

David Attenborough: Oral History Transcription

Name of interviewee:

David Attenborough

Name of interviewer:

Chris Parsons

Name of cameraman:

Bob Prince

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1. The early years - first interest in natural history broadcasting

Int: So I want to start right back to the very beginning when you first came in to the BBC, because you started off in the world of publishing rather than broadcasting. What took you into broadcasting, and when you went into broadcasting, was it in a very general sense or did you already have some notion of natural history in broadcasting?

DA: Well to start with, I left publishing because it was really very very boring indeed, and I applied to an advertisement in The Times, which was for a sound/radio producer. I thought that if you could think up ideas for books, you might just as well think up ideas for radio programmes, and why not? But I didn't get even an interview - I simply got a postal rejection. And then a fortnight after, or something like that, I got a letter out of the blue saying, "Dear Mr Attenborough, we've seen your application and we know that you didn't get an interview for the radio job. But we are in a part of the BBC that has started a new thing called television, and we wondered whether we could persuade you to come along and look at it." I was greatly embarrassed by this really, because, you know, I felt it would betray my publishers, but anyway I went along to Alexandra Palace. I was shown around - it was all very nice, but absolutely extraordinary of course, no one wanted to be in television because television was regarded as rubbish really. And eventually they said we'd like you to try your hand at doing an interview. There's a thing called Joan Gilbert's weekend diary (1). And I said, "Well

why not? You know - a fiver, could be fifteen quid or something like that.” Anyway I did it, that’s another story. And it wasn’t until I was in administration, was giving a retirement speech to the producer of that particular programme, that I discovered a note that said, “Attenborough is an intelligent young man, but he must never be used as an interviewer again because his teeth are too big.” But I didn’t know about that. All I knew was that they didn’t ask me to interview anyone else again, at that stage. They then said would I like to be a trainee producer? And I said, “I don’t want to be a trainee, I’ve got a son, a family, a mortgage I can’t just go to be a trainee, with no guarantee,” there was only a three month guarantee. And then they said, “I know the salary is very small.” But all I do know, or I knew then, was that it was over twice as much as I was earning from publishing. So I could afford to be out of work for three months and still be no worse off. So I said yes - I’d go.

I went into a trainee course for television producers. But talk about ‘the blind leading the blind’, I mean nobody knew anything really in those days. The cameras we were using, and indeed the studios we were using, were the same things, not just the same type, they were the same objects that had been used to put out the programmes in 1937/1938. The cameras were on bicycle wheels, and you saw the image, not through an electronic view-finder, but through an optical viewfinder, upside down on a ground glass screen by the side of this huge Emitron camera. It was thrilling, but there was hardly anybody there. The introductory course didn’t tell you anything about television, because, really, nobody knew anything about television, actually. It was all about the structure of the BBC, with little cut-out diagrams of different coloured chalks, leading from one box to another box and so on. It was an interesting course – there were a lot of people who subsequently became quite big people in television.

I went up to Alexandra Palace and there I was part of a group called the Talks Department. Which meant effectively that you did any subject that you thought of that was non-fiction. So I did: gardening, and knitting, and ballet, and short stories, religious programmes, poetry, archaeological quizzes, ministerial broadcasts, industrial design - like that. And we had heard that in America they had patent planning, so that you would have the same sort of programme every Wednesday. And all you could say about a programme in the BBC in 1951, every Wednesday, was that whatever it was like, it was not like what the programme was last Wednesday. They were made up completely new each night really. The fixed things were the dramas, and of course everything was live, because there was no form of —, tolerable quality way of reproducing things. But naturally because I was interested in natural history, amongst the things I put up, were natural history programmes. The first natural history programme I suggested was: I thought here we are, supposed to be vision, we ought to do something about the visual aspects of natural history, so I think we called it Animal Patterns (2), and so I said we ought to do a series on animal patterns.

I did every conceivable kind of programme, and we all did. I mean we were all just general people. But I had hoped from an early stage that I would obviously do something about natural history. But we couldn’t afford film. Because we were paid – I mean the television service got its money from Broadcasting House, which got its money from the radio licence. The television licence was so small, there were so few viewers, that it just came nowhere near to what our expenses were - so that radio subsidised us. And the people in charge of radio, neither new nor cared anything about television, to be honest. Their line was, “Okay you funny little people, you’re out there up in Alexandra Palace, getting on with your business, I’m sure its quite entertaining really but we don’t want to know much about it.” If you said, “I would like to do some film,” they said, “I’m afraid you’ve got this wrong, this is an electronic medium, and you should be doing something about television, you’ve got a studio. Now, if we give you ten quid for a roll of film that’s about it.” And really that was actually the case. So the idea I put up was that we would do things about the appearances of animals, but entirely with zoo animals. Which was how natural history programmes were at that time of course, because George Cansdale was doing animals from London Zoo. There was going to be one on camouflage, and one programme on warnings and signals, and a third programme on courtship, fairly obvious stuff. And I put up this idea, and I put it to the head of department who was Mary Adams at the time - a distinguished woman in her way, and actually a scientist, ex-scientist - but a great one for networking, she just knew everybody in this great establishment, and she said, “Ah yes, yes, very nice, we’ll get Julian to do it.” And I

said, "I beg your pardon." And she said, "Oh, I'll have a word with Julian." Julian, of course, was Sir Julian Huxley, a very, very big figure, and had been at UNESCO [United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization], author of 'Evolution: The modern synthesis' (3) - you know big stuff. And I was extremely humbled by this really, in awe, because he was a great man. So I had to go to Hampstead to see Julian, and he read through, but he was rather cantankerous by that stage, and he read through it and said, "Ah yes, very good, yes, yes, yes," checking off this thing. He said, "Now you ought to have a word with my friend here on that," which I certainly did. Then Julian said, "You write it out in detail." So I wrote it out in very considerable detail. And when it came to do it, Julian simply read the script, he didn't make it up at all. He just took what I wrote and spoke it. So there was the great Julian Huxley speaking my words. I thought good Lord. Then The Listener (4) rang up and said, "I don't know whether you've seen it, but Sir Julian did very, very remarkable programmes and we'd like to reprint them, could you ask him if he would give us a summary for them." So I went off to Pond Street and said, "The Listener (4) would like to do this." "Ah yes," said Julian, "you've got it all in your head give me a draft." And of course I gave him a draft, and that appeared in The Listener (4), not a comma changed. And I thought at the time if ever I get to that situation, and someone writes something for me I will let it go out under his name not mine, just out of common justice.

But anyway, that was the first natural history programme I did. I also did one actually, I can't remember the exact chronology, whether that was the first or whether in fact, soon after that, just about that time, they discovered the second coelacanth. Mary Adams, who as I say was a scientist, was aware that this was a scientifically important thing. "We will do a programme about the Coelacanth next week," she said, "and you'll do it David." "Yes," I said. So I fumbled around to get visuals - there was a photograph of Professor Smith [Professor James Leonard Brierley Smith] holding the thing, and that was really the only visual you had. So I got in sharks in formalin, and put them all in the bath, in the changing room in Alexandra Palace, and Julian came up and whiffled [sic] on about why the coelacanth was important for about twenty minutes, with just one visual - great programming.

2. Zoo Quest

Int: There's a big gulf between that type of programme and the first one that I really remember - maybe there's something in between - which is the first Zoo Quest (5).

