmes?

AB: On the basis of a combination of programmes. One of the things which I think we felt quite pleased about was one of the American commissioning editors said, the thing is about Partridge now is when I'm told it's a Partridge programme I don't know what to expect. That was something which I think we were pleased about because what you had coming out of it, was you had sort of **blue-chip** programmes about Fifi's boys (27) and so on. You had Steve Irwin running about the place in shorts, leaping on the backs of reptiles.

Int: That's right. He was originally at Partridge, under the umbrella of Partridge.

AB: He was originally found by Partridge, absolutely. Yes, under the umbrella of Partridge and, of course, the classic Steve Irwin story is one. When we taken over by United —

Int: In?

AB: In '98 I think, I can't remember the exact year, we had Steve, rest his soul — on a retainer, £2,000 a month recoupable against appearance fees. For that he was exclusive to Partridge and United said, "Some Australian, nobody's going to want him. We're not allowing £2,000 a month to go out of the business." As soon as his contract reaches his end, you are not to renew, which we had the right to do, the exclusivity.

Int: It's an interesting decision, isn't it, because as a purely commercial organisation they took the wrong decision.

AB: Absolutely they took the wrong decision and we told them that at the time.

*Int: But there's a bigger story here, Andrew, that I want you to explain to us and that is Rosenberg, who you probably know better than anyone else. Rosenberg in the mid-80s he created Fragile Earth, a huge, popular, commercial series of **blue-chip** films with some of the world's best film makers.*

AB: Some of the best storytellers.

Int: Phil Agland, Mark [Deeble] and Vicky [Stone]. Then within 10 years basically Rosenberg had kind of soared and crashed, and hasn't really been heard of since sadly. What happened? What is it about Mike

that caused this meteoric rise and, dare I say it, meteoric fall?

AB: Mike, well as we all know, Mike is an unbelievably complex character. In a matter of seconds I could go from hugging him to having my hands round his neck.

Int: Didn't he famously you fire you twice in the same day?

AB: No, three times in the same day. Mike fired me three times in the same day. I was writing a pitch for a show called Tales of the Serengeti (28) which was going to use basically Partridge's library of Serengeti, a lot of which was Hugo — Gil Domb. Some great footage from the camp at Ndutu, some lovely footage. But the idea was that we used the behaviour from the archive and we then go out and do filming about the characters, the people, that worked out there. The cameramen, park guards, scientists, all the rest of it, and it was going to be called Tales of the Serengeti (28), it was for the Americans. Anyway I was busy writing this pitch up and basically Mike disagreed with me about how it should be done and the way it should be pitched.

Int: Was he happy to have people in it?

AB: Yes, because basically what happened was that it was ABC/Kane wanted people in it. So Mike was happy to have people about it but it was the whole approach. I can't remember. What I just remember is I was in my office and the outer office, a big open plan office which had everybody had in it - the co-ordinators, some of the producers, the APs. Mike came into my office, a little partitioned cubicle, and starting yelling at me and I started yelling back, and he fired me.

Int: Over this proposal?

AB: Over this proposal. Anyway, I said I'm not going.

Int: And in all seriousness?

AB: He was serious about firing me, yes. Anyway, so I just carried on and he stormed out, and I just carried on working away. I can't remember what I was doing, doing a budget or something at that stage. Anyway Mike came back in and we continued the argument and he fired me again, and this time it had got really loud. When Mike opened the door to storm out, having fired me the second time, I looked out and the outer office was completely empty. They'd heard this argument going on, they'd all disappeared off to the HTV canteen to hide. Anyway I think later that afternoon Mike fired me again.

Bizarrely that project turned out to be, in terms of cost and revenue, the most profitable project Partridge ever made. So I was right, I believe, to stick to my guns for it and I was also right to be refused to be fired by Mike. I'm still very much in contact with Mike.

Int: He's a great friend of yours.

AB: I still count Mike as a really close friend but, as I said, I could happily throttle him sometimes. The things like that, I mean — he's impossible. Brilliant storyteller but could you get him to concentrate? Mike had the attention span of a three year old and a three year old with ADD no doubt. I mean remembering doing things like, I needed him to approve a script for a commentary record the following day. I ended up getting a bit of string, punching a hole in the script, and tying it to the belt loop of his trousers because that was the only way that I thought he wouldn't lose it, and I could actually force him to read it and say it was okay. Now whether he actually read it. Anyway I got the thing. So Mike walked around for an hour or so with this thing dangling from his belt. But I got the okay to go and record it, and you'd have to do tricks like that.

You always knew you were in trouble. You knew the company was in trouble if Mike went out and brought another car, that was sign. Mike was feeling insecure about this.

Int: Hence the big pink BMW.

AB: Yes, the pink metallic BMW which Mike bought. Mike's loves in no particular order are Chablis, cars and wildlife films I think.

Int: I think you're missing out another 'w' there.

AB: Women, yes, that's right, absolutely, and I know a lot of women who were uncomfortable with the way that Mike treated them.

Int: But he had great instincts didn't he?

