

## Chris Palmer: Oral History Transcription

**Name of interviewee:**

Chris Palmer

**Reasons why chosen for an oral history:**

Written a book on ethics of Wildlife film-making and has experience of IMAX and American TV production.

**Name of interviewer:**

Barry Paine

**Reasons why interviewer chosen:**

Well known friends

**Date of interview:**

2010

**Place of interview:**

Wildscreen, Bristol, United Kingdom

**Length of interview:**

c. 60 minutes

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### **1. The Early years**

*Int: Chris, you are a very distinguished person and you have a very distinguished career behind you and I hope a very distinguished career ahead of you. I'd like you to give me your full name now and your nationality and the current title of your job and today's date.*

CP: Thank you Barry, I appreciate that very much. Today's date is 13<sup>th</sup> October 2010. My name is Chris Palmer. I'm an American citizen, originally British. I'm a professor on the full-time faculty at American University in the School of Communication in Washington DC. I'm also the President of a foundation that funds and produces IMAX films, the MacGillivray Freeman Films Educational Foundation, [and I'm also the President of One World One Ocean]. I'm also the CEO of a film company called VideoTakes, Inc. Those are some of the jobs that I currently have.



*Int: You missed out the word distinguished actually.*

CP: I have the title Distinguished Film Producer in Residence at the American University (AU), and I founded and direct the Centre for Environmental Filmmaking at AU.

*Int: You come from a very distinguished background and I believe your father was an admiral. Can you tell us about life under the admiral?*

CP: My father was born in 1914 and came from a working class family. He made his way up in British society from being a working class guy to being an admiral, which was a very hard thing to do in British society. His mother used to clean lavatories to earn money to buy food to keep them going. Through sheer hard work, he made his way up British society.

He was a strict martinet. If you didn't do what he said he would clout you. I had three brothers and I was the youngest. When I was about five we still had rationing in England. The government gave us lots of milk but no butter. My father gave me a big bottle of creamy milk and told me to shake it. I didn't know why I was shaking the bottle. All I knew was that the pain in my arms was excruciating.

Anyway, after a lot of shaking, butter began to appear in the bottle. I thought it was amazing. I tell the story in my book, *Shooting in the Wild* (1). As fathers go he did a pretty good job.

*Int: This led you towards the navy as a career?*

CP: As a teenager, I was immature. I was adrift and often depressed. I had no idea what I was going to do so I went in the Navy. I knew about it because my father was in the Navy. I was 17 and spent 7 years in the military. That gave me a structured environment in which to grow up. I was very grateful for that discipline.

At that point I knew nothing about television, nothing about media. Actually I knew virtually nothing about anything.

*Int: Including natural history, you knew nothing about natural history.*

CP: Nothing. When I was growing up, my parents never talked about birds or animals. We occasionally would go to a zoo, but my parents weren't particularly interested in it, and I wasn't interested in it. I was more concerned with fighting with my brothers than with learning anything. I knew nothing about natural history.

*Int: So when did you first come into contact with seeing natural history, say, on a screen?*

CP: When I joined the National Audubon Society in my 30s. When I left the navy at age 25, I won a Kennedy scholarship to study at Harvard University, having never been to America before. On 23<sup>rd</sup> September 1972, I went to the orientation session. Next to me was this beautiful girl who I fell in love with





who became my wife, Gail. We've now been married now very happily for 35 years, we have three grown daughters.

I not only fell in love with Gail but I fell in love with America. I decided not to go back to England, even though I had a job lined up there. My first job in the US was with Booz Allen, a consulting firm, mainly working on naval issues. I worked intensely hard and within that consulting company started also working on energy issues. From there I jumped to Capitol Hill [in 1976] as Chief Energy Adviser to Senator Charles H. Percy, a liberal Republican.

I worked on Capitol Hill for four years, working on legislation, and it was fascinating. I then went to work for President Jimmy Carter as Chief of Staff to the Administrator and Deputy Administrator of the Environmental Protection Agency in Washington DC. After that, I joined the National Audubon Society. I now come back to your question. This was the first time I'd come into contact with people with an incredible passion for the natural world.