DA: That was where I got to, as it were. Then what happened was that they all said they liked that. So I suggested, that we should do a series based on the radio programme Nature Parliament (6) which had Peter Scott, and James Fisher and Alanbrooke and people of that ilk - Ronny Lockley [Ronald Lockley] and L. Hugh Newman. And I said there, we've got all these great people on radio, why don't we do a monthly programme based on the natural history of Britain. We could get these people here and we could talk about what was happening, and so on and so on. And this simply disappeared, evaporated, and eventually I went up to Mary and said, "Look - I don't understand this it's quite a good idea you know, why can't we do it?" And she said, "Oh, um, well we've got other things to think about - don't worry any more about that idea." What I didn't know was that Desmond Hawkins at this time was in Bristol, and was saying, "We want to do natural history and we want to hang on to natural history, we haven't yet got a television studio, we haven't got any television capability at all in Bristol, but when it comes, we want to do it." So Desmond, as you will know, the absolute top politician, he simply knew how to do things - Desmond fixed it. So there was no way in which I was going to do this natural history programme, based in Britain, which was a disappointment to me at the time.

There were two kinds of programme going on at the time, one was Armand and Michaela Denis's On Safari (7), which was handled in London by Cecil Madden, who was the world's first television producer as you will recall. And Cecil was a great cinema buff really, he really wanted to be in Hollywood feature films. Armand and Michaela came over to advertise a film called Below the Sahara (8) I think. And they had some of the



original 16 mm, which was used, and they put it together, really as a promo, and that was put out as On Safari (7). And it was huge. I mean it made an enormous impression, first time the people, on British television, had seen wild elephant and things like that. It was a very, very big success and Armand and Michaela were national names almost immediately and the BBC in the shape of Cecil Madden mostly, who was not a very good studio producer, but he put his tag on that and that became his project.

But at the same time there was also George Cansdale, who was in charge of the mammals at London Zoo, I think he was actually in charge of the whole zoo. He did a thing called, I've forgotten what it was called actually, it wasn't Zoo Time (9), but some name like that. And he would, in the middle of the night, go to the zoo, stuff these poor little animals in sacks, put them in a bag, bring them up to Alexandra Palace, fish them out in the lights, and needless to say they acted in a rather odd way. And they bit him. So it was very good because it was all live. So they had these two programmes going. And I thought, okay I've been thwarted on doing English natural history, why don't we take the success of these two things, and put them together.

I had a friend as a consequence of doing the Julian Huxley programme - I knew the curator of reptiles, called Jack Lester, in the London Zoo. I said to Jack, you know, "I desperately want to go to Africa," and Jack said, "I used to collect in Africa, I worked in a bank in West Africa in Sierra Leone. And I'd like to get out there and collect some more stuff for the zoo. I particularly want a —, can't we combine?" So I put up a proposal that we should do a series in which —. I suggested basically it would be a studio series, because it had to be because we couldn't afford proper film, but I would go out with them and make short sequences which showed how the animals were caught, how Jack caught them. Then having jumped on a python, or something, in the film, we would mix through to studio, and there would be the same python with Jack still holding it, and he would do a, as it were 'Cansdale'. So we arranged a lunch, in which Cecil McGivern the boss of television at that time, and the head of the zoo, who I think was [L.] Harrison Matthews, got together and congratulated one another, "You're very clever we bamboozled the BBC," or vice versa and so we were in business.

So we were going to go to Sierra Leone, and I said to Jack Lester, "Well now we've got to call it something you know. I'd like it very much if we could have a target and that we would go for some creature that's never been filmed before, perhaps never even been seen in captivity before." And Jack said, "Well I know exactly what we want - because I really want it - and it's a bird," he said and I said, "Great what's it called?" he said, "Well it's called *Picathartes gymnocephalus*." "Yes," I said, "well that doesn't exactly grab you - is it called anything else?" And he said, "Yes, it's also called the bald-headed rock crow." And I said, "Well, even 'Quest for the bald-headed rock crow' isn't going to drag them into the aisles." So eventually we decided to call it just Zoo Quest (5) and that would mean we would go for whatever we chose. And that was the first Zoo Quest (5) series. The fact that it actually got the public imagination was —, the cameraman who I will speak of in a minute, he and I were driving in his car along Oxford street, which you could do at that time - we were about half way through the series - and the bus driver lent out from high up on the bus, looked down on us, this little car and said, "Hullo Dave, how's Pickafarties then?" So we had hit the button.

Then the question was how we were going to film it. And the cameramen at the BBC at that time were all 35 mm. The only film at all used in the BBC at that time was 35. And I have to say they were prima donnas I mean they were full of all kinds of stuff. There was one cameraman who only wore white gloves and would turn on the camera, and he wouldn't turn on the camera himself, he would get an assistant to do that. Some of them were very tough guys - they had been through the war: newsreel. But by and large they regarded television as rubbish. I said, "Well we can't possibly do this on 35 mm it would have to be on 16." And the head of films, I was summoned to a meeting because I made a bit of a stink about this, and I was summoned to a meeting, and the head of films was there, a chap called Philip Dorte. And he said the BBC will not use 16 mm, it is bootlace, it is amateur material, it doesn't have the quality the BBC requires and the day 16 mm comes into this place will be over my dead body - those were his precise words. So we were very gloomy about this, but fortunately ITV was just about to start then, and they gave Philip Dorte a job so he didn't have

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to commit suicide and we got permission to use 16 mm. But, there wasn't any staff cameraman at the BBC, who would agree to use 16 mm. So I was casting around and I heard of an expedition that had been to the Himalayas, looked for the abominable snow man, with a Daily Mail journalist, whose name I have forgotten at the moment, and they had taken a cameraman, I think they'd taken Tom Stobart who had been on Everest and he had an assistant who was a young chap called Charles Lagus whose parents were Czech. And I met this rather nice guy and we went up to the pub at the top of Lime Grove and I bought him a beer and told him what I was going to do. And I said, "Would you like to come along?" and he said, "Yes." So that was that. I mean just like that and off we went, and that was how Zoo Quest (5) it was then called, started. On the first programme, Jack wasn't really very good, I have to say as a —. But he then became ill, and because it was live, he couldn't do the second programme, and somebody had to do the second programme. And Cecil McGivern, or maybe it was Mary Adams — well one of them said, "David you're the only other person who was there, so you must appear, you'll have to do it. But you're on the staff so there's no fee, there's no extra fee you understand." So I said that was okay by me and that is how I first appeared holding an animal.

Int: I wasn't aware that it was Jack [Lester] that did the first programme. I thought you did all —.

DA: No

Int: Just going back a touch though, you were obviously very keen - you'd obviously seen the possibility of natural history. But you had other interests as well in music, and anthropology and so on, did you at that stage feel that natural history was the thing that you really wanted to go with? Because you had a choice really didn't you?

DA: I could have done anything yes, I could have gone anywhere yes. Well I really wanted, I remember as a teenager or something, shaking hands with someone who'd been to Singapore. Singapore, the Mystic East, you know, and the thought of going to Africa. For the natural history sure, but just the general thought, I had never been outside Europe, I'd only been to France about twice, because of the war and one thing or other. But just the thought of going to foreign parts was so exciting, and birds, and natural history - animals, were the obvious things that could take me there. I'd got a degree in Zoology so, you know, I was set up for that. But getting there, just to show how long ago it was, the only way we could get there was by flying. You couldn't fly direct because you couldn't fly during the night. So we flew to Casablanca for the first night, then to French West Africa and then on to Sierra Leone. So it was primarily because of that, but in between these programmes of course I did all these other things that a standard producer —, except of course I did rather more because I was told that I had to catch up with the output of the others. I mean we used to do two programmes a week - direct two programmes a week.

