Desmond Morris: Oral History Transcription

Name of interviewee:

Desmond Morris

Name of interviewer:

Christopher Parsons

Date of interview:

06/09/2000

Place of interview:

Oxford, United Kingdom

Length of interview:

c. 80 minutes

1. The creation of Granada and the birth of Zoo Time

Int: What I'd like then to do is to start to talk about Granada. And I actually don't know how the Granada unit was formed, whether it was your idea, or Sidney Bernstein's idea. So can you take us through that scenario.

DM: Sure. Back in 1956 I was working here in Oxford studying animal behaviour with Niko Tinbergen and I was doing research into reproductive behaviour signals. But I had got interested in primate behaviour and I wanted to study mammals. Niko Tinbergen and his research group here in Oxford were very focused on insects, birds and fish. Niko felt that mammals were slightly sort of outside the scope of the sorts of studies he wanted to make. But I felt differently. I felt that mammals were suitable for **ethological** study for the kind of analysis that Tinbergen and Lorenz [Konrad Lorenz] had been making.

Lorenz had worked with quite a number of mammals, particularly with dogs and wolves and I thought it was time to move into that area. Niko wasn't interested and there was no way that I could get mammals into the zoology department in Oxford [Oxford University] really. Or, in Britain, there was not much to go out and study in the field quite frankly, that one could do as an observational study where one could sit with binoculars and watch mammals.

So I went to the London Zoo and asked them if there was any possibility of doing research there on the behaviour of their mammals. My link was that Alistair Hardy my professor here had been on The Discovery

going round the Antarctic with Leo Harrison Mathews who was a director of the zoo. So, he rung up Harrison Mathews and said, “I’ve got this young chap who wants to come and study your mammals. Would you have a word with him?” So I went to the zoo and I met Leo Harrison-Mathews and I sat down and talked to him. And I said, “Look, I’m doing animal behavioural research, I’ve done my doctor thesis on fish, I’m now doing post-doctoral research on bird behaviour, but I would love to study mammals and you have the biggest collection of mammals in the world here.” Which it was at the time. So I went to him really with no specific idea. Certainly no idea of doing any television work, and he said, “Well I’m terribly sorry we don’t have any research possibilities here at the zoo. We’ve no research grants, no research openings, we’ve —. The Zoological Society is an organisation that has scientific publications, scientific meetings and the zoological gardens which the public comes to and that’s a kind of another world. But I’m concerned with the scientific publications and the scientific conferences and we just don’t have any research on the animals in the gardens, they’re just put in the cages and people come and look at them.” And I said, “ Well that’s a terrible pity, because there’s a lot of behaviour going on there that we’re missing.” He said, “Well I’m sorry there’s no opening.” And so I said, “Well thank you anyway.” And I was just leaving when he said, “Hang on a minute.” And he pulled out a card and said, “Now we’ve just had a —. Something is being set up here. Have you ever made any films?” he said. And I said, “Well I did make two when I was 22 back in 1950, I made a couple of **surrealist** films.” So he said, “So you know about making films?” and I said, “Yes I do.” The truth was that these were amateur films made very inexpensively. But, he said, “Well, would you be interested in running a film unit at the zoo?” I wanted to get to the zoo one way or another, and although I really wanted to go there to do research I said, “Yes, of course”, immediately, without any hesitation.

And he said, “Well it’s Granada Television who’ve got in touch with us. Solly Zuckerman who is the secretary of the zoo is a friend of Sidney Bernstein who runs Granada Television. And they’ve been discussing the need for some kind of natural history programming on ITV [Independent Television], which is a new thing that’s happening, it’s coming along, it’s called Independent Television, it’s commercial television and it’s going to start soon and it’s going to be in competition with the BBC [British Broadcasting Corporation]. So —. and Sidney and Solly together have decided that we should have here at The London Zoo a — what they’re going to call the Granada TV, oblique Zoological Society TV and film unit. It’s got this cumbersome title because it’s going to be a joint venture between The Zoological Society and Granada Television. And, when we do this it means that we will be in a link with Granada Television which will be exclusive, and which will I’m afraid,” he said, “exclude the BBC. Which is a bit of a problem, because young David Attenborough is making this very good series called Zoo Quest (1), and he brings us rather nice animals which he goes out and collects, and he brings them back to the Zoo, puts them in the Zoo for us and we’re very glad to have them. And it gives us some nice publicity so we are very worried about that. I don’t know what will happen to that because Sidney Bernstein is managed to acquire the exclusive rights to The Zoological Society. But, Solly has insisted that if he does this, he has it properly run scientifically, so they’re looking for a scientist to run it. Would you be interested?”

I talked it over with Ramona [Morris] my wife who was here with me in Oxford and she said, “Yes, go for it. It sounds very exciting. This idea of a new television company, which will remove the BBC’s monopoly, and produce competitiveness in television is, I think, going to be very exciting.” And it was she who really encouraged me to do it because I was deeply into my research studies here. I was in the middle of a very complicated scientific study and I didn’t want to leave it. But, I had to, because ITV was about to go on the air and they couldn’t wait.

On February the 22nd 1956, I went for a screen test and Harry Watt who had been a film director and who was working for Granada sat me down in front of a camera and said, “Tell us about animals Desmond.” And I talked about the animals I’d been studying and some of the strange things they’d been doing, and I illustrated it with some drawings. I got a big card and I did drawings of the postures of these birds, how they displayed to one another. And he seemed happy enough. And I got the message, “Yes alright, you can have the post as Head of the new Granada TV and film unit.” I was a bit taken aback. I thought I was just going to go along and do a bit of filming but I suddenly discovered that I was now the head of a unit, a new unit, which was

ITV's only natural history unit. It was a bit of a challenge, but it was very exciting because it meant that I could get in amongst the mammals, which I was really interested in studying.

So, I had ten days in which to write up the research project I was in the middle of here, sell my house here, and Ramona and I then had to move to London, and I think it was a ten day gap. Well, the screen test was on February the 22nd 1956, we moved to the Zoo on March the 26th 1956, and the first television programme was transmitted on May the 8th. So it was a quick transition from the academic life, to fronting a television programme.

And this itself was a shock because I was under the impression when I went there that my main duty would be to make films about animal behaviour. And Sidney Bernstein who was a remarkable man had just started Granada Television, he took a risk because I had no idea what to do on television. And most of the people in those days who were working in television, regardless of whether the were doing a specialised subject or not, were people who had some sort of acting training, or training in show business of some sort, and Sidney was very adamant that he didn't want this. He said, "No, I want a scientist." He may have been influenced by Solly Zuckerman in his decision I suspect, but between them they decided that they wanted a scientist, and even though I was green and knew nothing about television and had never even seen it, leave alone been on it. They decided that they wanted somebody who knew the subject and could talk about it as a professional. And so they said, "We'll train him up. We'll train him to television, but we want to start with somebody who knows what he's doing. We want a professional zoologist."

Previously this had not happened very much. Armand and Michaela [Denis] were making On Safari (2), at the time, in Africa and it was very good of its kind but they weren't actually professional zoologists. George Cansdale who had done the earlier zoo programmes [All about Animals] (3) was not a zoologist either, he was a zoo man, and he had his own way of dealing with animals on television. But I was a new being in that I came from the Niko Tinbergen research group at Oxford and was plunged into popular television. They solved their problem because they had to solve it quickly because I had to go on the air in May of 1956, and they solved their problem by bringing in a very good director called Bill Gaskell who had worked in the theatre. And he was a very ruthless theatrical director who was himself trying out television as a new medium. He eventually went back to the theatre and became a very distinguished theatrical director and is, even today, in the year 2000, is, I found out the other day he is still acting as a consultant in the theatrical world. And Bill was an entirely new experience for me as an academic, because having been trained in the theatre, he was concerned with how I stood and moved and leant on an object, not just the content. He left the content to me, but he was very concerned with how I appeared on television and how I spoke. And he was wonderfully rude. You know he didn't sort of come in gently, he'd say, "You can't say that!" And he'd do it —. And it was wonderful. He made me because his rudeness—. I knew he was on my side. But what he did was he made me throw away all the dependent clauses. He made me throw away all the academic jargon. He made me throw away academic style, and it took him about twenty programmes to do it because of course each — we were doing a programme every week. And he got rid of the academic stiffness that was in me and for that I've always been grateful to him. And I enjoyed the — this very **acerbic** manner because it got rid of a lot of nonsense. We didn't have any politeness, we just went for it. And we were all up against it because Bill had never done live television before. We were all in there —. Well nobody had apart from the BBC. This was an entirely new project.