AB: Incredible instinct.

Int: And maybe the fact that he came to wildlife with a lot of money, a lot of confidence, and a lot of very positive, good storytelling instincts, is what created the wave of success. But what destroyed him in the end?

AB: Chablis and unable to, just found it difficult to pay attention I think, and didn't really like hard work.

Int: No, well, we know that. In fact, if we could tell this story. Mike came to see us several times and would mention ideas he wanted to make, and we would both say to him, send us the proposal Mike, and he never would do it. Two years later you'd meet up with him and he'd say what about this idea we were going to make in St Lucia, and we'd say where's the proposal?

AB: Well, basically not that long ago I got an email from Mike would I please write a proposal for him. But the other point, Mike on a good day was absolutely fantastic. He was also really good at putting stuff off and one of the big American commissioning editors, there was a programme which they'd done which didn't work. It just needed restructuring and a proper story put into it. So they asked Mike if he'd do a recut of it, basically a reversion of it, and Mike being Mike just put it off and put it off and put if off. Until finally, I think on a Friday afternoon after a two bottle Chablis lunch, he couldn't put it off any further because it was due on

the desk in America on the Monday afternoon.

So he went into a VHS edit suite with a junior editor and by 4 o'clock, after a liquid lunch, he'd basically moved the blocks of that programme about, had recorded a scratch commentary to make sense of it, and sent it across. I'm told that for some years, possibly even now, the American commissioning editor keeps the two cassettes side by side, the previous version and the Mike version, just to show what can be done by storytelling. So he's hugely talented but, like many of us, a flawed person and his passion for wildlife and his talent for storytelling was what made it work for Mike. Then the feet of clay are the inattention to detail, the love of Chablis and basically trying to get other people to do the work for him. Now that's fine when you've got the money to pay them.

Int: I think we're going to have to wind this up but I've got to ask you a final question about what went wrong at Granada. We worked there together for three years. You were already running the place when I arrived and you knew it much better than I did, and I think you handled it very, very well. But what in the end is your interpretation of what went wrong from about '98, '99, the United Granada, right through to the demise of Granada Wild? What happened?

AB: A number of things. No matter how hard you tried it was a bit like being the duckling in bed with the hippo, with the BBC, with the NHU.

Int: Down the road?

AB: Down the road. But not just down the road, just wherever they were but in Bristol, because we were close. If you're working in a commercial world and your main competitor is something like four times the size. Has a —

Int: And some.

AB: And some. Has a guaranteed income for 7, 12 years, whatever the licence fees is, and above all has channels that want to show wildlife, they're in a very privileged position compared to you. So there we were. ITV had stopped showing wildlife and latterly, when they did show wildlife, it'd be 5.00 am. I think there was even one of the later Survival programmes that it's premiere on air was 5.00 am on ITV.

Int: Although I've got to interject with what for me is a more remarkable fact, that in 2002, even in 2003 as we know, ITV showed repeats of Survival ***blue-chip*** *films midsummer, August-ish, on a Sunday afternoon, 5, 6 in the afternoon, and they were getting as good audiences as the Natural World.*

AB: Yes, exactly, certainly. The problem is, again commercial world, is that the time that ITV schedulers found they could get a good audience was Sunday teatime. The budget for a **blue-chip** Survival, **blue-chip** Natural World is this, the advertising revenue at Sunday teatime is this.

Int: But they weren't even prepared to put in that reduced amount. Sorry, this is a pedantic point. But if you and I had had access to the reduced budget for a teatime ITV show and gone out and found co-producers, we could have kept it going for years.

AB: Yes. But the fact is that clearly for whatever reasons, the commissioning editors of ITV didn't understand wildlife, saw it as not being something that the channel should do. In fact, you could argue look at the way Channel 4 got out of wildlife. One of the reasons for this, and I think this may affect ITV, but anecdotally I was told that Channel 4 did audience research when they were showing wildlife, some of which were made by Partridge, some of which were made by Survival. They'd do audience research and they'd say what did you think of the wildlife programme about meerkats last week, and people say it's great, don't the BBC make great programmes. And that was a programme shown on Channel 4.

So the British audience perception of wildlife is that it's made by the BBC. Again, the hippo and the duckling. So if you're a broadcaster and you want to carve out a niche for yourself, then you would not be doing that in wildlife because the BBC already own that niche. Channel 5 does wildlife but Channel 5 does wildlife in a very specific way. They schedule it at 7.15 against soap operas and that's quite clever scheduling. They do some sort of 8 to 9 stuff but they're the only UK channel that's showing wildlife at the moment that I'm aware of, other than the BBC.

Int: And they're also making it appeal to young men and high testosterone.

AB: Exactly. It's the killers, the dinosaurs and the all the rest of it. So I think it's a combination of things, that ITV weren't prepared to invest, and I suppose you can see their point. If everybody assumes all wildlife's made by the BBC, how do you differentiate your channel by putting wildlife on it? But I think also ITV was in such a perilous state anyway, they were losing audience figures, they had more on their plate to look at than wildlife. So it was kind of nice to have a wildlife team but it wasn't core to the operation.