Int: The first Zoo Quest (5) was obviously a great success and that would have made it easier then presumably for you to say, "What about another, chaps?"

DA: Yes, Yes. I remember coming down the river which forms the frontier between there and Liberia with Charles. We'd been there for three and a half months. We'd gone to look for pygmy hippopotamus, but didn't find it. And we were lying on the launch looking up at the sky - the African sky - just black velvet with these diamond stars, and I said to Charles - I remember very clearly - saying to Charles, "I think we might get away with this. I think we really might get six programmes out of this, one way or another. And, *if* we play our cards right, I think there is a chance we might be able to get away with it and do another one." So when the series turned out to be a success, I mean like within a fortnight of finishing, I banged in another proposal - why don't we go to South America.

Int: How many Zoo Quests did you do in total?

DA: Ten I think...

Int: As many as ten?

DA: Yes, or maybe it was eight?

Int: Anyway, they were roughly one a year?

DA: One a year roughly, yes.

Int: In those days, at this point in London, how did you do for budget?

DA: I remember exactly - yes, we didn't have underlying costs, so our budgets were all that we had to pay out, as it were, for which we had to apply to Broadcasting House, to the radio people, for some cash please. I know exactly what my first budget was, it was a thousand pounds for the six. And of that: three hundred pounds went for all our air fares, getting us all there and back and all the baggage; three hundred pounds went on film stock and things of that sort; and three hundred pounds were incidentals - living costs and so on.

Int: As the Zoo Quest (5) developed did you still have to - even with the later ones - were you still forced to do other programmes?

DA: Ah yes, yes, well I wanted to really - because I was married with small children. So I didn't want to go away more frequently than three months every year. So what happened was: three months we were away; three months we spent putting the programmes together; and the remaining six months of the year I did general programmes.

Int: And how did the books (10-13) work in - because you had to write books as well, because you did a book on each one too?

DA: Not on each one - I didn't do one on West Africa.

Int: You did a book on at least half of them?

DA: More than half - yes.

Int: And that wasn't with the BBC publications?

DA: No there wasn't any such thing. BBC publications didn't publish books. They did the Radio Times (14) and The Listener (4) and that was it.

Int: They didn't mind that?

DA: No they were very pleased I think. I mean it was more publicity.

Int: So you got several years of Zoo Quest (5), and that was building nicely, and you've referred to Bristol and things going on in parallel in Bristol.

DA: Yes, well quite soon into that. Desmond [Hawkins], who was the most disarming of men, as you will know, as well as anybody. Desmond came up and I met him, see, and he said would I be interested in coming down to Bristol? Because he was going to set up a unit there - it wasn't called Natural History Unit at the time - he just said that we're going to start producing programmes and natural history will be one of them. And you will speak better than me on that about how in fact you use **OB** cameras. Again a wonderful example of how clever Desmond was, and how ingenious he was. And I said no, my children were at school now here, we'd just got settled in, we've just bought a house. No, I decided that I wanted to stay because it would have been, technically, a step back. I was at the cutting edge of television up here, and didn't want to go down to Bristol, as well as domestically. So we had a meeting with Desmond as to how we were going to solve things. It was, odd to look at it now, but it was agreed - natural history, I mean natural history, was really British - that was what natural history was. Now if you wanted to go after these crocodiles and elephants and things like that, well that's not natural history that was big game hunting or something, but certainly not natural history. Anyway, so you can do all the foreign stuff, and we'll have this agreement, like dividing up the world as those sixteenth - seventeenth century kings did. Okay eighteenth century kings or whatever they were. Okay: Bristol - Europe; rest of the world - London, and that was my oyster.

3. Running BBC2

Int: You've got this amazing success story of Zoo Quest (5) - the public wanting the next Zoo Quest (5) and you're riding high and yet, you decided at some point to pull out of it.

DA: Yes, that's true, but Mary Adams, in due course, retired and her job was taken by a formidable lady called Grace Wyndham Goldie. Grace's view was that the only thing that was really worth doing on television was politics. That current affairs, and politics, and —. It was a noble ambition, and in many ways it's correct - this was the social cement that was going to hold Britain together, and made democracy really true, all absolutely correct. But, it was perfectly clear that in her book they were the only people that really mattered. She was a great interferer, I mean she interfered in programmes in a very big way. She was a very good producer and had been a good producer, and was a very good head of department from that point of view but I wanted to get out of her way, I didn't want to be involved in that. So the best thing to do was to beat it really, to somehow get out of the beam of her vision, which wasn't all that difficult to do because she was simply not interested. "Ah yes, how are you and your monkeys?" that was the sort of line. So I decamped and left Lime Grove where I had been. We'd just bought Ealing Studios, film studios, so I'd got an office there, and got out of her way. Which was fine, as far as I was concerned, and then by that stage we were expanding Zoo Quest (5), or expanding that kind of 'Gallair' as Grace used to say, into not only natural history things, but foreign things - exploring things, travellers' things you see and a very nice man Brian Branston came to join me, and we ran what was called the Travel and Exploration Unit. So that, in between times, I would do a Zoo Quest (5), Brian would be holding the fort and then in the other six months we would put together a series using explorers' 16 mm film, because by that stage we were quite good at putting that

stuff together. And we did a series called Travellers' Tales (15) and things of that sort of ilk, clichéd titles of that sort. And I had been getting more and more interested, and spent more time living with tribal people, with aboriginals, and towards the end of these kind of series expeditions, I was producing films which were probably as much ethnographic as they were zoological. Then I thought, well I really ought to discover a bit more about this thing that I was supposed to be making programmes about. So I asked the BBC whether I could resign from the staff in order to take a postgraduate degree in London School of Economics (LSE) in Social Anthropology. And the deal was that I would have six months on, doing my stuff, and when I came back I'd have six months at the LSE doing my degree. LSE were very nice about this, and there was a great anthropologist called Raymond Firth who was Head of Department, he accepted that I could do this in this broken-up way. So I went to all the lectures, but also I was going to write a thesis for my doctorate on the use of film as an ethnographic tool. Which, had I done it, would have been a groundbreaking thing, because it was another ten years before anthropologists saw the point of natural history filmmaking, of the kind of filming that we as natural history film makers knew how to do.

So I did that. I resigned and I came back from the Australian trip, the Northern Australian trip, and did a spell at the LSE. Then I did another trip, which I think was down the Zambezi from the source to mouth. Then went back to the LSE. And it was while I was in the second session, the second or third, or my time at the LSE, the BBC rang up - Huw Weldon - and said would I be interested in running BBC2?

Int: Without wishing to pry into your financial affairs, that was quite a brave thing to do.

DA: I suppose, but I knew I could live perfectly well. I suppose I thought that - rather mysterious now you mention it. But I was certainly earning enough in that six months. I know what it was - of course it was the books. Of course it was. Because the books were earning me more than my BBC salary. The Zoo Quest books (10-13) did very well.

Int: So the six months that you did of the year at the BBC, you were just paid as a staff member?

DA: Yes. Except I was no longer on the staff so I had a contract for that six months, but it was about pro rata I think.

Int: So obviously you'd known Huw [Weldon] for some time?

DA: Huw was an old colleague. Yes, an old friend.

Int: So how did you view this then, because it was quite a task to take on?