2. The first Zoo Time and bringing the studio to the animals

And Zoo Time (4) which started in —. As I say, the first transmission was on May the 8th 1956 (5) and it ran for about eleven years. I think there were about five hundred of them in the end. And I could never understand why it was successful. It puzzled me, because I had gone there to run a research unit and make

animal behaviour films, as I said. And we did indeed have a film cameraman and a team of people working in the unit as part of the zoo and we were making animal behaviour films, but they were — what Sidney Bernstein hadn't realised, it was a slow process. That you cannot film the reproductive cycle of an animal in two days. It tends to take a year or two. And so, our attempts to produce animal behaviour films was so slow that Sidney panicked. He had to have programmes on the air immediately. So he said, "Look Desmond, would you mind doing a half hour programme each week, live, it'll only take you half an hour, about animals in the zoo? And we'll put this on and that will mean that while you're making these serious animal behaviour films, which I gather are going to take rather a long time we'll have some product coming out from the unit." I said, "Okay, fine." I didn't know what I was letting myself in for. And so we started out, and we had this first Zoo Time on May the 8th (5). I'd only just arrived, I knew nothing about it at all and we had no where to do it. And they said, "Well you'll have to bring the animals to the studio." And I said, "No." It was the first argument I had. I said, "George Cansdale, my predecessor took zoo animals to the studio. The animals were disturbed by this, they did not behave naturally. They were upset by being moved about and in most cases all you got was a look at the animal, they didn't do anything, you just saw what shape it was, and also what it looked like when it was miserable." So I said, "I'm not going to do that." And I said, "Furthermore, bringing live animals to the studio causes all sorts of problems, and I'd been told that the most extraordinary thing that had happened when George used to take animals to Alexander Palace, was that he took a fruit bat one day and it escaped. And it lived in the rafters of Alexander Palace, and used to flit through the news, and through dramas. Every so often they would be in the middle of a drama from 'Alley Pally' [Alexander Palace], and this fruit bat would fly through and disappear, and everybody would look in horror. And this fruit bat made sudden appearances in large numbers of early programmes. Very often no more than a sort of shadow, but it sort of reduced a lot of early programmes to a kind of 'Dracula' sort of quality which wasn't really meant, that wasn't in the script.

And I thought no I'm not —. "This is silly, I'm not going to do this. The cameras will have to come to the zoo, and furthermore I want a studio, a proper studio built inside the zoo where I can acclimatise the animals in the week before they are shown so that they are at home. And this caused all sorts of consternation. My Producer was Dennis Foreman. I had two producers, Harry Watt and Dennis Foreman, but Dennis Foreman was the main one, because Harry left shortly afterwards to go back to feature films. But Dennis Foreman was very resourceful, and he managed to hijack a television studio that was on its way to Wembley. No sorry, to Wimbledon. It was a portable studio, which had been built and then dismantled and turned into flats, and was being taken to Wimbledon to interview the tennis stars after they had won Wimbledon. And Dennis Foreman heard about this, and literally hijacked it and got it diverted to the zoo and erected because we had to go on the air on May the 8th. I don't know what happened to the Wimbledon, but we got the studio. And it was built. This was all done in the matter of a week or so a complete studio was built inside the zoo. The zoo unit, the television and film unit, was in the old sanatorium building. They'd built a new animal hospital, and we took over the old one. And there was a big yard in front of it, a private yard next to the bird house in London Zoo where the studio could be erected behind the scenes without the public having access. It also gave us a yard where scanner vans and things could arrive and set up.

And so, by May the 8th, within a matter of weeks we had this studio erected, and we had worked out the script for the first programme in which animals were going to come in to it (5). It meant that I could —. It was decorated as if it was—. It was called my 'den' at the London Zoo, and it was decorated as though it was the den where I lived. Well I did to a large extent because I was in there all week getting animals used to it and making sure that they were going to be relaxed and comfortable.

So I won my point, my zoological point, which is, let's take the cameras to the animals, don't let's take the animals to the studios. And this was new, and this had never been done before. All previous animal things, I'm not talking about films now, but live television with animals, had been done in a studio where animals had been brought along in a bag or a box, and then taken out, and looking around and blinking looking at the lights and wondering where they where. So, we actually got a lot of behaviour out of the animals, and then unfortunately, Nikita Khrushchev chose this moment to give Princess Anne a bear cub called 'Niki', after

Nikita. And this bear cub arrived at the zoo a day or two before our first show went on the air, and it was big news obviously. Because it was an international gift and it was the first sign of any sort of friendship between Russia and the West. And Nikita Khrushchev made these sort of emotional gestures every so often as he was trying to break down the barriers a little bit, not much, but a little bit. The bear was — looked like a teddy-bear, but in fact it was incredibly ferocious and wild, and wanted to be back in Russia very badly. And, I when I met this bear knew that I was in trouble. Because I knew I had to make it the star of the show because of its news value. Any way, just as I was about to rehearse it, somebody arrived to take it round to show it to the Queen, because the Queen wanted to see what her daughter had been given by the Russian Leader. And so, a big black car arrived and whisked this bear Niki the brown bear cub, off to Buckingham Palace where it was allowed to run around on the lawn and promptly attacked the keeper who was in charge of it and the Queen only made one — came out to look at it and only made one comment when asked, "Maam, this is the bear that Mr Khrushchev has given to your daughter." She looked at the bear savaging the keeper and said, "What a silly man." And went indoors. And that was the end of that. And Princess Anne never did get to see her bear. At least I don't know, she may have seen it, but she never got to cuddle it because it wasn't cuddleable. Now nobody knew this because it looked like a teddy-bear and this first programme (5), this was the main point of it. And I started out the programme (5) with this bear, and it promptly clamped itself onto my arm. And luckily of course we were in black and white because people couldn't see the blood, and I bled for my art through the whole of the first hour of my life on television. And that was quite a challenge, because if you've actually got a bear that's clamped onto your forearm, and you're bleeding rather badly and it's your first television programme ever, and it's live, and all the animal's in it are coming on live with no — this was before videotape. This was a 'baptism of fire', and after that, everything else seemed quite easy. The programme of course, because the bear was so famous and popular was a great success and to my surprise, and I have to admit, horror, Zoo Time (4) became immensely successful. I say horror not because—. I enjoyed doing it, but it was only meant to be a minor part of my activities. I was a scientist. I wanted to do serious animal behaviour films.

We were making these films, we were filming the reproductive courtship of the bullhead. We were filming the way —.We were doing slow motion studies of the way in which the thrush could open a snail shell, which the blackbird cannot do. And we were comparing thrush and black —. Doing all these sort of little natural history things and filming them all very carefully, but they were taking too long. And so Zoo Time (4) became a weekly event and it began to take over our lives. Because to produce a half hour live show each week with no recordings possible, everything live, 'go', was quite a challenge and the programmes went out weekly from then on.

So the first Zoo Time (5) went out on May the 8th 1956, and by January the 1st 1959 we'd transmitted 135 of them and it went out almost every week. And this was all without any videotape. And the technique was that scanner vans would arrive at the zoo, all the cable connections were made and then these huge cameras, they were enormous in those days, with the rotating lenses at the front, which made life a nightmare for the presenter —. Oh, the joy the first day we got our zoom lens, I remember that. Those big cameras were then put in various positions around the zoo, and when the time came for me to start the programme I had to previously rehearse the time it took for me to run across the zoo.

Because Sidney Bernstein, for some reason decided that there should be only one presenter. He didn't like the idea of joint presenters. Now Ramona [Morris] my wife who was with me and who was working in the unit as a researcher, and later as a film librarian, and who was very beautiful and everybody wanted her to be doing the programmes with me. And Sidney wouldn't do this. Ramona didn't mind, she wasn't that keen. I mean, she would have done it if she'd been asked to do it, but she wasn't upset. But Sidney said, "No. I don't want another Armand and Michaela." Armand and Michaela [Denis] were 'the couple', and there was also Hans and Lotte Hass who were doing fish studies and Armand and Michaela were doing Africa. And it was becoming a bit of a joke. It was sort of,"Well done Michaela!" said Armand in his programmes. And Michaela had —. They were very good, don't get me wrong, and I was very impressed because at that stage they were extremely good for that period. And they were going out into Africa and they were showing people

wildlife in Africa and putting it on television. But the relationship between Armand and Michaela was a little arch, and that sort of —. In fact there was a saying at the zoo whenever a keeper did something well, they'd say, "Well done Michaela." It was the zoo joke. And that showed you the extent to which it had become a cliché. And Sidney Bernstein did not want to repeat that cliché. And he felt that if he had Desmond and Ramona Morris that would be somehow look as though we were doing our version of Armand and Michaela.

So that was forbidden, and I was the sole presenter, which was incredibly difficult because it meant that if we were doing some lions and then say, some penguins I had to say, "And now we're going to see the penguins." And then I had to run across the zoo to be with the penguins. And so we'd have a few minutes of sound effects while I was running across the zoo and then I'd be there and I'd say, "And here we are with the penguins"[imitates being breathless]. And I'd move on to the next one in this way. Now that was alright on most occasions, but it did get out of control occasionally.