It was a revelation to me that people could be fascinated by wildlife. I would listen to them talk in great detail about birds and bird behaviour. This was amazing to me, but over time, it rubbed off on me. I also became absolutely fascinated by birds.

Roger Tory Peterson, the famous ornithologist, told me the story of a class field trip he took when he was about 12. He was walking through a wooded area when he pulled back the branches of a low tree and saw an exhausted migratory bird sleeping. As he touched it gently with his finger, the bird woke up and in a nanosecond burst into vibrant life. It had gone in an instant from somnolence to incredible energy and vitality. Roger loved that characteristic of birds, and I do, too.

## **2. Stepping into wildlife filmmaking**

*Int: That's an extraordinary story. So how did you make the leap from that to the filmmaking world as it were?*

CP: I was one of Audubon's chief lobbyists. So I'd go up to the Hill and testify on natural gas pricing, or nuclear power insurance, or solar energy, or some other issue. I found that when I would get to the hearing room, there might be five congressmen or if I went up to the Senate there might be one senator. I began to question what I was doing. I said to myself: is this the best use of my time? I was about 33 and feeling very energetic. I wondered if I was really in the right place to exert the most influence that I could in my life. I came to the conclusion the answer was no, and so began to think about what else I could do.

I invented about five different new business ventures that Audubon could do to be more influential on environmental issues in the country. One of the ideas I had was to start work on film promoting conservation. I knew nothing about film, but what I did know was that we somehow had to reach the general population so they would elect better senators and better congressmen in the first place.

So I started work on this but at the same time the head of the office, Bill Butler, came back from a meeting of the Green Group and told me that a representative from Turner Broadcasting System (TBS) Superstation had been at their meeting, a woman called Barbara Pyle, and she was looking for new programming for Ted Turner.

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So I called Barbara Pyle, who's a wonderful person, and got together with her. She liked my idea and took it to Ted. Ted liked it, and that started my new career in filmmaking.

While others thought I had changed careers, to me I'd simply changed the tools that I was using to achieve my life goal of promoting conservation.

*Int: What role did you see yourself in there? Were you a director of those films that you were making?*

CP: I was the producer [or executive producer]. I was thinking up ideas, and writing and creating treatments, raising the money, hiring directors of photography (DPs) and others to help me make the films. My skill was leadership. My job was to run the organisation, hire the people I needed, keep things on target, make sure we achieved the goals of the film in terms of conservation, and to create a team that would produce great results. My job was to lead and inspire that effort, make sure it happened on budget, on time, on mission.

In my book, *Shooting in the Wild* (1), I have a whole chapter devoted to the job of being a producer: 'What does a producer do?', chapter 3 of my book and I was basically describing in that chapter what I do.

*Int: This was all within the United States?*

CP: Our programmes were shown all over the world and we made films all over the world. I usually took the title of executive producer, but I consider myself more producer than executive producer because I was very hands-on, and very involved in the productions. I had to be because I was responsible for them. If the film didn't promote conservation and do a good job I was going to get fired by the Audubon Board.

The programs were initially on TBS Superstation and on Public Broadcasting Service (PBS). We had some eight years when we were on primetime public television as well as the cable stations.

*Int: But in terms of fieldwork, actually working as a producer in the field, how did you react to that? This is a new world. You're meeting the public who are also noticing what you're doing. Did you have any interactions with people?*

CP: I loved being in the field. I would go on location to make sure things were on track, to deal with any personnel and production issues. Then sometimes there'd be financial problems: should we do another shoot because we're out of money—those sort of decisions.

*Int: Is there a particular example of that?*

CP: We would often go over budget on principal photography and then have to find other ways to make the film. This happened routinely. Bad weather, animals that don't show up, people who have accidents, missed trains, missed planes—all sorts of things can go wrong and push up spending. Putting out fires was a



routine part of my job.

*Int: But what about the local people there actually, did you have interactions with them?*

CP: Probably we should have had more interactions. Nowadays there's a growing consciousness about the need for us to produce films for local indigenous people and not just to arrive, film, take what we want, go home, and show the film to white people in rich America. Back then we barely thought about ethics. We were there to make a film and if it required harassing animals or deceiving the audiences we did that routinely. So I'm not too proud of that and one reason I've written *Shooting in the Wild* (1) is to bring all that out into the open, to admit my faults and mistakes, and to try and create more discussion of those issues.