DA: BBC2? Well I was very much taken aback by the invitation, and I remember sort of sitting down and writing out lists on a piece of paper as to what the advantages were one way or the other. And I rationalised it to myself by saying, okay Attenborough, now what is it you wish to be? Do you wish to be an anthropologist, zoologist, behaviourist? Or do you wish to be a television person? Because if you wish to be the first, then obviously you don't take this, you go on and you complete your doctorate at the LSE and you look to moving into those kind of areas and the academic use of film, and it was an interesting thing. Or do you wish to be a broadcaster? And I concluded that I would be a better broadcaster than I would be an academic. I mean it was a quite cold decision. And I tried obviously to be as subjective as I could be, and as realistic as I could

be, as my income was going to depend on that. But anyway, I decided that I would be better as a broadcaster. In that case, if you are going to do broadcasting you can't possibly turn down the job of starting a new network. I say starting a new network, it wasn't really of course, because the new network was ten months old at that time - BBC2. But it had no programming policy at that time.

Int: You had obviously seen BBC2 - did you feel that Michael [Peacock] had got it wrong?

DA: No, I mean Michael [Peacock] will be his own historian at some stage, I hope. But poor Mike, BBC2 was absolutely lambasted if you looked at the reviews and journalism of the time, BBC2 was a catastrophe. It wasn't really Mike's fault. Mike had to devote all his energies to getting the damn thing on the air because of course it required completely new studios, completely new engineering, completely new line standards, completely new set of transmitters - all these kinds of problems. He had to deal with that, he had to recruit new staff, and so on. And he simply hadn't got enough output to do it. The government had asked the BBC —, the BBC had been on their knees saying we want the second channel. The government said no, no, no, of course you can't. Then suddenly, like within —, I don't know the inside story but certainly within a short period of months, they said, "Oh no — politically it's expedient now." So they turned round to the BBC and said, "Right start the second network, and you've got to start —, you know: now." You see, as is the way with governments. And there was an argument I don't doubt about when it was to start, but it certainly had to start much, much quicker than the BBC would have wished to do in a normal way, and Mike simply didn't have enough programmes, enough output. And he was forced to do - I mean there was one whole evening of repeats. He could only make up his schedule by repeats from BBC1. So he decided not to sprinkle them around, trying to be surreptitious but he decided to put them together in one programme. So there was one programme that was entirely repeats. One day of the week was repeats, another day of the week was entirely further education. Well hell, this is not the way that you can sell a new network. So for me coming in after ten months of that, it is exactly the right thing you want to go in on. Everything is a disaster, whatever you do is going to improve, so you're okay. So it was a very good wicket to go in on.

Int: When you walked into the controller's office, colour was already on the agenda wasn't it?

DA: No. Well, well it was on the agenda, perfectly true - we hadn't got a starting date. But it was known that when colour came it would have to go on 625 lines UHF, and BBC2 was the only network that was on that standard at that stage, so although the future lay in UHF and 625, ITV and BBC1 wouldn't be the ones to start in colour - BBC2 would.

Int: So, did you start even at that early stage, think about programming that would?

DA: Not in colour, no. I had enough problems thinking about black and white. It wasn't until I'd been there eighteen months or so, now looking at it, it seems an extraordinarily short length of time, but it seemed like an eternity to me. We were formulating what BBC2's policy was, trying to get new strands started, getting new hours - expanded hours, because at that time, which again seems extraordinary, the government actually restricted the number of hours we were allowed to broadcast. And then suddenly we were told that BBC2 had to start colour. And the problem about that, well there were huge problems about that, we would be the first in Europe to do so, at least we intended to be, and we were in the event. But there were huge technical problems. There were simply not enough cameras being made by Marconi and we were hanging around, saying, "Yes there's another camera that's going to come off the production line, so we'll have another two cameras in three weeks' time, isn't that exciting." Of course we had additional problems about the transmission that had to be compatible with black and white, because all the colour programmes that you saw were going to be seen by the majority of the people in black and white, not in colour at all. So you couldn't do something that was entirely based on colour because you were betraying all your BBC2 listeners

that you were supposed to be recruiting. So there were a lot of problems. The great boon was the **telecine** machine, because once you had one **telecine** machine obviously you could use it all night if you had a number of films. And I knew because of what we had been doing with Travellers' Tales (15) and those kind of things, I knew that that there was this great library of Kodachrome, which was not the best stock of choice because of its contrast ratios and so on, but I knew there was all this stuff there. And it was that time I think I talked to you didn't I?

Int: You talked to Nicky [Nicholas Crocker] and me.

DA: And said I could give you 50 minutes a week. I probably didn't say that I probably said, "What can you do?" In the end we decided the Travel and Exploration Unit could do 26 and you could do 26 in Bristol.

Int: So the question was what have you got, what can you think of that can go in.

DA: That's right - that would go into 50 minutes. So just to set that into context, to show what the state of television was at that time, at that time there was no 50 minute documentary series, on the air, at all, on BBC1 or ITV. BBC2, and I'll say it myself, I had started a 50 minute documentary series with a thing called well, there was Whicker's World (16) and The Philpott File (17) and One Pair of Eyes (18), and these were 50 minute documentaries, and everyone said, "Fifty minutes, a documentary for 50 minutes, nobody will stand it." But of course they did very well, and clearly natural history was going to do that. So it was agreed that we would alternate. A Travel and Exploration Unit one, and then the next week a natural history one, which made perfectly good sense to me. And both Bristol and London, both hated it, they said, "It's really unfair." Each one would say exactly the same thing, they would come into my office - whether the it's the head of Bristol or the head —, and they'd say, "This is grossly unfair, we had a huge hit last week and what did we do, no sooner have we got this audience to assess how wonderful it is, then next week you give it to Bristol," or as you might say, "London," whichever it was, you see. And I'd say, "Calm down chaps, let's work together." But no, no, no daggers drawn - furious they were. Huge edge between the two on that, which was a pity because actually there had never been an edge between Desmond [Hawkins] and me. And even when Peter Scott branched out, and decided break our concordat about the division of the world, and did Faraway Look (19) which is what you did with Charles Lagus as I remember.

Int: Yes I wasn't the producer; I was still an editor at that stage.

DA: That's right - with Charles. So they took my cameraman, as it were, and whizzed round the —, and went round with Peter Scott and did Faraway Look (19) in the Galapagos - and that broke our agreement. But anyway we got that together because Desmond's such a nice man and I mustn't exaggerate it. But there was an edge, in whatever I called it - The World About Us (20).

Int: As these things begin to develop, World About Us (20) I think was probably twelve first of all, and did well so you kept bringing it back. Didn't you sort of feel, you know restless, to get back into natural history?

DA: I have to say that the first few years of BBC2 were very thrilling, and you really didn't want to go home, really, because there were all these new genres that you were being able to develop. New sport, new styles of light entertainment, new styles of documentary, new styles of **OB**. Then when colour came along - the excitement of colour - which was also a great thrill. And I was pretty happy doing that, and then Charles Hill became Chairman, and he said, "What we need my boy is wider experience," but there was one of these

palace revolutions. And he said, “You want to take charge of both David, that’s what you want, you know I’ll make you Director of Programmes,” and Huw [Weldon] became Managing Director. Because we had Mckinsey - one of these boring management consultants - Mckinsey’s came in and they decided on a different structure. Anyway I was made Director of Programmes responsible for both BBC1 and BBC2. Huw Weldon, who had more or less had that job, had been made Managing Director - rather grand. The only effect of that was that I was taken one step back from actually doing something about programmes. So, what I did as Director of Programmes - I mean I personally thought it was a non-job. My responsibility was to do with sacking people, pay rises, union strikes, management methods, the introduction of computers, believe it or not, which a lot of my friends thought was very funny, all the things that really bored me absolutely solid. So after 4 years of doing that, and dealing with politicians and the politics of broadcasting, I did think - this is as not as much fun as watching chimpanzees.