And to give you two examples of the problems of filming now without videotape, when you cannot have any re-takes, and when whatever —. Of course, I say problems. Someone once said to me, "The only reason I watch the programme, is to see what will bite you this week." And people watched the programme as much for the disasters as for the successes. So, I learnt that, I realised that after a while, that if something awful happened, that if an animal —. I was with a giant tortoise on the lawn. Now, a giant tortoise is incredibly heavy and incredibly strong because it has to move that weight. And in the middle of the talking to the camera about the giant tortoise it started to walk off so I thought well, I'll stop it, and I put my hand on the front of its shell. So the next two minutes it's me being pulled across the lawn by a giant tortoise and I turned that into a talk about the strength of the giant tortoise. I said, "I had no idea —." Because I was learning, I genuinely didn't know how strong a giant tortoise was. It could pull a man across, with a microphone in his hand, across a lawn. And so, the viewers at that moment —. And that I always made use of these things. That if the giant tortoise was trying to ruin the shot by walking off, I would make capital out of that, by explaining that with this weight they have to have immensely powerful muscle systems. So, you would use it in that way.

Sometimes you couldn't use it. Because, on one occasion, we were in the reptile house, behind the scenes in the reptile house, with a lot of iguanas and lizards and things like this and giant tortoises again, and this time the giant tortoises wandered off, but I couldn't go with them because I had an iguana in my hands and they jammed between the two cameras. So now the cameras couldn't move either. We've now got giant tortoises jamming the cameras and nobody could move. And so I couldn't leave to do the next item because the cameras couldn't move with me, because the giant tortoises had jammed them. These were the sorts of things that nobody ever knew were happening.

I was told, and I think this was a mistake, Dennis Foreman said to me once, and it was the only time I ever disagreed with him because he was brilliant. He said, "You must never allow people to see the equipment." I said, "Well, actually when you —. If I could have shown a shot of this giant tortoise jamming between two cameras and the cameras not being able to move, I think people would have been entertained by this." He said, "No, no, no, television is magic." You've got to remember this is 1950s. And he said, "People don't understand about cameras and things like that. We mustn't ever let them know about the technical side of it."

And the first person incidentally in television history to break that rule was That, Was The Week That Was (7). For the first time ever, they did this shocking thing that you could actually see cameras, in picture. And That, Was The Week That Was (7), was a revolutionary programme in the sixties and they allowed people to see the cameras for the first time. Before that, it had to be magic. So I couldn't tell people what was happening so these dramas went on without anybody's knowledge.

3. Getting across scientific facts to the audience

And, because we had no videotape again, there were dangers, we took risks. Because we decided —. I wanted to demonstrate always, with each animal, not just to show an interesting animal, but to get across without people realising it a scientific fact. I had to do this secretly. I couldn't make this into a scientific educational programme because it was entertainment. But, I always slipped at least one zoological concept into each Zoo Time (4), and that was my —. I couldn't live with it otherwise as a scientist. I couldn't just show you feeding time at the penguin pool and the sea lion pond and so on. I just couldn't do that unless, I could get across to the audience - I had an audience of about two million a week - There was two million people, I wanted to get one week, without them realising it I would tell them what **countershading** was. Another week I would deal with visual signals of birds, or something. I would get some concept into a programme and nobody would notice it because I would do it, I would bring it in inadvertently and —.

For example, we were going to show them a cobra. Now, the one thing I wanted to demonstrate to them, despite the famous scene of the snake charmer, the cobra rears up out of the basket and the man plays his flute, and he plays his flute like this [pretends to play a flute], and the cobra weaves about [indicates snake movement]. Snakes are deaf. Now, it's no good telling people that because they don't believe you because they've seen the snake charmer and that's how they know the cobra. And they know the cobra likes music, you see. And so I said, "You know, this isn't true, and I'm going to demonstrate it to you," and, "I'm not going to tell you snakes are deaf, I'm going to prove it to you." And so we —. The idea was to have a cobra in a basket and I was going to play. I had the snake charmer's flute and I was going to play it and the snake would weave and then I was going to do it silently playing the flute and by weaving back and forth, of course, the snake followed my movements and was dancing to the music, but there wasn't any music. So that was the idea, and embedded in this bit of fun with a snake charmer's basket and all the rest of it, was a lesson that snakes are deaf. That was the zoological fact I was getting across. And I said to Reg Lambourne, the overseer of reptiles, "Now I'm not —. I know it's going to be risky, but I will not have this snake tampered with." Because of course, all snake charmers mutilate the snakes. They remove the fangs so that they can't strike. And I said, "I'm not going to do that. I will never —." One of the golden rules of Zoo Time (4), over 500 programmes, was that no animal must ever, ever suffer for this series. And so we had to use an intact cobra, which was extremely dangerous, because it was lethal, and had it struck and — at either Lambourne, or myself, we would have been dead within half an hour. Extremely painful death too, because it's a **neuro-toxin** which does all sorts of really very nasty things to you. So we were a bit nervous about this. Reg Lambourne said, "Don't worry, I will tape it, it won't hurt the snake, but I'll put tape around its tail so that when it rears up out of its basket it can't actually get loose. It can rear up, but its tail will be taped in. It won't hurt the snake and we can untape it afterwards." And I said, "Fine, well that's —. Because we've got these cameras we're in quite a small space with several cameramen around and, and a crew, you know. And I don't want to take any silly risks." So that's what we did and we were live. And it worked beautifully. I did my demonstration. It worked perfectly. I was very happy and I said, "Thank you very much." And as I said, "Thankyou," to Reg Lambourne, to my horror I saw the cobra come out of the basket, down on to the floor, and straight to camera number two. And the cameraman —. It's the only time I've ever seen a cameraman —. In those days they were huge pillar cameras, with great big camera on top of it. He actually managed to operate it from on top. He saw this cobra coming to him and he climbed up his own camera. And he was now trying to control his camera sitting on top of it, or sort of perched on it. And other people are disappearing. I've got no crew left, everybody's gone. And there was this one brave cameraman who's on top of his camera. We're live on television and this cobra is heading straight towards him. It's sort of, it's at the bottom of his camera. Reg Lambourne rushed after it and caught it, and got it back safely and we went on with the programme. And I said afterwards, "What. How did that happen?" And we looked in the basket and there was one thing we'd overlooked, the snake was just about to shed its skin, which is what it had done in the basket. So, we had neatly taped the shed skin of the snake in its basket and all we'd done was to aid it to shed its skin. Because, when a snake sheds its skin, it pushes against things like this [demonstrates action], to get rid of the skin. So that was the sort of nasty incident that occurred.

And there were two other examples that I'd mention. One is, was, the first time I showed a vampire bat. I'd always been fascinated by vampire bats. To me an animal that can make an entire bat out of blood, strikes me as being a physiological miracle. And apart from that they are fascinating animals. And they don't suck blood as you know, they, they slash with teeth that are so sharp that you don't feel it. They don't even wake you up. Harrison Mathews the director of the zoo who had been in South America, told me that he'd been bled by vampire bats because his toes sticking out of his tent. They come up in the night, they slash your toes they lap the blood like a cat, and then go away. And you wake up in the morning and you find these cuts on your toe. And you know you've been done by a vampire bat, and you don't even feel it, don't wake up. So we knew we were up against a difficult customer, but I got in a bat expert. I'm afraid I forget his name now, but he —. We didn't have a bat expert at the zoo so we imported one. And he was a fanatical. He had a bat hanging up in the back of his car instead of a little furry toy, and he used to cause crashes when people saw it spread its wings. And his car number was 'BAT 13', I remember and he was completely besotted by bats. He kept a fruit bat under his waistcoat and it used to pop its head up under the bottom of his waistcoat in an obscene manner. Which didn't seem to worry. We didn't have any complaints about that. But he was thrilled, he was so thrilled, because he'd never seen a vampire bat before. And, they'd only just arrived at the zoo. I didn't know that they carried rabies at the time and luckily this one seemed to be rabies free. But, but we had this vampire bat on the desk, this was live television, no video, no safety net, and this vampire bat is extraordinary because it, it can move in all directions. It jumps about like this [indicates jumping movement], like a sort of clockwork toy. And it was licking its lips [imitates licking lips] and looking around, and we'd got a dish of fresh blood for it. And we put this in front of it and it went (imitates lapping), and it was lapping this fresh blood which it really was enjoying. It was a wonderful meal because we got some very fresh blood and it started to sort of —. It actually began to sort of bulge with blood and it was really well fed. And now it had got its strength up, and at this point, and we were talking of course, about vampire bats and about the legends of vampire bats, and at this point it took off. And again, headed to this poor cameraman, number two. And it went straight to—. And it was flying towards camera number two. And our bat expert was terrified that someone was going to hurt it. He wasn't worried about the people. He was worried about his bat, this vampire bat. And he shouted out, he forgot he was on television, he shouted, "Don't hurt it, don't hurt it!" Because this bat was flying. And he forgot that he had a neck mic [microphone] on. Now in those days there were no radio mics, they were plugged in. And so he ran after the bat to try and catch it, but his cable ran out as he got half way across the studio. And so he was strangled. He reached the end of his cable and he went, "Aagh!" and the cable strangled him and he disappeared out of shot [indicates downward movement]. Now, what the viewers saw, was me saying, "The vampire bat it's got loose." And they saw it flying towards the camera, it went out of focus as it went towards the camera, followed by a bat man saying, "It's loose, it's loose!" And then suddenly he went, "Aagh!" and disappeared out of shot. So everybody at home thought, "My God, the vampire's got him." And the switchboard at the zoo was jammed. People panicked all over the — because there was a vampire loose in London. And this was the kind of nonsense —. Of course he caught it and it was safe and so on, but you couldn't explain to people. I didn't even realise that he'd gone out of focus in that traditional sort of horror film way just at the point where his cable ran out. And these were the kind of problems that we faced every time that we went on the air. And, for example, we had a **boom mic** because we were having such trouble with these mics that I was linked up to so we tried a boom, and we had this big boom, and I the programme, we were about to go on the air and I had an owl here [indicates owls position]. And as I said, "Hello and welcome to —." the owl flew up and landed on the boom, and the boom operator who wasn't noticing didn't realise that it had gone over the back. So, the actual opening shot of me, is me with an empty wrist saying "hello". And a boom comes down and hits me on the head because the balance was lost. So that was the opening of that programme.