*Int: What was the longest period you were away from the office as it were?*

CP: Not long: perhaps three weeks. I'm not a cinematographer. I hire those great people. They would go out for weeks on end but I myself would tend to fly in for a week or two weeks, help all I could and solve all the problems I could, and then I'd go home because I had a lot of films going on at the same time. We were into IMAX and music videos and many other formats. We started in documentaries but over a period of ten years I expanded our programme into multiple areas, including computer software. We created a huge programme and raised millions of dollars, worked with Disney and many other networks beyond PBS and TBS Superstation.

*Int: So there's a big archive of material with Chris Palmer's name on it. Anything you're particularly proud of?*

CP: Many things, but one of them is the first IMAX film I made on whales with my great friend and colleague David Clark. We produced it together. It was a \$4 million project, the first IMAX film we'd done. It took us six years to raise the money and the film went on to be a terrific success. It's so far grossed about \$70 million. Whales are incredible animals and for us to be slaughtering them, hunting them down as Norway, Iceland and Japan are still doing is to me unconscionable, and we have to do everything we can to stop the killing of whales.

*Int: Conversely, is there anything which is a tremendous disappointment or something you would rather stayed on the shelf?*

CP: One big issue we face in the world is over population. We have seven plus billion people on the planet and it's a huge problem.

I made a film with colleagues about over population and it got a low rating. I failed to create that program in a compelling way so that the average person would look at it with fascination and gain a new realisation that over population is an important issue.

### **3. Trends in wildlife films: Ethics and morals**

*Int: Now you've been in this industry quite a long time and you've seen changes take place. Can you*





*give us an idea of how you've been particularly conscious of those changes?*

CP: The biggest thing I've noticed is the drive to make money. Networks are money driven, they're not conservation driven. This is an obvious point but often we forget it. People who are new to the business sometimes get surprised when they discover that films they see on television about the natural world are made by people who are trying to make money, not conservation groups. They naturally assume such films are made by the World Wildlife Fund or the National Audubon Society. Wrong! These programmes are made by people whose job it is to promote the branding of their network and to make money.

When a top executive at Animal Planet or Discovery or the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) or National Geographic receives his or her annual performance assessment, he or she gets asked about ratings, revenue, advertising, branding, and profits. The person doesn't get asked: What did you do to improve society? What did you do to encourage people to get a better understanding of conservation? What this has led to in the last ten years has been the growth of hands-on, intrusive, on-camera hosts like Jeff Corwin and the late Steve Irwin. You, Barry, have come up with a vivid way of expressing this. How did you say it?

*Int: They reinvented the animal circus.*

CP: "Reinvented the animal circus" and I quote you in my book on that. You asked about what I've seen change, and the biggest thing I've noticed is this growth of on-camera hosts like Steve Irwin because those programmes can be produced quite economically. They involve animal harassment: people like Jeff Corwin and Steve Irwin routinely grab and goad animals. It's adrenalin-pumping because the animals are usually dangerous and threatening - crocodiles, alligators, snakes. This is a problem.

But this isn't all black and white because on-camera hosts have done a lot to persuade young people to fall in love with reptiles. In about ten years time, we are going to have a whole new generation of young PhD scientists out there trying to save and conserve reptiles because of Steve Irwin. On the other hand, he set a bad example of grabbing animals and getting in their personal space. We should be leaving these animals alone, not getting in their face. Intrusive hosts also makes the animals look dangerous and menacing and this is also a bad thing. We don't want to people to think of animals erroneously as menacing, threatening, and man-eating, when in fact all that is happening is that they've been deliberately scared into being aggressive.

One of the things I object to in *Shark Week* (2) on Discovery every year is the overriding message that these animals are monsters -- man-eating and dangerous. This is not a good message at a time when we are trying to save shark populations. Shark populations are plummeting because of shark fin soup and other reasons. We need to save sharks. When you send out a message on television that these sharks are menacing and threatening, it leads to a feeling on the part of the audience that maybe sharks are not worth saving.