Int: We’ll come back to that in a moment, but I’d like to go back a little bit, because obviously you were very interested in natural history, and cared about it. Can you say something about the competition from ITV, and particularly Survival? Because you were instrumental in trying to get Alan Root back weren’t you?

DA: Yes. If you were going to do the 50 minuters, you really needed the very best you could get. And I had met Alan Root on my way to Madagascar, I’ve forgotten the year but I could look it up, because I was going off to Madagascar and getting out at Nairobi, and actually subverted to go up to see Joy Adamson and Elsa, to make the first and indeed only filming of the real Elsa - that was done professionally in any way (21). As we landed in Nairobi there was this rather spindly chap in horn-rimmed glasses, with this even spindlier girl alongside him, who were waiting and sort of ambushed me as I went in. I was a junior guy, really, this was before BBC2 of course. It was Alan and Joan, and Alan wanted to know what the set up was, and how could he get his own films. He had been working, as I’m sure he would have told you, for Armand and Michaela and he wanted to do something by himself. But by the time I got to BBC2 he, it was perfectly clear, was one of the great natural history film makers. So I thought the thing to do was to get him on. He came with a very different financial outlook to the sort of people I’d been —, because the stuff we had been using for Travellers’ Tales (15), to be absolutely honest, was straightforward amateur stuff, I mean it didn’t have sound, and you were making bricks with very, very little straw indeed with that stuff. Alan, absolutely correctly, thought this was no way to go on, that you simply had to do it professionally. So his budgets were huge. But none the less I was able to inveigle him and find enough money to allow him to make, well, the first one was Mzima (22), I think, of the Mzima Springs. I think he did Baobab (23), and he did one on hornbills - that was in Baobab yes. Anyway so I got him to do those, which was a very good move, in my view. But we didn’t hold on to him because he wanted more money, and ITV could see that, particularly Survival, could see that he was one of the great names. And so very wisely, and sensibly, they seduced him with money.

4. Return to wildlife filmmaking with Eastward with Attenborough

Int: You mentioned just now that as Director of Programmes you were beginning to think, “Well perhaps this isn’t for me.” You were doing the occasional narration - World About Us (20) and other things. Eastward with Attenborough (24) was quite pivotal - how did that happen?

DA: Well, how that happened was that when Huw asked me to take over BBC2, I said, “First of all I don’t think I’m going to do it for more than 5 years; but I’ll certainly do it for 3. But I don’t think I will do more than five,” because I wasn’t at all sure that I was going to enjoy administration. And I also said, “Therefore now if I want to do that, and I’m thinking I may be going back to —, I want to keep my hand in production.” I dressed this up into some kind of bogus excuse or bogus rationalisation, I said, “It’s very important. If one is going to go into the administrative on the sixth floor, one really must keep in touch with production techniques. One must be aware of the new equipment and all this stuff.” So every now and again I said - perhaps every eighteen months - I would like to go away and make a film. With the new gear, with the new stocks, with the

new lenses - to know what I am talking about. And that was agreed - that I could do it for 6 or 8 weeks. The first one I did was to go to Bali, to make a film about Balinese music, a rather *recherché* thing to do, but it was great fun and a place I was very keen on. So I did that after about two years I think and —. I must have done something else, but anyway —.

Int: Did The Tribal Eye (25) come then?

DA: No. What then happened was that, by the time I had made up my mind that I was going to resign after four years as Director of Programmes, I had got another one of these 'sabbaticals', as it were, fixed, which was going to be called Eastward with Attenborough (24) and which was going to be done with the Natural History Unit. That was a very convenient way of getting out from administration, because I had already got to make all the arrangements for what was going to happen while I was 6 to 8 weeks away. So I had got all the people who would take over various responsibilities when I had gone. And I could do that without raising suspicions of any kind. So that was very convenient and I decided that that was the way to do it.

Int: It was a very successful series.

DA: Eastward [With Attenborough] (24) was, yes. There was another problem, which I ought to say, that during the preparations I was making for colour - I decided that one of the things that we desperately wanted to do was to demonstrate how good colour was, and we would use 35 mm, I have to say, to do it. Because I hadn't got enough colour cameras and we hadn't got colour videotape anyway. We would do a very big prestige documentary, and the obvious thing to do was the greatest art objects of the last ten thousand years. We got Kenneth Clark, and it became Civilisation (26), and that was a huge success. Aubrey Singer who was Head of Science was outraged that I should have chosen an art subject for this great prestige thing, and insisted on —, and I said, "Well fine, I certainly wanted a science series," so that was Ascent of Man (27). By that stage it was clear that the genre of a 12 part series which took a huge subject and dealt with it methodically, it was absolutely clear that at some stage, someone would do that for natural history. I was in no position to say, "You mustn't do it because I want to do it." I didn't even know whether I did want to do it. So I couldn't actually have stopped that. If Bristol had come up and said, Peter Scott wants to do it, he could have done it. But after Ascent of Man (27), I think it was 1973 and Alistair Cooke and that had to be done then and so on, and so on. And I knew - that you, well I think you and I had had, sort of, little nodding, sort of chats —.

Int: I came up to see you in your office, and said, "Look we've been, we think it's time for the NHU to do a series, and we've been working on this for a long time," and I can remember saying to you, "Are you going to stay in this job, forever?" or words of that effect, and you said to me, "Well if you are going to do a series, I would certainly be very interested in doing it." So we had a sort of suspicion that you were hatching up a parallel idea. We wanted you anyway, but we thought we better grab you, so that's when that thing began to happen.

So what was the deciding factor - you'd done your four years as director of television programmes?

DA: Well the deciding factor came in after about two years. I thought I am simply not going to spend the rest of my life doing this. Because it was, it was very tough work. It was very demanding work. But above all it was very boring work, and this is not how I'm going to spend my life. The BBC is always under attack, but it seemed to me at the time that it was particularly under attack. And that by that stage, if you were Director of Programmes you were number two, effectively, at the television service. So if you made a move, everybody was going to say, "Oh he's been, either chucked out, or there's been a Palace revolution." And the press

were prepared to attribute anything, cloak and dagger stuff, to you. So the difficulty was, how could I get out without letting down my pals? Like Huw and all the rest of it. This was the first time —, well that Eastward with Attenborough (24) break was the one time when I could do it reasonably.

Int: What was the year that you actually left that job?

DA: I think it was 1973.

Int: 1973 was it?

DA: I think so.

Int: So what did you do between 1973 and 1975? Because we were originally going to start Life on Earth (28) in 1975. But it was late for a number of reasons, including my back.

DA: Yes that's right, what happened then was, I had Eastward with Attenborough (24) all lined up. And that was only going to occupy me for 3 months. We weren't ready - you weren't ready - to do a big natural history series. So I had to think of something in between. I thought of a short series, which was required, called The Tribal Eye (25) which was about tribal art, which was something that I was also interested to do.

5. Life on Earth

Int: Okay, let's talk about Life on Earth (28). Now by this time I think Aubrey was in charge? I mean certainly he was by the time we were making it.

DA: In charge of BBC2? Yes.

Int: Of course, you had done the big mega-series, but by any standard then it was still a lot of money, and it obviously would have been made on co-production. I think Michael Peacock was quite pivotal, because he got on to Warner's, in getting the American co-production was he not?

DA: Well I don't really know about that, because I had didn't have anything to do with it then. I had left the BBC administration then and I was just putting up an idea.