4. Cameras as a research tool into animal behaviour

DM: One lesson I learned from taking television cameras into the zoo was about the animal's reactions to the cameras. Most of them didn't care. But lions for some extraordinary reason saw them as a threat. And on one occasion when we were filming the lion house where there were a series of large cages and we started

at one end and then the cameras and I would move down the cages talking about one lion after another. And to my astonishment - and you've got to remember this programme went out quite early, it was before the watershed anyway - and we get to the first pair of lions and I'm talking about them and then I notice that as the camera, which is a huge camera, almost lion-sized camera, and it's on a device that can raise it up high, they sort of pumped it up like this and it went up so that it was at the level of the lions looking slightly down at it. And this male lion took one look at this camera and decided it was a threat, and promptly copulated with the lioness. It was a curious reaction and I thought it was just a coincidence until we went down to the next. And I of course, quickly said, "Well, I think we'd better leave these lions and go to the next one!" And we got down to the next pair of lions and the same thing happened. And all the way down the lion house, as soon as the lion, and we had several pairs of lions, saw this camera looming up, it proceeded to copulate with the lioness, as much as to say, "this is my territory, I'm in charge here, this is my female, you keep out". A most extraordinary reaction, and it happened not once, but three times. So I then started to ask myself the question of how do, you know, how do lions respond? Why does it respond to this? And I started then thinking about **sign stimuli** and the fact that the camera was this shape (indicates shape of camera) and of course a lion's mane makes it that sort of shape. And maybe a human being is this shape. And so I —. You started to think about the reactions of animals in this way. And we learned a great deal about animal behaviour from filming them.

We had a young chimpanzee called Congo who appeared on many of these programmes (4) and who became a sort of television personality. And Congo again, one of the things I refused to do was to dress him up. I was asked to put nappies on him because he was a male with a conspicuous penis. And I refused. I said, "If this chimpanzee is dressed up I'm leaving." I used to get very stroppy in those days because I was a scientist and I wasn't going to appear with dressed up animals. And I remember there was a long debate this. Could they risk viewers seeing a chimpanzee's penis? And I said, "It's not very impressive, I don't think you need worry, it's not like a human penis it's a tiny spike, even" I suppose Congo must be the first being ever to have an erect penis on British television. But even when it was erect, it wasn't very impressive. And in the end they accepted this and nobody complained. We didn't have a single complaint about that.

I also made sure that Congo's behaviour was natural, and that he did things which, in which we were testing his intelligence, we were studying his reactions. And for example, we used a toy snake which you could wind up and then writhed [indicates with hands] and he was panic stricken by this snake and attacked it. And the interesting thing was that he attacked the head end of it, and he hit the head of the snake. Now this was something we were discovering. We were actually discovering things live on television. And we also —. I used television for the first time as a research tool. And I did this in a rather cunning way because I wanted to find out about people's reactions to different species. Which animals do people love, and which animals do people hate, and why? I was studying animal phobias at the time and why people hate snakes and spiders, and so on, which is an interesting **ethological** question. So I set a competition on television. Only a small prize, I've forgotten what it was now, a book or something. And children were asked to send in a postcard and on it they had to write what was they animal they liked most, what was the animal they hated most, and a third question which was, give us an idea of a good thing to show you on television, and that's the one they got the prize for. Because I didn't want the prize associated with clever answers to the first two questions. So we asked these three questions, they had to put their age and their sex and their name and sign it. And to my astonishment we had 84,000 postcards and I then employed people to analyse these, and on the basis of those 84,000 entries, which was a huge sample compared with most scientific studies, I was able to produce graphs showing fluctuation in the love and hate of different animal species at different ages and different sexes. I was able to demonstrate for the first time ever that there is a gender difference in the spider hatred which there is not in snake hatred. So because human females at puberty have a massive spider spider hatred which is not present in males, whereas snake hatred grows in both sexes equally. And I was able to analyse which animals were loved and then to say why were they loved. I started to analyse the qualities of those animals that made them lovable, and the qualities of the animals that were hated that made them hateful.

A curious thing happened because several years later, for some reason they lost a programme and they had to repeat one, and they accidentally repeated this programme. So, to my horror, I came into my room and found another 80,000 postcards which I wasn't expecting. I was now no longer at the —. I was now **Curator** of Mammals at the zoo and we had another, without knowing. "What's this?" and what was fascinating was, that we then repeated the analysis. We were now several years later, and there was only one change. Lions were much more loved, and in the intermediate zone, period between the first time and the second time, Elsa had appeared. Joy Adamson and Elsa (8). And in the first analysis lions were much more hated. I never thought of a lion as hateful, but children put them in the top ten hates. But now —. And that was the only shift, and it showed that one person, Joy Adamson, through Elsa the lioness had been able single-handedly to change a whole nation's attitude toward lions. Which is interesting, it shows the power one person can have in that way. So lions had become lovable, thanks to one person. That test gave me a lot of very valuable information which led on to studies by me. So television was very useful and I exploited in that way, without anybody even realising that this was being done as a serious scientific study. And it worked very well as a competition of course.

The only problem with Zoo Time (4) was that it was the uncertainty of it that made it exciting. And after a while I realised I was getting too comfortable with it. I'd done so many programmes, several hundred programmes and it was reaching a point where things were too easy. And so I deliberately did dangerous things to make myself adrenalise, to keep myself excited. And on one occasion I decided to - a ridiculous thing to do, horrible, I should never have done it. I taught British children how to pick up a scorpion, which if you stop to think about it was an absolutely ridiculous thing to have done. But luckily it went wrong so I don't think they would have tried it because I said —. I was again trying to demonstrate that all the trouble with scorpions comes in the tail. And everybody says with scorpions, "It's horrible, I can't touch it!" But of course you can. Provided you pick it up by the tail, it can't do anything because it's only the tail of the scorpion that's got the sting in it and I wanted to demonstrate that and so I did it. I had a lethal scorpion and I picked it up, by the tail. But, what I hadn't realised was that the scorpion has the ability to twist round and grab you with its **pincers**. And so, I was holding the scorpion's tail but it had got hold of me with its pincers and wasn't going to let go. And at this point I did start to adrenalise and of course my finger tips became slippery, I was losing my grip on the scorpion's tail, but it was not losing its grip on my hand. And any minute now it was going to get loose and kill me. So that did, that certainly got rid of the laziness that was — I felt was creeping in, and I started to adrenalise again and that was very exciting. It was a very tricky moment and a very stupid one. But it was the need to reintroduce some risk and excitement into it. These live programmes as I said, went on — they worked so well because they were so real that they went on for many years.

5. The end of Desmond's first stint on Zoo Time

Int: Why did it [Zoo Time] come to an end?

DM: I've been talking the early days of Zoo Time (4), when it was live doing the first 135 programmes, when we had no videotape and the problems we faced were very special problems which we managed to deal with. More or less. One of the things that was exciting then was the fact that you didn't know whether it was going to succeed. I didn't know, the viewer didn't know. And on one occasion when I was doing some marmots and they were supposed to come out of their burrow and look around and we knew they were going to it, but then the weather changed or something and then they wouldn't. So I did a whole two minutes on a hole in the ground and of course I had to - it was rather like cricket commentators when there's rain - you know, I had to think of something to say about a hole in the ground and I noticed that the rim of the hole was slightly proud, and I then started to explain how when it's going to rain which was what was keeping them in they would come out, they would be sensitive to changes in temperature, would come out and would actually push the earth round to have a proud lip to the hole to stop the rain going down it. So you know, you'd find

something to say even if you've only got a hole to look at. But, the fact that there was uncertainty, and that you never knew when something was going to work was part of the excitement of the programmes. And it also was part of the reality of the programmes. People have got very cynical today about natural history programmes because they're so perfect, they are so wonderful, so that they don't believe them anymore. And things happen now, particularly with say Oxford Scientific Films where you can go in a burrow and so on, and people would say, "Hey hang on, I mean this is supposed to be how that animal really lives". And what they have to do is to trust the integrity of film-makers with specialised advanced techniques, although they are cheating by having a camera in a burrow, but they have to trust the integrity that people are using these techniques to tell the truth. And they have to trust the film-maker that if he is showing something strange happening that you think you couldn't possibly film, that although he's cheating with his technique, he's cheating to tell the truth. And that's the integrity you have to rely upon. But the great thing about those days before video existed was that people knew they were seeing the truth and they loved —. It was warts and all, and they loved the warts because they loved it when it went wrong and I was in trouble. Any way, that was Zoo Time (4) in the early days.