When we go to the United Nations (UN) and to the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) and other UN conferences to try to save polar bears and sharks and bluefin tuna, one reason we're not getting the results and the support in the world that we want is that there are television programmes out there which are not doing a good job of representing these animals, showing their true value and their true nature. Sharks are not dangerous if you leave them alone. There are four or five species, bull sharks, tiger sharks and so on, that have a reputation for being dangerous, but most sharks are not dangerous. We know now we can swim freely with them, even with great whites. We need

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more intelligent programmes which show the true nature of these animals.

*Int: Chris, I know you feel strongly about the honesty of what is shown in films, whether we try to hoodwink an audience or fool an audience as to whether animals are filmed in the wild or in a zoo. Can you enlarge on that?*

CP: This is something that I've become more conscious of over the years, and one reason why I wrote *Shooting in the Wild* (1). I think that there are several problems with wildlife films. One of them is that we tend to deceive audiences. I'll come back to that in a moment. Another is that we tend to harass, disturb and sometimes kill animals during production. And third, they often lack a conservation message. These three problems have come to haunt me.

For the first 15 years of my time in wildlife films, I was so fascinated by the process, so infatuated with the celebrities and films, and so absorbed in the fascination of it all, that I never thought ethical issues. But after about 10 years I began to ask, are my films really making a difference? People would say to me, "Of course they're making a difference! I've just finished a film on tigers and received a wonderful email from a viewer who said they loved the film. Of course they make a difference."

But I said to myself that's an anecdote and maybe it came from someone who was already a conservationist, so maybe that anecdote doesn't prove anything. So I began to start to question people's claims. Also, when I was in the field, I began to notice things that bothered me. For example, we made a film about wolves. During the film production, I noticed some biologists had caught some wild wolves. Their four paws were all tied together and these animals were lying there. There was some justification for it but I was appalled that these animals were treated that way.

There's a programme we have in America called *Man vs. Wild* (3) with Bear Grylls. In one episode, Bear Grylls jumps into a stream, thrashing around and looking for a monitor lizard. After about 20 seconds he finally emerges holding up a monitor lizard about 3½ feet long. He points out its sharp and dangerous claws.

Bear Grylls takes this animal and whacks it as hard as he can against a tree. Then he gets out his knife and plunges it into the back of the neck of the monitor lizard and kills it. This is on [Discovery Channel]. He is killing an animal for the sake of entertainment and the sake of ratings.

There's a problem with animal harassment. The general public doesn't know what goes on. Producers need to be more transparent and need to be more conscious of animal welfare.

I also worry about the amount of staging, manipulation, and fraudulence that we put into our wildlife films that we don't tell our audiences about. For example, take sound. It's challenging to obtain clear sync sound, and so we often create sounds in the studio with the help of skilled foley artists. I often tell people the story of what happened when I brought an early film home on bears to show my wife, Gail. She loved it.

There was one particular scene that impressed her. It was a shot of a grizzly bear stepping through a stream. You could hear the water dripping off its paws and it was beautiful. Gail asked me how we got the shot. I said we just got lucky. We had a long lens, were across a valley, and the bear was perhaps a mile away. We'd been out there for days on end and we were lucky. She said, that's great but how did you get the sound of the water dripping off its paws?. I said, well, I've got a very talented sound guy. He filled a basin up with





water, ruffled his hand and elbow in it, recorded the sounds, then matched those sounds with the footage. Gail looked at me horrified. She said you mean you cheated? She said I can't believe that you cheated. She said, "You mean I wasn't listening to the real sounds of the water dripping? You are a phoney baloney, a big fake!" She was outraged.

Now we all know that is just routine filmmaking artifice. What we did was so routine as to be banal, but for Gail it seemed like we'd cheated. A far bigger ethical issue is the use of animals from game farms. This is a significant problem that I am guilty of myself.

Since the time I used game farms, I've learned about them and am very concerned about what they do. Of course, game farms vary from very bad to not so bad but typically they keep animals, such as lynx, wolverines, bears, and wolves, in small cages. When people come along needing, say, some bears for a shoot, they rent them out. You might pay \$5,000 for the use of a grizzly bear for an afternoon, for example. They're all captive and controlled and they're trained using jelly beans and M&Ms. They're trained to open their mouths on command and then, with the help of sound effects, you can put a big roar in there.