Int: It was a mad thing that we started. We actually proposed originally, I don't know if you recall, about thirty-six programmes, which in fact were virtually Life on Earth (28), Trials of Life (29) and Living Planet (30) - originally. And in a sense it came in, and eventually you said, "What we should be doing is this," and started framing the Life on Earth series (28). And I think, I can remember a number of meetings with Sparky [John Sparks]

DA: so can I

Int: and [Richard] Brock and you, and there was a sort of spectrum of opinion, in which Sparky was 'there', Brock was 'there' and I think you and I were probably in the middle. They were quite heated discussions I think. Do you want to say something about that?

DA: Well, my view of the series was that we ought to do a television equivalent of an encyclopaedia. And I thought the more straightforward it is the better, absolutely four square. This programme will tell you all you needed to know to understand reptiles. This programme will tell you all you needed to know to understand birds etc. And that seemed to me - I could see how that would go and I could see the kind of story, and you could easily put it in a sequence, which was an evolutionary sequence. So that seemed to me absolutely clear. But when I came down to Bristol and we had one of these meetings, and I don't know how many we had - I can't remember. But there was Richard Brock and you, and John Sparks, and John said, I'm reconstructing a bit, but I imagine I must have set out what it was I wanted to do. And John was very dismissive, I mean John said, "That's going to make us the laughing stock of the academic world. Because what that is, is really retrograde nineteenth century natural history, nobody is interested in that anymore. We ought to be doing something about evolution, in which we talk about population genetics, or something of that sort."

I didn't have any alternative really, because I simple had to say, "Well if you want to do that, you are going to have to get somebody else, because I am not competent." It would be quite wrong to get me to do a programme about population genetics, because I don't —. I mean I could muck it up but that's not the point. I know a bit about anteaters and spectral tarsiers, but I don't know about this other stuff. If that's what you want, and that's what the corporation decide they want, it'll be without me - go and do it. And John more or less said, "Well I don't want to do the taxonomic thing, so in that case you'll have to do it without me." And I said, "Well, that's for the corporation to decide." Is that your memory?

Int: Yes - pretty close to that, yes. I had to do a lot of discussions after you had left the room.

DA: Did you?

Int: Well yes, there was a lot of intermediary but we eventually arrived at the right formula. I think it is often good to have these tensions because somewhere you get pulled into the right things.

That series, obviously, was a watershed in many respects, wasn't it? It was a watershed for the unit, and I guess it was for you too, because the dye was cast then, wasn't it?

DA: Yes, and of course one couldn't be sure that it was going to be a success by any manner of means because as someone said, probably John, said, "You mean you are going to start this ground-breaking series, with 60 minutes about green slime?" And not only that - I don't know whether John was keen on this, but I know Jeffery Boswall, who may also figure in your history. But Jeffery Boswall who made programmes, had rules about what qualified a programme. I remember going down after the first programme, which I have to say did pretty well in the press, I mean it got some pretty good reviews. So my task in going to Bristol, at that time, walking through the canteen, was to look modestly down, and say, "Well it was an accident really," and that kind of thing. And so I was doing that relatively well, when Jeffery Boswall came up and said, "Sorry about last night," and I said, "Oh really, why?" and he said, "You know, bit of a disaster, but the reason is

perfectly simple, one should not do more than one species every two and a half minutes, that is absolute maximum, and I counted up last night and you did seventy nine,” - or whatever, I don’t know what the figures were. And so it obviously followed that it broke Boswall’s rule number thirteen - so it was a disaster. So I said, “Well I’m very sorry about that.” But also there was a very strong, and quite responsible view, that you shouldn’t do a programme about birds, in which you might show one bird in Australia and the next bird in South America and the bird after that in Africa. People will be confused, they said. My view was that they wouldn’t be confused because you had an alternative story to the geographical one. But none the less, it was a perfectly creditable and proper - credible - view that maybe doing all this jumping about was going to be disastrous. But I remember it was you - you got a very good musical score for it, thanks to you. But I remember the last sequence of the first programme involved just that - some great geographical jump and it ended in the barrier reef. It ended up with me walking, coming out from underwater, and standing on the reef while the helicopter zoomed away. Suddenly I got a feeling, which I hadn’t banked on I mean I didn’t realise it was going to be quite what it was. You got quite a lump in your throat, that you suddenly saw that for the first time, and it was the first time, it was possible for a single unit, and a single man, and a single viewer, to get a comprehensive view of the planet - as a planet. Later of course we did it when we looked at the planet from the moon, but it was a similar sort feeling that you got at the end of that first programme.

Int: Well, other series followed. What would you say, not necessarily the most popular programme with the public, but what was the one that gave you the most satisfaction, the one you are most proud of?

DA: Oh I think it was Life on Earth (28), as a totality. Oh yes I don’t have any doubt about that. It had a more powerful logic than either of the other two - than Trials [of Life] (29), or Living Planet (30), in my view. I mean they were perfectly good, and they did very well and so on. But this had a logic of time which gave it the evolutionary aspect, which was very moving. Nothing to do with the way we made the films, except that it was to do with the way the films were laid out. It was a new way of doing them, and it had an unparalleled effect on the audience - there was nothing else that quite did.

6. Story telling

Int: That business of a story - a very simple but very well structured storyline is important. I was going to ask you how you see yourself. Do you see yourself as a communicator, a teacher, an educator, an entertainer?

DA: I see myself as a story teller - telling a traveller’s tale. I am clearly not a scientist making original observations, however much I wish I were - but I certainly am not. Obviously I am a journalist in that extent, a television journalist. I would like to think that I knew something about construction of storylines and films, and understood about how you construct stories from separate shots, which is part of one’s training as a director. Of course I have some familiarity with animals, but I am not - I am certainly not - the quality of naturalist that Peter Scott or Eric Ashby were. They were great natural historians who learnt something about television. I’m a television man who has learnt something about natural history. I mean, sure I took Zoology at university, and it’s always been a deep fascination for me, but compared with those two giants of natural history I don’t rate.

Int: If circumstances had been different would you have been happy to have done a simpler role in anthropology or music? Would you have got so much enjoyment out it, do you think?

DA: No, because in the end anthropology has been a disappointment. I mustn’t rate it too high, but anthropology hasn’t yielded to me the kind of truths and insights that I thought it might when I took time off to do an anthropology degree -for all kinds of reasons, which aren’t germane here. But as a discipline it is not

as scientific and as rich, in my view, as zoology.

Int: So, you said you think your great thing is as a story teller, and I believe that to be true. You have got this wonderful ability to absorb massive amounts of information, and tease out from it a simple but correct storyline which the public can follow, and which doesn't actually offend the scientists as well.

DA: Well, I would certainly —. Desmond Morris is a great friend of mine, and I admire —. I think he has the most original mind, but I think that he and I are reciprocals of one another. I think that Desmond has a very penetrating scientific intelligence and what he really wants to be is a television performer. I am a television performer who would really like to be a great scientist, or as original thinker, scientific thinker, as Desmond.

Int: As part of this business of being a story teller do you make a conscious effort to avoid quirkiness, language of the time, which can quickly become dated. Is that a process that goes through your mind all the time, or does it just come naturally?