As I mentioned earlier, I'd gone there to make animal behaviour films. We weren't able to include film clips because — of my serious studies of animal behaviour in Zoo Time (4) because Zoo Time (4) was all live. It just went out [voiced utterance indicating speed] and that was it. It was a live feed and that was it. There was no film, there was no tape at all of course in those days. But I did make — start a series called The World of Animals (9), and the first one was transmitted on May the 15th 1956 (10).

Right at the very beginning, it was the first thing we worked on and it was a serious look at animal behaviour. We looked at the social life of the hippopotamus I remember, with some wonderful film that had been brought in from Africa. And I put my commentary on it and analysed the behaviour. And it was a successful little programme. It went out in the evening on May the 15th, and right back in the —. This was in the first weeks of ITV, and it worked extremely well. But, the time and effort that it took to do it meant that we couldn't do it on a weekly basis and that was why Zoo Time (4) went ahead live, and the animal filming got slower and slower. And what happened was that I got more and more disturbed by the fact that we weren't actually able to start a proper animal behaviour series on television, which was what I'd gone there to do. So, after three years, I'd had enough of this and said, "Look, I want to make serious animal behaviour films." And they said, "Oh but Zoo Time (4) is such a success, you've got this big audience, you must do that." And I said, "I've done it for three years, I've done a hundred and thirty five of them, I want to stop that. I want to make serious films." And in the end I decided that I couldn't go on. And I left and I became **Curator** of Mammals at the zoo. Because, I'd been working at the zoo now for three years and I was known there. They needed a **curator** and so I took that job on. The irony was that once I left — and that happened —I became **Curator** on the 1st of January 1959. And the irony was that as soon as I became **Curator**, Granada didn't think I was going to leave and when I did leave, they realised that they had actually let me down by not letting me make serious animal behaviour films.

So then — and I was pleased about this — they then did bring in another **ethologist** from Oxford and she came in and they did make animal behaviour films and I was then used to do the commentaries for these. And so in the early 1960s Granada was at last doing what I'd always wanted to do. I was no longer in charge of the unit but, I was there and I was available to do this.

6. The arrival of videotape and Desmond's return to Zoo Time

And then of course an extraordinary thing happened. Videotape arrived. A momentus thing. I mean we take it for granted now, but it was momentus. Videotape, this was fantastic. You didn't have to worry about a one second shot or a five second shot or a thirty second shot, the cost of film. You could run the tape for hours

and it didn't matter. So, now they came to me and said, "Would I do Zoo Time (4) now? Because now they could record them all in batches." And the zoo said, "Fine", because of course, it was a half hour commercial for the zoo each week. And, so although I was now full time **Curator** at the zoo I was able to do Zoo Time (4) and we did it. We shot them two a day for a couple of weeks which meant we had what say, ten twenty — we did 26 programmes took about three weeks I think. So out what had taken me a year before live, I could now do in three weeks. We had 26 programmes. Each of them was repeated once later in the year. So, I was on the air now, every week, as I always had been, but it only took three weeks of my year. So it was like a sort of Granada vacation from my **Curatorship** and anyway I was there at the zoo. And so, although I was now **Curator** and running the whole of the mammals at the zoo, I was able to do, thanks to videotape, these batches. We shot them at —. Sidney Bernstein said, "I don't want to loose the live quality so you will not be allowed to edit your tape." So, actually for the next seven years, each year I would have three weeks of recording a batch of 26 Zoo Times (4), which were then repeated. So, there were about 500 Zoo Times (4) altogether and it didn't end until 1967. And throughout the 1960s I'd take this three weeks and I'd do a half-hour programme in the morning and a half-hour programme in the afternoon, day after day after day. It was exhausting, but, we never ever edited a Zoo Time (4). So, it was 'as live'. So we kept, even when there was video, we kept the atmosphere.

Someone cynically later on said to me it was because in those days tape was very expensive, it was the early days and tape was very expensive and Sidney didn't want the cost of editing it because he could reuse it if it was unedited. I don't think that's true. I think he really genuinely wanted to keep the atmosphere of live television. So people didn't even notice the difference. They didn't know that video had come along. That was the advantage to us, that we could record them in batches. And we had a good production team. And they prepared the whole thing and we just whooshed through the zoo. We covered the entire zoo and Whipsnade because we were doing Whipsnade as well, in two or three weeks.

So Zoo Time (4) went on its merry way. The zoo unit, the Granada zoo unit, the natural history at the zoo unit, grew and got bigger and bigger and they made a lot of films. Ramona [Morris] my wife remained with the zoo unit and became film librarian and she was in charge of a library of what amounted to a million feet of film of animal behaviour material. All in black and white and that archive I think sadly has been lost. But it was a wonderful archive and she indexed it, species and behaviour. So that every species was indexed and every kind of behaviour was indexed. And her assistant, which is interesting historically, her assistant librarian, was a young girl who'd arrived at the zoo and applied for the job and her name was Jane Goodall. And I'm ashamed to say none of us recognised her potential. We —. She was a lovely girl, we all adored her, but we never realised how great she was going to become later on. I did notice that she had a strong affinity for apes and it was her little car that used to transport the big orang-utan who was so fatted that it couldn't walk the distance to the television studio. And there are pictures of her, Jane Goodall in her car driving with this huge orang-utan sitting next to her being brought up to the Granada unit for filming.

We made —. The one thing that was exciting was that we made a film —. I'd been making a study of chimpanzee painting and the origin of art, serious study of the roots of art. And I worked for a long period, several years with one particular chimpanzee developing the picture making of that animal and we did make a special film about that which is a unique record of a chimpanzee, the only time anybody has done a serious study, a serious attempt at getting chimpanzees to make pictures. And that —. There is a film, a one hour film called Behaviour of Higher Primates in Captivity (11), which was lodged with the Zoological Society and which was done for lecture purposes. I used it for lecturing and it contained all the exciting material we'd got on the behaviour of chimpanzees in captivity, in which I was able to study play patterns, responses to snakes and various other things.

But, the film unit remained, it grew, it started to make all the films I'd wanted to make but I was no longer able to be actively involved except to do commentaries for it. My role as **Curator** of Mammals was full time. What I did do though was, I started a research team studying animal behaviour at the Zoo [London Zoo]. Because I

said, “There’s so much going on here, we’re wasting it all. Animals are coming in and they’re living here and they are not being studied.” And I got doctoral students. I had about half a dozen doctoral students who used me as the field. They would be in a department somewhere and they would come to me as if going to a field station and do all their studies with me. And I was given a lot of accommodation and had a very good research team working there, about half a dozen doctoral students. One of whom, John Sparks came on to be the head of the Natural History Unit [BBC] at Bristol eventually. And Jan Van Holf who was my first student went back to Holland and he and his brother had the top rating programme on Dutch television with their zoo because they’d come from the Arnhem Zoo where they grew up. Their father had started the Arnhem Zoo. So he went back and did television there. Lyall Watson was another of my students, and he went on to do, to write bestsellers, and to do a lot of television work. He went on, I think, he worked on Tommorrow’s World (12), and various other programmes. And they’d all had their first taste of television as guests on Zoo Time (4), so it was a good breeding ground for people like that.

7. Approach by the BBC

And then, in 1960 — I must get the date exactly right —1961, I’d been —. I was **Curator** from 1959, and in October 1961, I was approached by Desmond Hawkins. Old friend of mine, I’d known him for many years and he persuaded Ramona and I to go to Bristol where he tried very hard to persuade me to take over the Natural History Unit [BBC]. And I was at the time, the only professional zoologist who’d actually run a television unit, and so I was an obvious choice from his point of view. I was very flattered and loved the idea of taking over the Natural History Unit in Bristol because I knew, there, I could do the thing that I had gone to London to do, and not been able to do. I wouldn’t have taken the job in London if I hadn’t been promised the opportunity of making serious animal behaviour films. When that didn’t happen I was very disappointed and Desmond at Bristol was already starting, admittedly it was early days and the techniques were not very advanced, but he was already starting to do that kind of film. And Heinz Sielmann’s Woodpecker film (13) had already gone on and that was a revolution to people. People were very excited by this, and we were beginning to get closer to animals and study. It wasn’t a matter of “ahh look, there’s an animal,” through the binoculars, it was now getting inside the nesting box. And although we didn’t have good equipment yet, the ideas were there for filming natural history. And Peter Scott of course, had **Slimbridge** which was near to Bristol, and he was associated very strongly with it and Look (14) was a programme that was going out from there at the time. And so, in the 1960s, BBC Natural History Unit in Bristol showed great promise.