The whole thing is ludicrous because these are not animals behaving naturally although the audience thinks they are watching a free roaming, wild animal. When we go shopping at Christmas and we see those calendars containing beautiful photos of bears and other wild animals, those are all captive, controlled game farm animals. They're all captive, controlled and some of them trained to some extent to do certain things.

What I'm trying to do with my book, *Shooting in the Wild* (1), is to persuade audiences to be more sceptical. So when they watch an Animal Planet or National Geographic show and they see an animal, say a grizzly bear, feeding on the innards of a dead elk, I want them to say, wait a minute, that *looks* real, they're trying to tell me it's real, but is it real? And I want them to pick up a piece of paper and write to the network and challenge them. "Would you please assure me that that bear was not from a game farm, that you didn't put jelly beans in the innards of that elk to make the bear feed on it, and will you please tell me exactly how the film was made?"

I'm leading a campaign to get people to talk more about these issues of audience deception, of animal harassment, and of the lack of conservation in these programmes. These are big issues that we need to deal with.

*Int: What you're saying, Chris, really is that being in the age of celebrity that the celebrities are taking over the show and are more important in their own eyes perhaps than the animals.*

CP: I want to commend you, Barry, because you've been one of the leaders in this area. I commended you earlier on for creating this notion of reinventing the [animal] circus, and, yes, we do live in a celebrity-driven culture. This does lead, I think, to problems with these films and we've talked a little about this already. Putting more emphasis on the host than the animals is a problem.

Another problem is that, for the sake of money and entertainment, animals are sometimes demonized and we see that in *Shark Week* (2), and in *Untamed and Uncut* (4). *Untamed and Uncut* (4) is a popular series. When I watch it, my heart is beating fast because it is so exciting and dramatic, and because these shows celebrate attacks of animals on people. Like for example, a naive woman who goes over the fence in a zoo to get close to a polar bear to take a photo of it. The polar bear grabs her and starts mauling her.







*Untamed and Uncut* (4) takes incidents like that and makes entertaining television. That programme is produced by a good friend of mine, Erin Wanner. Erin is a wonderful person, a strong conservationist, and a consummate professional. But she works for Animal Planet and they are driven by ratings. If they're going to survive, if Erin's going to keep her job, she has to get high ratings. It's a business.

So Erin isn't very comfortable with the programming. She recognises that the programme demonises animals, that people watching it are going to think that polar bears are dangerous and menacing, and so maybe it isn't so bad if they get shot or the numbers go down. She knows that problem but she works for an institution that's driven by money and by profits and by ratings. So what does Erin do? She does the best she can. She still produces the show, she has to, but she makes sure that the message comes across clearly that it's the person who was at fault, it's not the animal that was at fault. We don't blame the shark who attacks a person who gets too close or the polar bear who attacks the woman. Erin does the best with the system she has to work within.

I can criticise programmes like *Uncut and Untamed* (4) and say these programmes should not demonise animals. But I'm trying to step back and be rational and try to explain how a good person like Erin Wanner can get caught up in doing that type of programming. I think it's also our job to put pressure on people like Erin to keep trying to do better and better programming.

*Int:* We await the programmes of the two chaps swimming with the saltwater crocodiles I think, don't we, from Animal Planet?

*CP:* The guy who did that is Didier Noiroit who is a terrific French cameraman, and a very talented, brave guy. He dived with crocodiles. He worked with Cousteau for years. I like him and he's a good guy, but all I could think when watching that film was what the hell is he doing harassing those crocodiles? Why not just leave the crocodiles alone? I worry that we are getting too close to animals, and we're bothering them for the sake of entertainment. We need to leave them alone, leave them in peace. We don't need to keep sticking cameras up their rear ends to get all these pictures. How many pictures of elephants do we need? I mean, they've been photographed to death. We don't need to keep photographing these animals. We almost need a system where we create a pool and then when you want a photo of elephants you go to the pool and get what you want.

*Int:* You've just put half the industry out of work.