DA: I think, and I have articulated it and anatomised it to myself very carefully, I think that for every synch shot, for every time you get between the viewer and the animal, you have to have a quite precise reason in your mind as to why you are doing it. It's not just that you can do it, because every time that you do you are distracting the viewer from the animal. So what are the reasons? Well there are about half a dozen: one is that it is a very useful way of paragraphing; another is that it is a useful way of saying, "Well now we are going to move from Africa to South America," a third is - and quite important this - that the problem that you have with natural history films is that you are always particularising, that if you make a statement and you show a rat chewing a stem, and you want to say something generalised about the problems of vegetarianism and relying on vegetables for food, you can't make that generalisation without people thinking you are actually talking about a rat. If you want to make that powerfully, so that it really goes in, you have to come away from the rat and say, "Now the rat was one example, but of course any animal that eats grass, for example, is going to have certain problems with its teeth, it's going to have problems with its guts, digestive systems and so on." Now that is another useful way that you could use a narrator - for generalising. You can also use him, or her, to give you an idea of what the atmosphere is like - whether it's cold, or whether it's warm, or whether it's comforting, or whether it's alarming, and those sorts of things. But you shouldn't just say well now we'll stick in a 'to camera' piece here because we haven't had one for a bit.

7. Dealing with requests from the public and organisations

Int: Can we just talk a little bit about related subjects? Inevitably, a national and international figure - the most famous figure to do with natural history programming - it is inevitable that are going to get every conservation society in the world queuing up for you. You probably get five letters a day, saying will you do this for us, will you do that for us, be the chairman, patron or what have you. You have been actually quite careful, I think, about what you do in this respect. Can you talk about how far you should go with this?

DA: Yes, first of all I think quite a lot of conservationists say, "How terrible it is that you are doing a film showing how birds of paradise are beautiful, and you're not even saying that they are endangered." My view is that nobody is going to care to do anything about whether they are endangered or whether they are not, unless they start off by thinking that birds of paradise are marvellous. And the primary job - my job as I saw it - was to show people that the natural world is extraordinarily fascinating, extraordinarily valuable, that we are a part of it, sometimes it's beautiful, sometimes it's frightening. That's almost irrelevant - the point is that we are part of it, and we have responsibility for it. So that's the first thing you do. It is only when you have done that, that you say, "And, oh by the way, birds of paradise - there are three species which are in real danger

and we could get money to raise a reserve for them,” or whatever. But you mustn’t put the cart before the horse - that is the very important proviso. Then you ought to do something about the natural history of this country, which is why I became the President of the Royal Society for Nature Conservation. And, okay, you ought to be involved also with more world-wide things, which is why I served as a trustee, for a long time, with the World Wildlife Fund, or the World Wide Fund for Nature as it is now called. And then there are organisations which you get involved in because you simply can’t avoid them. I mean the mountain gorillas - I promised Dian Fossey that I would come back and help set up the Mountain Gorilla Project, which one did. And then there are various other things. But you can’t do everything, and you’ve got to cut off sections, and so what I don’t do is things to do with animal welfare. I mean it is very important - I’m all for it - but it’s a minefield. And you get yourself involved in all kinds of partisan sections about vivisection, or whatever. The thing I know about, a little about anyway, is ecology and conservation - simply in terms of space and biodiversity. That’s what I try and help with.

Int: Yes, but you still don’t get too deeply involved in the rough and tumble and controversy on the whole, do you? You make your views known, but then you —.

DA: Yes - I am a person who thinks that, by and large, you should only go for your objectives in a democratic society in a law abiding way. So I don’t support some of the extreme law breaking by Greenpeace, or whoever.

Int: No I wasn’t suggesting that, but you don’t, on the whole welcome opportunities to get into heated debates about conservation issues do you?

DA: Well, I do on some occasions, but again I have learnt from bitter experience, that it is very unwise to get involved, with the degree of public exposure that you have, in an issue which you don’t have first hand experience of. It will look absolutely great on paper. People say, “We want to conserve this plot of land and these evil people are trying to take it over, will you give us a statement?” So you make a statement and then someone shows to you that actually they are offering in exchange something that is much better. That the road that they wanted to put through is at the moment shaking —, because it is in order to take the traffic away from old ladies who are having their cottages shaken to pieces by huge trundling lorries that are going past. So unless you really know what it is that you are talking about in those circumstances, you are very unwise to get involved. And what is more you do a damage because the opponents then say, “Look - there you are. They’ve trundled on the same old stage army, they’ve got Attenborough *et al.*, and he’s never been down here and he doesn’t give a damn anyway, and he’s making a fool of himself.” And that doesn’t help them.

8. Reflections on career to date

Int: Somebody is going to look at this in 50 years’ time and say, “Who is this guy, David Attenborough. What was his motivation?” Is there anything that you want to say?

DA: One of the things that I have often wondered about, is how it is that television has been the great populariser of natural history. I mean why didn’t cinema do it? The answer to that is two fold: the first is that nobody wants to go out to the cinema to look at something for 50 minutes, and then come back home - you need a complete evening’s entertainment. And for that you need long stories and stars and that sort of stuff. If you are going to do natural history at all, it is done as a little filler, which of course doesn’t get the budget and doesn’t get the attention. But of course there are exceptions: The Living Desert (31) and Cousteau films, but by and large they never did it. And that is because natural history doesn’t take well to personalised



narratives that run longer than 50 minutes. So it is that television has become the visual medium which has really dealt with natural history in an unparalleled way and the coverage of natural history by television is one of television's feathers in its cap in my view - one of the really important things that it has done. After all, just about now, there are more people in the world that live in cities than live in the country. If we are to persuade people to take decisions about their lives which involve their pay packets and which involve their living conditions, all of which may be necessary in order to conserve natural history. They are never going to do that unless they know something about the natural world from which they have been cut off. The one medium which keeps them in touch with that is television. Actually looking back I can't say I went into television because I thought I would be carrying a torch or carrying a banner, I went into television and particularly natural history because it was fun. It was just great going off to Borneo for three and a half months and living with the Dyaks - I just had the time of my life. But looking back on it now after 40 years - it is nearly 50 - I reckon that I'm very fortunate in that I can look back and say, "Yes, it was worthwhile doing." It did something; it contributed something to the consciousness of people in this country, but not only this country - in Australia and America. You and I both know that we get letters from everywhere. From Russia, from China, from Hungary, from all kinds of people who say that they were moved and saw the value of natural history because of television. And that is something that you and I and the rest of us who work in this medium, I think, can say, "Happily, the way we enjoyed ourselves proved to be not without merit as far as the rest of the world is concerned."

Int: That certainly would apply to the last 40 or 50 years. I wonder if it's going to apply to the next 20 years. With the changing environment, I wonder what is going to happen.

DA: That is quite right - with the continuing division of the television audience, and the fragmentation of the television audience. But the interesting thing is that of those networks that the fragmentation that has started taking place in America already, it is already clear that there is a very, very substantial audience that want to get home, and after a harassing and ghastly day at the office or whatever, they are glad to be able to look at natural history and see something about reality which isn't clouded with advertising considerations, or political considerations, or see human beings acting in an abominable way.

Int: Yes, I mean it's always very stupid to predict what's coming up in the future because you will inevitably get it wrong. When I retired from at-Bristol somebody dug up a recording I'd made being interviewed by Angela Rippon about what was going to happen in the future. Some of it was right because I was talking about what was in fact Wildscreen, but I was also talking about laser discs, which don't exist any longer. It is very difficult to predict what is going to be this curious mix between television and the internet.

DA: Well that's true, but on the other hand television has forged a style and has demonstrated that people do like to look at, and it is possible to look at, one hour or two hours of serious reality. And that they both enjoy it and feel refreshed by it and that it is valuable. It may be that that goes onto DVDs or to some cable channel or Sky network. But this is here now; it's like demonstrating at the beginning of the 19th Century that actually a novel worked.