It was early days, but it looked as though it could develop into something, which of course, we now know it did. And there was an attempt to make it into an important centre. Bristol in those days was —. They wanted to make it an important centre. And they did two things. One thing was, they tried to get me to leave the zoo [London Zoo] and go there. Now, I would have done, I would have left my **Curatorship**. I agonised over this for about two weeks with Ramona [Morris] we agonised and agonised, because we’d both wanted to do this, because I knew at Bristol I could do the kind of animal filming I’d wanted to do. But I was now, not only **Curator**, who was developing all sorts of ideas at the zoo, but I’d got a research group of doctoral students working with me. And I went to Bristol University and I saw — I tried to find out whether I could move my research group there, and it wasn’t possible. And I couldn’t abandon all those people who were doing important behavioural research. So my research team was really the thing that stopped me going. But it was a hard decision, particularly because something else had happened at about that time. No, actually it was earlier.

What isn’t generally known is that —. Now I’ve got to get the dates right here. This was much earlier, this was back in 1950. In 1950 Peter Scott decided to make Bristol the main centre for animal behaviour studies. He knew that — I think Desmond Hawkins was already there, I’m not sure, but anyway, the point was that Peter Scott wanted **Slimbridge** to become a major centre for animal behaviour studies. Niko Tinbergen and I had been down to see him when I was a student here and Niko was very impressed and we spent time visiting Peter Scott there at **Slimbridge**. And then Peter invited Konrad Lorenz to come over and join the

Slimbridge team and become the director of animal behaviour research at **Slimbridge**. Now this isn't generally known. Konrad came over to Bristol and in 1950 he gave a series of lectures at Bristol University. And I was student then elsewhere and I rushed down to Bristol and heard Konrad speak. And he was inspirational, this was a genius, this man wasn't brilliant, he was a genius. He simply brought to life the whole world of animals and Peter Scott was determined to get him to join there. And had it happened, had it happened, Konrad would have made Bristol into the great centre for animal behaviour studies, which would have led —. And with his skill on television, Konrad's skill on television was amazing to see. His early appearances were knockout, and he would have become the great figure. Because, Peter Scott, although he did a lot of television, he was a very quiet man and Peter, he was a lovely man, but he didn't have the charisma of Konrad Lorenz. Konrad Lorenz is like one of these people who do cookery programmes you know, come at you like this [gestures] and you can't take your eyes off him and it would have been marvellous if it had happened, but it all went wrong. It went wrong in a personal way. There was a personal problem and Konrad had to rush back to Germany because he was in the Russian zone at the time, and there was a threat to his family and he had to get back and move his institute [Konrad Lorenz Institute for **Ethology**] to the West. Because of that, he couldn't take up the post and it all went wrong, which was a great shame because with Tinbergen in Oxford, and Lorenz in Bristol, it would have been a completely different history. However, Desmond was very upset because he must have known about that and the loss of Konrad Lorenz, and now he couldn't get me to come down from the zoo because I wouldn't leave my research unit, wouldn't betray all my students and leave them in the lurch.

So, I stayed at the zoo and went on doing Zoo Time (4). Zoo Time (4) had a run that went right through until I left England and it only stopped because I left England. I think it would have gone on forever like Animal Magic (15). Talking of Animal Magic (14), that was going at about the same time. And it gave me a problem because Johnny Morris was an old friend of mine. He's not a relative but we'd known one another since the 1940s, we knew one another before either of us had stepped in front of a microphone and I was very fond of him. But I couldn't stand the **anthropomorphism** of what he was doing, because I was trying very hard to show animal's natural behaviour and I hated the funny voices and all the rest of it. Which was, I knew it was entertaining, but it was the old-fashioned form of television and it was very difficult for me because I loved Johnny as a person, but I didn't like his way of televising animals. And it's rather a coincidence I suppose, that it was one of my students who had been with me and developed this objective analysis of animal behaviour, anti-**anthropomorphic** way of looking at animals, John Sparks, who eventually was in later years I discovered, the person who actually killed off Animal Magic (15). Much to Johnny's disgust. The —. And John Sparks of course, coming from that group eventually, although I didn't go, but one of my students eventually came from my research group, and he took over the (BBC) Natural History Unit and introduced a more **ethological** approach to animal behaviour studies. So the Zoo Time (4) series went trundling on, I was now deeply involved in writing books and in making research projects.

There was —. I've got a note of two little milestones in that on November the 5th 1962, we did the first colour test at the zoo [London Zoo] for television. And I can't remember it now, I don't remember it. I have a note in my records that that was when we did the very first colour tests for television at the zoo.

8. Desmond Morris and David Attenborough

Then in 19 —. I should now introduce David Attenborough into the story because David and I had both started in the 1950s. He did Zoo Quest (1) for BBC, I was doing Zoo Time (4) for ITV, so we were the two —. and we were told by our bosses never to speak to one another. Our bosses said, "You must never collude, you must never get together, you are rivals, you are enemies!" and so on, and so we became friends immediately. And Harrison Matthews introduced us, and very early on in the 1950s, and we had dinner together and got on like a house on fire, and have been friends ever since and of course, ignored this ridiculous ruling. And David went on doing Zoo Quest (1) because the zoo had a special arrangement

whereby, although Granada had got the exclusive television rights to the zoo, the animals David brought back from his Zoo Quests (1), were excluded from that arrangement, we had a 'gentleman's agreement,' so he could then get those animals to the studio afterwards to look at and so on. And David was very successful at his Zoo Quest (1) programmes. Although he now looks back on them with faint horror because he was trapping animals and bringing them back to the zoo, which is something as he said he'd never do today of course.

The curious thing about the way in which David and I presented programmes is that, it wasn't until I did a programme about the history of television — natural history on television — that I realised how we'd changed. And I took a video of this round to David and showed it to him. And in the beginning of it there was me introducing Zoo Time (4), and him introducing Zoo Quest (1). And I was showing him this was what? Now in 1980. So I was showing him this video. And I came on first and said, "Hello, welcome to the London Zoo." And David fell about laughing you see, and then, his face came up and he said, "Hello, welcome to Zoo Quest." And we both had this sort of, "Hello," cut glass voice. And we realised that without recognising what's happening, tonality changes. And you know those early 'Ally Pally' [Alexandra Palace] films of the early — "Hello, welcome to the BBC." And the funny thing is that David and I couldn't believe — well, we had no choice, because there it was — but we actually had those funny cut glass voices and so the way of speaking had changed and we hadn't realised it.

But David had been sucked into the BBC hierarchy. The 'Peter principle' was operating, the principle that says that you are always promoted beyond your level of competence. Actually, it wasn't true in David's case because he was competent as an administrator. He was all too competent, that was the trouble. But his real level—. I think the 'Peter principle' should be changed. It's not that you get promoted beyond the level of your competence, it's that you get promoted beyond the level where you really are in love with your work. And what David was in love with was making programmes. But he was so good at it that they said, "Look, we want to start a new television channel". And, at the time he was visiting —he was — I was having behaviour seminars and David was coming along to sit in at my behaviour seminars on animal behaviour at the zoo [London Zoo]. And he was now being asked to come back to BBC — because he wanted to get back in to academic life again at this point. And, he was asked to come and run a new channel called BBC2. And it was too big a challenge, he couldn't resist it. But of course, it took him away from the thing he loved doing, which was making programmes. The first thing he did when he took over BBC2, was to say, "now what sort of programmes do I want to have?" And he'd been coming to my seminars at London Zoo where each week we'd have a —someone would give a talk, but it wouldn't just be a lecture, it would be a discussion. And it was pretty violent, I mean people arguing and shouting. We'd all have a drink afterwards but no punches were pulled. And this appealed to David. David thought this was wonderful because usually you go to a scientific conference or something, and everybody sits there half asleep whilst somebody drones on about their research. This was different, this was a furious debate about primate expressions or evolution of chimpanzees. 'And, why haven't chimpanzees got tails?' and all kinds of things like this which we were debating hotly as animal behaviour topics.

And it was a group of only about a dozen of us who were all doing animal behaviour research and David sat in on this. And when he took over BBC2, he thought, there's never been a television programme about animals, in which people discuss issues. 'Is there a Loch Ness monster? You know, 'is there a yeti?' 'Do they really —.' 'What —.' 'Why are people—.' 'Is there any scientific evidence at all for something like that?' 'Is the wolf really the ancestor of the dog?' Which I think was the very first programme I made for him (16).