*CP:* Nowadays everybody is a cameraman or camerawoman. We all have cellphones, and they all have cameras. In a few years we're all going to have HD cameras. The world's going to be crawling with cinematographers and this is going to be a problem. Go to Yellowstone and you'll find bison surrounded by 20 people with cameras trying to get as close as they can and this is not good. We need to keep our distance from these animals. We should not get in their personal space.

The prime example here is Timothy Treadwell who in October 2003 was killed and eaten by a grizzly bear in Katmai Peninsula along with his girlfriend Amy. He had been out there for 13 summers. His fans called him a bear whisperer. He would get on his hands and knees and sing to bears and try to touch them. He took the most remarkable still pictures and videos. Timothy was made famous by Werner Herzog in *The Grizzly Man* (5) which came out in 2005. A wonderful film by the way. But Timothy Treadwell himself was a problem. He meant well but he got too close to bears and after 13 summers he got his comeuppance. He got eaten and





killed by bears and it was incredibly sad. The bottom line is we shouldn't be getting in the personal space of these animals.

#### **4. Influences and memorable collaborations**

*Int: Now you've met a lot of people obviously in the course of doing your work, I mean you mentioned Roger Tory Peterson. Is there anyone else that you were particularly struck by or influenced by?*

CP: Yes. One of them was Ted Turner; he helped get my career launched in television. He's given me millions of dollars. He's a philanthropist, a generous person, a visionary, a media mogul. One thing about Ted is that he's not afraid of anything, he will say anything. This is something that has got him into trouble but he's a fearless guy and that's what I've admired about him. When I made programmes for him at the National Audubon Society and the National Wildlife Federation, we worked together for about 20 years, we sometimes made programmes which caused trouble.

We made a film about clearcutting, and the lumber industry came after us with a boycott. They boycotted TBS Superstation, they put pressure on the National Audubon Society. The film was called *Rage over Trees* (6) with Paul Newman, it's a wonderful film. We were very, very proud of it, but Ted Turner and we came under incredible pressure from the lumber logging industry to not air the film. Ted Turner to his great credit aired the film anyway despite the fact that the logging industry drove away advertisers. They had scared all the advertisers and our sponsor, Stroh Brewery, had been scared away and had withdrawn their money. We lost hundreds of thousands of dollars from this, but it was not a successful boycott in the sense that the lumber industry didn't achieve their goal. Ted broadcast the film anyway. So I was very proud of him for doing that, for supporting us, and then later on we found more funding by bringing in General Electric as a new major sponsor.

But then we did another film, and this again shows Ted's character, on ranching and on over grazing. This time the ranching industry came after us with a vengeance and they also launched another boycott against TBS Superstation. They again succeeded in running off our sponsor, General Electric withdrew, and all our advertisers. Ted Turner still broadcast the show without any advertising. He took a financial bath but he broadcast the film anyway.

So I've always admired Ted Turner for his bravery and for putting conservation ahead of profits.

Other people I've worked with are Robert Redford, [the late] Paul Newman, and Jane Fonda. They want to leave a legacy like the rest of us, they want to make a difference, so they love being involved.

So I've had great fun and great pleasure in getting to know celebrities and actors and seeing their serious, substantive side. Ted Danson's another example. These are people who want to advance the course of conservation, who want their lives to mean something, who want to live with purpose, and they can sometimes get that from working with environmental groups like the ones I worked with.

*Int: Is there anyone that you would like to have been, rather than being Chris Palmer?*

CP: I would have liked to have been a Founding Father. People like Alexander Hamilton, James





Madison, George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, and Ben Franklin were amazing people. We owe them so much. They founded this great democracy, the first democracy in the world. They created an amazing system of government that has led us to be a thriving and free country up to this point. I'm in awe of them. They sometimes didn't get along well. Thomas Jefferson and John Adams had a long rivalry. Ben Franklin and John Adams disliked each other. John Adams detested Alexander Hamilton.

Yet somehow their clashes of interest, [together with their high mindedness and patriotism], brought us through that incredibly difficult period when the country could have easily not survived. We almost lost the war against the British. It lasted eight years and was often touch and go, and it was only due to George Washington's leadership that we became independent from England.