Bob Prince: Do you think that the kind of life you've led, that you've gained any insights, as it were? Say, for instance you talk about that realisation at the end of Life on Earth (28) that this is a single planet, that it's a complex thing. Do you think that, you may as a person have seen more of this planet than many or almost all of the people who have lived on it during its history before? Or maybe I am wrong about that. Do you think that has given you any special insight?

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DA: No I don't, honestly. In a way it might seem a boastful thing to say but it is also humiliating thing to say when you think what Darwin thought after three years or four years on that one trip. I mean he had enough to think about for the rest of his very long life and he produced extraordinary things. What I find humbling, is that here I am and it has to be, that for whatever reason, I've been zooming around the world for 40 years and have been privileged to go to a wide variety of places - that I've actually produced so little as a consequence. And I think that Darwin was probably right, that the lessons you can learn, the really important lessons you should distil from scientific observation of natural circumstances, can be done actually at the bottom of your garden - spinning at the bottom of their garden - as they can in the middle of the Galapagos or on the South Pole.

Desmond Hawkins: You've produced information in a different format to that which was capable of being done before television. So therefore you mustn't minimise what you've left behind - it's a different format.

DA: No, but Bob's question was, "Had I actually got a special view as a result of going around the world," which is a different thing. Television programmes are a different format, and that was what I was trying to say earlier. That really is a contribution, but I can't say that I have a wider perspective, or produced some huge insight as a consequence of keep whizzing about. That if I had enough wit I would've been able to get from looking at my compost heap.

Bob Prince: Because I'm doing some research into this, one of the things that I'm interested in is: to what extent do you think you are an original author of the works that you have worked on? You seem to have been, from what I have seen of statements that you have made, that you are quite modest about your contributions.

DA: I am, from that point of view, a journalist. I haven't made original observations. What happens is that, simply because of the requirement to distil and condense, you do sometimes see things which you hadn't actually realised. You see continuities which you didn't see before. I mustn't magnify this, but I've just finished writing a new series about mammals (32). A year ago when I started I had to make a decision as to how we were going to divide this up. For reasons that I was speaking about earlier, about when we were doing *Life on Earth* (28) I thought, "Keep it simple boy, keep it simple. What do you want to have? Do you want to have rodents together; you want to have carnivores together; and you want to have insectivores together; so you know where you are." And I was sure that was right - because it fits the taxonomy rather well. So I didn't say we want to do this for taxonomic reasons. I said it makes a nice logical thing: talking from the point of view of if you are a herbivore, you've got to have certain anatomy, you've got to have certain teeth, you're going to have certain gastric problems —. But that in turn affects your behaviour as to whether you are a loner or whether you form groups, and if you form groups that has an affect on your breeding system. And so everybody said, "Okay, you want to do it by diet?" And I said, "Yes - that's how I want to do it." So we started that way.

But last week I had to deal with the last programme which includes humanity and it was only then that the penny dropped on me that of course we continually talk about mans' intelligence and so on. But actually the reason why we dominate the earth is that we learnt how to domesticate our food – how we ought to organise our food supply. And it wasn't until we actually learnt to tame animals to take their meat and domesticated plants, that we were able to live together in great density. Because we lived in density we had specialist techniques that led to computers and going to the moon, but fundamentally it was about food. Anybody, I dare say would think about this if they thought about it for a couple of days, but none the less, I had been baffled and confused - thinking about all these other things: upright stance and all kind of other things, thumb and forefingers and tools - but actually it is food and the density of food. And of course, now is becoming the really crucial thing, because of genetically modified foods. So suddenly you see this sequence which stretches right from the early insectivores. As more and more things get more and more specialised on food



production, this is the crucial thing where are we going to do because the population dynamics, or the plant geneticists say that, "Yes - we can manage a population of 11 billion, at the moment we're 6-7 billion, the planet can stand 11 billion," think what it would do to —, anyway.

Int: But you'd almost got there in the last episode of Life on Earth (28) because you said something very similar in that.

DA: Yes, but I didn't say that I thought it was diet.

Desmond Hawkins: How does food increase one's brain power, one's brain size?

DA: It doesn't.

Desmond Hawkins: But then man has, we believe, a greater brain.

DA: Well, in point of fact, that was likely - it depends on whether you believe the aquatic ape theory - but certainly molluscs is thought to be one of the first pieces that you ate a high protein diet in order to allow the frontal lobes to develop. Then you had to deal with fire in order to cook material which you could actually digest. But the reason our brains have not done much since then, the reason that we are able to go to the moon is that we live together in order so that we could specialise. Not only cooperate but we were able to have specialist techniques we were able to have people who did nothing but make iron; and people who did nothing but then who would eventually invent writing and writing on books and so you got the whole specialism, but all that is founded on the fact —.

Desmond Hawkins: Why haven't apes made iron?

DA: None of them have been able to produce the population densities that have allowed them to specialise. And we have because we are able to grow fields and we're able to have towns of 10,000 people which we did quite early.

Int: But the brain size had arrived by then.

DA: That's right, but like computers now —, a child —, you computerise his brain, you feed in you programme his brain with digital mathematics now.

Int: If you get the brain size you cope with it.

Bob Prince: I'm quite interested in your use of the English Language, what I'm quite interested in as well is, how did you develop your use of the English Language? I was arguing in the car that I think you are a very important person in that sense, in that you have come up with a very clear and lucid way of explaining.

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Int: That's what I was mentioning about - that he doesn't go for quirky things.

Bob Prince: What did you read whilst you were at school? What was your English teacher like? Was that important to you?

DA: I don't think it was important to me at school but it is certainly important to me now. I think the business of writing commentaries should make you think very carefully about exactly what you use every single word for. It's a very good discipline that you've got to say something important in a time scale which is almost arbitrary. I mean the mean, "The pictures last that long so will you please explain mitosis, and you've got thirty seven and a half seconds to do it in." Then you —, makes you think and you realise how much of the words you have used are padding or guff - mind you padding and guff has its place. I'm flattered that you say what you say because in my art I do take a heck of a lot of trouble over commentaries – a lot. I really do. People, I think, find me tiresome every now and again because I argue about words.

Bob Prince: What you're saying is the process of making television —.

DA: It has, but on the other hand, I will now give you the old man's tetchiness of the inadequacies of youth, which is so boring. But I do find that the slovenly use of words is absolutely pervasive, I mean if you want to use a slovenly use of words there it is - that's a very bad way of putting it, but you know what I mean. People are simply not aware of how precise words can be and it is a great pity when you see that in the commentaries and I see it all the time. A lot of the stuff I do now is speaking commentaries that other people have written and I very often rewrite them pretty thoroughly. They are always very nice now because I'm so old and all that and I've been there, so they say, "Well if that's what he wants to do let him do it." Whether they know, whether they bother to say, "Why has he changed it from this to that," I don't know.

Desmond Hawkins: You very rarely use cliché.

DA: Yes, well one does one's best. You should see the sort of prefaces, people write to say, "Will you provide us a foreword for this guide to the salt marshes of the upper thingy and all you have to do is put your name at the bottom of this," and you think, "How can I possibly put my name at the bottom of this?" It takes a whole bloody day to re-write the thing and tease out what the emotions are and what the sentiments are and try to put them in some way that makes you —, well not a cliché. Okay. Was that it Bob?

END

Glossary

OB: outside broadcast

Telecine: a machine which electronically scans film and converts the visual information into a television signal

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