Int: I think it will be interesting, won't it, to see if Michael Grade now decides that one of the things he's got to do to lift ITV out of the quagmire is to give it strong, factual commissioning backbone, whether it's in wildlife or in documentary at all remains to be seen.

AB: Yes, and if you look at Granada's tradition in documentary or in anthropological documentary. You could say look what happened to Disappearing World (29). A really great series which ITV failed, for whatever reasons of fashion or money or whatever, or different commissioning editors who didn't understand it, thought those anthropology programmes weren't interesting. So that stopped.

So I think why did Granada, ITV, pull the plug on wildlife? Falling audiences overall, falling advertising revenue, wildlife not being core to their channel at that stage. Who knows what Michael Grade might do? But I think if they do they'll probably buy it in from independent producers. Why nowadays would you go ahead and set up a wildlife unit? You probably wouldn't.

Int: No, I agree with you. My own feeling is that we've reached a natural conclusion there unless, while we're still running, if there's anything else you'd like to add, any thoughts, any think you think is missing.

AB: Well, if we talk about the future and what might happen, I mean sitting here in 2006

Int: 2007

AB: 2007 sorry, 20007. An awful lot of chat about IP, Internet Protocol TV, and I have a feeling that there's the potential there for a load of almost guerrilla wildlife film making.

Int: Guerrilla with a 'ue'.

AB: Yes. It is possible if you so wish, using your PC or your Mac and an HD camera, you could go out and you could make a very good HDV wildlife programme, edit it yourself and then stick it up on an internet server, Internet Protocol Television. So I think there are some opportunities for youngsters or indeed for those of us who get fed up with the commercial or indeed the, as some people might see it, slightly **blue-chip** nature. How you will make money from this I don't know. But in terms of wanting to be creative, I think that we as programme makers we could, provided we can find a way of funding ourselves, we could actually get back to the days where we can make the programmes we want. They might not be seen on broadcast television on a major theme but we at least can control the methods and means of distribution.

Int: But to take your idea further, and I'm sure you're right, user generated content. I mean presumably it's not just us making the things we may want, it's the viewers, it's villagers in places like this who could make their own series of the wildlife of Westbury, South Mendip.

AB: But it also gives opportunities to people in the developing world. I mean one of the sad things that I've seen in my time in the wildlife film business, is the lack of ethnic and even class diversity. By and large, obviously there are now many more women than there were when I started in wildlife film making but we're basically white educated, and either middle or upper class. I can think of no, I'm sure there are, but I can think of no UK based Afro-Caribbean or British Asian wildlife film makers. Why ever not? I know the reasons about we tend to recruit people with zoology degrees.

Int: Do you not think it's also a cultural thing?

AB: I think it is a cultural thing.

Int: Innocent enough, it's not as if they're being excluded but the cultural bias of the British. I mean look at us, we're great pet lovers, that's a different thing again. It's not as if we're trying to exclude those people.

AB: No, we're not excluding those people but are we doing enough to help people come forward or for them to see it as a possible career, as a possible way of earning a living. Are we doing that?

Int: Yes, I agree. In fact, I think one of the most exciting developments at WildScreen over the last couple of years has been this sudden burst of interest in, say, India and China, South America, in what we do. And the exporting of WildScreen ideas and ideals to places like that, where they came benefit from our knowledge and experience.

AB: Look, the cynic in me would also point out that wages are a lot lower. So you can actually get the same programme, you can get more time in the field or the same programme for cheaper, by using local labour.

Int: But surely the content provided for that sort of outlet, say on websites, surely isn't likely to be competing with Planet Earth (26). It's more likely to be local environmental issues or local wildlife stories.

AB: But going back to that I think that's true but at the same time I think it's admirable, I think it's good that people in India, in China, in Africa, are able to tell their stories about their wildlife. I think it's fantastic.

Int: Absolutely, yes.

AB: But this is still a very white, very middle class business.

Int: It is.

AB: And again, if you talk to some of the Europeans, it's an overly Anglo-Saxon business. We have particular, because of the size of the BBC and the size of the British and the American markets, there's a way of making wildlife films, particularly the more populist ones, which actually a lot of European countries don't like and don't show. Walter [Curler] from RIF he's on record on many occasions talking about the Anglo-Saxon, the bloody Anglos, who have dumbed down or gone commercial. I think in occasions he would include the BBC in that.

Int: And yet he still comes to sell his programmes.

AB: Yes, absolutely, of course he does, yes, because where else can he go in the UK?

Int: Shall we stop there?

END

Glossary

Slimbridge Wildfowl and Wetlands Trust: The headquarters of the Wildfowl & Wetlands Trust (WWT), the UK's only specialist wetland conservation charity with a national network of wetland visitor centres. Slimbridge WWT was set up in Gloucestershire in 1946 by Sir Peter Scott.

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.

Altruism: In Zoology, the instinctive cooperative behaviour that may seem detrimental to the individual but contributes to the survival of the species.

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