So my dream would be to be one of those incredibly wise, well read, and hard working, diligent people [who founded America]. They reflect many of the qualities that we need more of today. If you look at someone like Alexander Hamilton, he had little formal education yet he was fiercely brilliant. Alexander Hamilton, as we know from Ron Chernow's very excellent biography of him, was extraordinarily intelligent.

Studying the lives of the Founding Fathers is a useful thing to do and I recommend it for wildlife filmmakers. One of the characteristics of a successful filmmaker is that they have a good character. In other words they are honest, they keep their promises, they work hard, they're creative, they're fair, they think of the interests of the other person, and they're not just solely absorbed in themselves. These are all characteristics that you can find in the Founding Fathers.

I tell people that if you want to be a good film producer, the first thing to be is a good person. You want to be the kind of person that other people want to work with, that other people want to have around. You want to be the kind of person who keeps their promises, works hard, does an outstanding job, and is reliable and trustworthy. If you're that sort of person, you are going to attract people and resources, and you're going to be able to produce films. So you want to be able to attract the resources that allow you to become a producer.

## **5. Dream films and career highs**

*Int: Chris, imagine for a moment that time and money, travel are not an issue and what's the film you'd most like to make or just see made if you have it all?*

CP: Kodiak bears fascinate me. These are animals that can weigh up to 1,500 pounds. You find them on Kodiak Island in Alaska. I'd love to make a film about Kodiak bears.

If I had all the money in the world, I'd like to make a film about spinner dolphins. You can find them off Tahiti and all over the world. These are dolphins that, as you know, do remarkable acrobatics in the air. We don't really know why they do this, whether they're playing, whether it's a courtship ritual, or something else. Not easy to capture on camera.

I would love to make a film on the spread of toxins -- chemicals in our carpets, pesticides sprayed on our food, and so on. We have sodden our environment with dangerous, untested chemicals. We don't know the impact of them. It's a worry and the general public is not conscious enough of the danger - its impact on reproduction, its impact on our health and on our longevity. We need a film that kick starts a national

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discussion, so that regular people start questioning what they eat, what they breathe, and what chemicals they are unintentionally imbibing.

*Int: If you had your time again is there anything you would change about the places you worked or the people that you worked with, projects undertook or the jobs that you passed up? Did you ever pass up a job?*

CP: I wouldn't change much. I think I would exert higher standards in terms of how we treated animals in some of our films. I think I would deceive the audience less, and I would put even more conservation into my films than I did. But generally, as I look back on 30 plus years in this business, I'm pretty satisfied, it was enormously interesting and I met wonderful people. I don't think there's a lot I would change, in general I've been satisfied by what I've done. I'm particularly proud of my book *Shooting in the Wild: An Insider's Account of Making Movies in the Animal Kingdom*, published by Sierra Club Books in 2010 (1). It pulls back the curtain on the dark side of wildlife filmmaking as well as celebrating the incredible people that are in this business, people like yourself and Jeffery Boswall and other people who've been pioneers in this business. I'm glad to say it's won a lot of attention so far.

## **6. A view on today's wildlife programmes**

*Int: I mean obviously to write that book you must be a regular viewer of wildlife films. Would you describe yourself that way and what do you think of today's programme presenters? Do you have any favourites or any that you really dislike?*

CP: David Attenborough would be my favourite. He's iconic, he's incredibly well principled, and just a terrific human being in every way. I've got the highest admiration for him. I don't like some of the on-air presenters who grab, goad, poke, and harass animals, and get in their personal space. I wish some of those people would back off a little and give the animal more space, and not bother them so much

I haven't seen everything. Usually I'm amazed at the quality of them. Yesterday I watched Martin Dohrn's new film, *Night of the Lion* (7). He uses at night infrared cameras, starlight cameras, and thermal cameras. He's made this amazing film of lions hunting wildebeest, gazelles, and other animals. Lions like to hunt at night and he's opened up an area of knowledge that we didn't even know much about before. This is an example where technology allows more creativity.

I'm constantly amazed at the quality of the **blue-chip** programming that is produced. Generally I'm very proud of the industry, but we need to harass animals less, promote conservation more, and deceive audiences less.