And so, he decided to get the BBC Natural History Unit in Bristol to do a new programme, chaired by a zoologist, which would not only show animals, but would actually have discussions about evolution, about issues of natural history importance. A whole hour on human diet, 'should we be vegetarians or not?' This was way, way before this became an issue. And so we were doing programmes on hot topics in zoology. And what he did —. Well I say we— I, he decided he wanted a zoologist to do it and he thought of me and asked

me if I would do it, and I agreed. And on November the 14th 1965 the first programme called Life (16), the full title was Life in the Animal World (17), but the main title was Life went out. It was a one-hour programme and it went out fortnightly from Bristol. It was done in the studio in Bristol, and I was given enough money to bring in experts from all over the world to discuss. And people had violently different attitudes towards animal behaviour topics. And there were some pretty fiery debates took place and those programmes went on until January the 23rd 1968, which was Life number 53 (18). We did 53 of them before I left England.

And during that time we also did the first colour programme which was a Life programme in colour on January 20th 1967 (19). It was —. I'm not sure now whether it was ever transmitted, but it was the first time they'd done a full programme with this marvellous new thing called colour. And that was done over at Television Centre. And we had every colour we could think of every colourful animal, it was wonderful, because at last we could have colour on television, which of course I'd been crying out for, for years. So Life (17) was used as the vehicle for that first colour programme at the BBC.

And over that period, from 1965 to 1968 this one-hour programme went out every fortnight. It alternated with Horizon (20). Horizon dealt with human topics, and we dealt with animal topics. But I cheated a bit because I introduced some human /animal studies into it. If we were looking at facial expressions of monkeys, and how monkeys communicated with facial expressions, I would add in a bit about human facial expressions, because I was getting more and more interested in the 1960s in human behaviour, in the human animal. And those programmes included some very interesting archival material, which I think has been lost, sadly. For example, a one hour tribute to Julian Huxley in which he gave his last interview, in which he told anecdotes about Aldous Huxley, and was talked about by people like Konrad Lorenz and Niko Tinbergen, Ernst Mayer and it was — and Peter Scott, and there was some wonderful material, but sadly I think a lot of that has been lost, which is a great tragedy. Not because of me, but because of the people who I got into it. And I got all the leading people of the day including people who were violently opposed to one another's theories and they were arguing furiously in the studio, which was wonderful.

9. The Naked Ape and Desmond's move to Malta

DM: But, then the unexpected happened, and in 1967 I'd written a book called Naked Ape (21), and it was published in October of 1967. To my utter astonishment, it took off and became a best-seller. And it was so successful that I didn't need to work again. I couldn't believe what had happened, it happened overnight. It was like winning the lottery. At the time I was still doing, Zoo Time (4) was still going on in 1967 even though I was now doing Life (17). At one stage I was doing Zoo Time (4) weekly for Granada, Life on Earth [Life] (17) fortnightly for BBC, running the mammal **curatorship** at the zoo, and in addition to that was writing books, doing radio series (22) at Broadcasting House, reviewing all the animal books for TLS (Times Literary Supplement) (23) in London and my health was collapsing and it did collapse. And I had to be in —. I became seriously ill. I just burnt out. I was enjoying it all but it was too much and so I said, "Look, I've got to stop Zoo Time (4). I can't go on doing this." And the last Zoo Time (4) edits I did, I went to Manchester and did the last set of edits for Zoo Time (4) on January the 7th 1967 and I said, "Look i'm sorry, I just can't do this any more." But I did go on doing Life (17) and I continued to do that right up to the time I left England in 1968. January the 23rd was the last one and at that point there was a problem because Life (17) was going very well and it alternated with Horizon (20) and they wanted to keep both of them going —.

I'd been over-working so much in the sixties, only because I loved it all. But it had begun to affect my health and when I had to take the giant panda to Russia as part of my research into giant pandas, because Ramona [Morris] and I had written a book about giant pandas (24), we also made a programme (25) for BBC about giant pandas at the time, and I took ChiChi from London Zoo to Moscow Zoo to try and mate the London panda with the Russian panda, and it was a very traumatic period. During which time the Russians believed that I was a spy and did everything in their power to trap me. The —. I was puzzled by this, but I don't think they believed that an Englishman, on his own, going to — this was in the Cold War, going to Moscow in dead of winter to, to plan the mating of two giant pandas, they thought it was a cover story. And they thought I was spying and unfortunately, we'd just caught one of their spies and they wanted a swap and they thought I would be good for that. And so they tried to get me involved with the plans of a secret factory, they bugged my room, they dismantled my electric razor, which all fell to pieces to see where my microphones were. I was followed everywhere and the whole thing was pretty traumatic. And the temperature was minus 35. It was as cold as it ever gets without actually sort of killing you, and I came back from this experience puzzled by the way I'd been treated, and collapsed.

My health —. it was the last straw. And when my health collapsed, this was in 1966, in the spring of 1966, and when I recovered I decided to cut down my workload. And that was when I told Granada that I'd have to stop doing it. I'd tried to stop doing Zoo Time several times, but they always got me back again and because I'd sort of made it mine. It wasn't that I was better than anybody else, it was just that it was my show. And they tried a replacement and broke the golden rule of Sidney Bernstein, which was, that they used an actor who didn't know anything about animals. And I remember I heard him talk about the elephant's horns, he meant tusks, and he said horns. And when I heard that I thought, that's it, I've got to go back. I didn't want to go back, because I was now busy. But, I cannot have this sort of rubbish going out from the London Zoo when I was a **Curator** there, so I went back and did it. But it was a strain to do all of that as well as my **Curatorship**. And then with Life (17) for David Attenborough's BBC2, Life in the Animal World (17), on top of all that and it was getting too much. So, in 1966 I conked out for a month or so, the only time I've ever been ill in my life. But I was just worn out. And so I said, "That's it, I'm stopping Zoo Time," at that point. And they never replaced me, they didn't, because it had become so much identified with me so that was the end of Zoo Time. I went on doing Life in the Animal World (17).

And I did incidentally, for what it's worth, discover the reason why they thought I was a spy. And I don't know whether you know this, but there was a natural historian called Maxwell Knight, do you remember Maxwell Knight? And Max Knight and I did a lot of broadcasts together. He never did television, but he did a lot of radio. And Max and I and Peter Scott and James Fisher used to do programmes called things like Animal Parliament (26) and so on, answering listener's questions and we did a lot of broadcasting from Broadcasting House. And, I knew Max as an **avuncular**, friendly old bloke, who loved animals and had written several books about how to keep pets. He wasn't in my book, a serious scientist, he was just a nice chap who liked animals and wrote books about pets. And he was very softly spoken and amusing and friendly and so on. What I didn't know was that he was the chief spymaster for British Intelligence and was in charge of all the British spies. And that in fact, Ian Fleming, when he wrote the Bond books (27), as a joke, made James Bond's boss, gave him the initial 'M'. And it wasn't until many years later, they published the biography of Max Knight and the title of the biography was 'The man who was 'M' (28) because Ian Fleming, as a joke, because he knew about the intelligence business, had used Max's initial. And so, no wonder the Russians thought I was a spy. No wonder they gave me such a bad time, because they thought I was one of Max's boys, because they knew I did programmes with Max. And I was Max's cover, because Max's cover was to be a nice gentle natural historian, when in fact, around the other side of Regent's Park he was running the spy network. So, that was why I got into all that trouble. It's not really relevant, but it's an interesting story because Max was involved in broadcasting about animals.

Anyway, when The Naked Ape (21) happened in 1967 and I suddenly found myself able to do whatever I wanted to do, Ramona [Morris] and I went off to live in the Mediterranean and we stayed there for a number of years. And I stopped all my activities other than writing. I wrote books out there, and I painted pictures, which was what I wanted to do. And I stopped all broadcasting, and I didn't do a single broadcast of any kind

during that period. The Nicholas Crocker, who I think, at the time was running the Natural History Unit [BBC] came out to Malta — spent some time with me to discuss what was to be done, because they'd lost David [Attenborough] to administration, he was running BBC2, they'd lost me because I'd gone to live in Malta. And we two, had been the two sort of people they had been looking to for natural history filming , and he came out and we had a long debate about what we should do and where we should find somebody else, and who was around. And he wanted to pick my brains on all the people I had used in my programmes and as to whether any of them would be suitable. And the only reason that Life (17) stopped was because I went. It would have gone on I think and with colour, and with modern techniques would have got better and better and has never been replaced.

One of the sad things is that there has never ever been a programme like it again in which people discuss issues of natural history. I haven't heard an objectively controlled discussion on animal liberation. You get the sort of frantic programmes, passionate programmes, for or against, but what we tried to do though was to take an issue and examine it objectively. We'd have different viewpoints and there'd be arguments and discussions, but we were trying to get at the scientific truth of modern issues. And today for example, if I was doing Life on Earth [Life (17)] I would do cloning, I would do genetically modified crops, I would have all these sorts of topics, I would discuss them with the people who are involved, with the critics and the scientists who are doing it.