*Int: Do you have an all time favourite programme or series and conversely do you have a worse programme?*

CP: Well, I think a favourite would be *Nature* (8) on PBS run by Fred Kaufman, Bill Grant, and Janet Hess. They've been relentless in asserting high standards in the production of their shows. I was honoured to be involved in one of them about ten years ago and have the highest regard for what they've done. Marty Stouffer was another favourite although he got into trouble. He's a great human being, a great person, and his *Wild America* (9) had a big influence on me. He's a good person, despite the trouble he got into which I discuss in detail in my book.



Even though I've been critical of Steve Irwin, who was killed by the barb of a stingray in 2005, for getting too close to animals, he was still a favourite. He was a dynamic, colourful personality who made tens of thousands of kids all around the world care for reptiles. I don't like people trying to emulate him by getting too close to animals, but apart from that, he's a terrific person.

*Int: And the worst?*

CP: *WildBoyz* (10) on MTV, which I talk about in my book, was a horribly irresponsible series. MTV has done some good programs, but I was embarrassed by *Wildboyz* (10). The two hosts would jump into a river right next to a mother bear with cubs. This is unforgivable to wantonly harass and goad an animal like that. They were recklessly brave. They would run in the nude across the Alaskan tundra with wolves. It got high ratings and was fascinating to watch. I disapproved of it because it doesn't set a good example of how we should be interacting with wildlife. We need to leave wildlife alone, photograph them from a distance, and be more respectful of animals.

## **7. The future of the wildlife film industry**

*Int: Do you think we have a future in this industry?*

CP: Not if we keep going like we're going as a purely money-driven business. People are going to be more and more separated from the natural world instead of being engaged by it. So I'm pessimistic.

Offsetting that, is that at American University Center for Environmental Filmmaking where I work, as well as at the University of Otago in New Zealand and the great programme at Montana State University (MSU) in Bozeman, are university centers that are producing a new generation of wildlife filmmakers who are young, innovative and fresh thinking. They are also sensitive to animal welfare issues and are deeply concerned about conservation, and want to produce films that are highly entertaining and dramatic. So we have a new generation coming along which I think is going to do a great job. This makes me optimistic. I'm worried that the networks are so money driven that they sometimes forget that these programmes have a social impact.

*Int: That anticipates my next question. A newish recruit comes to you tomorrow and asks for advice, what are you going to say?*

CP: Find mentors. Find people like yourself, like Jeffrey Boswall, like Janet Hess, like Kathy Pasternak. These are great people. Find mentors who can help you and guide you. Also network like crazy. Come to Wildscreen, come to the International Wildlife Film Festival in Missoula, come to Jackson Hole, [come to BLUE Ocean Film Festival, come to those festivals and others]. Meet people. Find mentors.

The other thing I would say is train yourself, coach yourself, shape yourself to be a good person, a person who's honest and has integrity. Train yourself to be the sort of person that other people, as I said earlier, want to work with. Keep your promises, work hard, be highly creative, and look for those fresh stories that haven't been covered. Be extremely diligent and hard working. Those are the sort of things which are foundational, and which will lead to a successful career in this business.





Also learn how to raise money. There's a skill in raising money. It's also a lot of fun. A lot of people look at it as a drag, but raising money is exciting. Some of my best friends have come through my fundraising work. It gives you the freedom and autonomy to do what you want. Get to know foundations, get to know wealthy people, and get to know corporations. Send in proposals, and send in letters of inquiry.

In summary, a few of the keys are learning how to raise money, being a good, honest person with integrity, finding mentors, networking like crazy, and becoming knowledgeable with a great reservoir of intellectual capital. Study the subject, really get to know it so you are very knowledgeable. If you want to make a film about wolves or bears, really study up on the topic. Get to know it inside out so when you're in the field, you'll be able to see several different ways to tell the story.

*Int: And buy and read Shooting in the Wild (1).*

*CP: Exactly. Thank you, Barry, for that promotion.*

*Int: Thank you, Chris.*

*CP: My pleasure. An honour to be here.*

## Glossary

**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.

## References

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[www.wildfilmhistory.org](http://www.wildfilmhistory.org)





10. *WildBoyz* (MTV 2004, - 2006)

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