And that kind of programming lasted from 1965 to 1968, and then it vanished. It's never reappeared. And it was David's idea, I'm not — it's no credit to me, it was David Attenborough's idea, and it was a brilliant idea. I enjoyed it enormously, and I just wish it could come back. However, David —. I was now out in Malta, living in Malta and Cyprus and David was running BBC2. David came out, he'd come out each year and spend his summer holidays with his family with us, and it was clear to me that he was getting increasingly unhappy with his administrative role. The trouble was, he was too good at it. It wasn't that he'd been elevated above his level of competence, it's that he was so good at it and so imaginative, and created so many marvellous ideas that they were desperate for him to stay on. And when he finally said, "I can't take any more. I've got to get — I want to go back and make programmes again!" And so they said, "Well, have BBC1 as well." And so he said, "Oh alright, well okay." Couldn't resist that, so now he had BBC1 and BBC2. And so each time he came out and spent a holiday with us I could see him becoming more and more agitated about not being able to make films. In fact, during the run of Life on Earth [Life (17)], there was one time when for whatever —oh it was when I was ill! And there were two or three programmes to be made in Africa about research in Africa and David managed to play 'hookey' from his job as the boss to go out — so he took over from me for those two or three programmes and was able to go out to Africa and actually do some filming again because I was ill. He was so thrilled about that. And he could only do it of course, because I was ill and "they had to find somebody". Because of course, he should have been on whatever floor it is, the administrative floor at Television Centre organising things and having boring committee meetings instead of enjoying himself in Africa. So he did manage to get in that whole period he only managed those one or two programmes. Anyway, we had long discussions about this in Malta and about the future of it all and he said, "Look, I really have got to get back to it. But it's so difficult, you know." And I said "Look, life's short. You're a great programme maker, if you're unhappy, for God's sake, just give it all up."

And one day at his house, Huw Weldon got me on one side and said, "He's not really going to leave, is he? He's not, he can't be!" And of course, I suddenly realised that it wasn't — part of the trouble was, that if you're the captain of the ship and you decide you'd rather be up in the rigging, then there's something wrong with being the captain of a ship. And of course, David wanted to be a programme maker and they kept promoting him up and they said I bet you they said to him, "One day you'll be Director General." And you see, he didn't want any of that and Huw was horrified, and I suddenly realised that was saying to me, without saying it, he was saying, "It's an insult to us if Attenborough goes back into the ranks when we've elevated him to this level." Because of course if you prefer going out and making programmes standing in up to your knees in bat dung, rather than in committees with Huw Weldon and people it isn't seen kindly by those administrators. But of course, David is a very strong character and in the end, despite all they did to keep

him, he left. And I saw this happening when he came out to us. Because, he would arrive in Malta as the Controller, and he'd be all sort of buttoned up and twitchy and "Where's the next committee meeting?" and all the rest of it and so on. And after 48 hours he'd got his binoculars out and he was up on top of the villa and I'd say, "What are you doing?" and he'd say, "I'm looking at **phosphatic nodule layers**" And we were off, and he was back and it was fascinating to see him because he was such a — he loved being out on location, making programmes. But even though he was an administrator and couldn't do it anymore, with us, on holiday, he'd got us climbing over the cliff-tops looking for sharks teeth and he was once again on his zoo quests compulsively. And we were bathing in a little cove somewhere, and I looked across and there he was doing a fifteen minute programme about a sea cucumber to two startled children that he couldn't—. And there were these two little children and he was saying, "And you see how—." And there was David, "And at this end —."And he was telling them —. And he was doing a programme which normally would be for fifteen million people, but there were these two little children who were getting fifteen minutes on the sea cucumber, whether they liked it or not. And that was David, and that's why he's such a success, because it's genuine, he loves telling people about animals. And that's of course, why he's gone back and why I'm so pleased that I didn't. Some people were saying to him, "Oh David, it's too important, you should stay as Controller" and so on and I didn't. I said, "No, you go back and make some programmes." And thank goodness he did because then in the 1970s he made Life on Earth (29), which is probably the greatest series ever made.

10. Desmond's return to Oxford and recent films

And that really brings me to the end of that period, which I think is the part — because since then when I did return to —I came back — Niko Tinbergen came out and said, "You must come back and do some research." And he came out to Malta and persuaded me to come back to Oxford, and I said, "I'll come back and do some research for a few years." That was in the 1970s and I'm still here now in the year 2000, still in Oxford, still doing research and, but what has happened to me is, that during the past whatever it is, 30 years since I came back, I have concentrated on human behaviour because I got interested in human zoology. I'm a zoologist, but I like studying the human animal, it became my species.

And I've only returned to the Natural History Unit [BBC] once. No. That's not true, once or twice, because what I've done is the only series they've made on the human animal, called The Human Animal (30), and it was only a single series because of course they can't bias in favour of human behaviour. But they did allow me on one occasion to do a series, a natural history series about human beings, treating human beings as I did in The Naked Ape (21), as an animal species.

But by and large, I've stopped doing my natural history filming when I left England in1968 and since then, apart from my human studies, my animal behaviour studies have all been to do with domestic animals. And I have made a series for Australian television on the relationship between man and animals called The Animal Contract (31). But apart from that, a little television I did later on I didn't really want to go back to doing zoo programmes because I'd fallen out of love with the zoo because I'd realised more and more, that zoos are so distorting to animals, and so damaging to animals. And that I tried very hard during the course of my **Curatorship**, and when I was making Zoo Time (4), I was trying all the time, to put some complexity back into the lives of bored zoo animals with not much success. And I became increasingly dissatisfied with what zoos were doing to animals and increasingly pessimistic about my attempts to make zoo animal's environments more complicated. It's getting better now, a little bit better now, but it's still not ideal. So I didn't really want to go back to that, and, but I have made — I did do series of programmes for Bristol called — which I'd forgotten about, called — about domestic animals, called Tiger on the Tiles (32), which is about the —looking at the domestic cat as an animal, and Wolf in Your Living Room (33) on the dog, and Beast of the Field (34), about other domestic animals. And most of my animal work in the last twenty or thirty years has been to do with domestic animals and not with wildlife. It's something I miss, and I often wonder why I didn't go back to it but I think I just became too obsessed with the human animal, and that has really preoccupied me ever since.

END

Glossary

Acerbic: Harsh in tone.

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

Avuncular: pertaining to, or characteristic of an uncle.

Curator: The person in charge of a museum, art collection, etc.

Boom: A long movable arm used to manoeuvre and support a microphone.

Countershading: A type of protective colouration in which animals are darker on their dorsal surface than on their ventral surface, thus ensuring that illumination from above renders them evenly coloured and inconspicuous.

Ethology/Ethological: the study of animal behaviour with emphasis on the behavioural patterns that occur in natural environments.

Neuro-toxin: A toxin that affects the functioning of the nervous system.

Phosphatic nodule layers: layers of rock with a high concentration of phosphates in nodular or compact masses. The phosphates may be derived from a variety of sources, including marine invertebrates that secrete shells of calcium phosphate, and the bones and excrement of vertebrates.

Pincers: Claws adapted for grasping.

Sign stimuli: Part of a stimulus that is sufficient to evoke a behavioural response in an animal.

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

Surrealist: A 20th-century literary and artistic movement that attempts to express the workings of the subconscious and is characterized by fantastic imagery and incongruous juxtaposition of subject matter.

References

1. *Zoo Quest* (BBC, 1955 -1961)
2. *On Safari* (Armand Denis, 1957-59 and 1961-65)
3. *All about Animals* (BBC, 1955)
4. *Zoo Time* (Granada, 1958-1968)
5. *1st Zoo Time* (Granada, May 1956)
6. *135th Zoo Time* (Granada, 1959)
7. *That Was The Week That Was* (BBC, 1962-1963)
8. ELSA THE LIONESS (BBC, tx. 03/02/1961)
9. *The World of Animals (1956)*

10. 1st WORLD OF ANIMALS (May, 1956)

11. THE BEHAVIOUR OF HIGHER PRIMATES IN CAPTIVITY (Desmond Morris)

12. *Tomorrow's World* (BBC, 1965-present)

13. WOODPECKERS (Peter Scott) (BBC, tx. 15 January 1955)

14. *Look* (BBC, 1955 – 1969)

15. *Animal Magic* (BBC, 1963 - 1984)

16. MANS BEST FRIEND (*Life*) (BBC, tx 14 November 1965)

17. *Life* (BBC, 1965-68)

18. HUMAN ETHOLOGY (*Life*) (BBC, tx 23 January 1968)

19. Life programme- 1st colour on TV. 20 January 1957.

20. *Horizon* (BBC, 1964-present)

21. Morris, D. (1967) *The Naked Ape: A zoologists study of the human animal*. Jonathon Cape, London.

22. Desmond Morris radio series?

23. *Times Literary Supplement* (1902-present) Times Newspapers Limited, News International, London)

24. Morris, D. and Morris, R. (1966) *Men and Pandas*. McGraw-Hill, New York.

25. THE GIANT PANDA (*Life*) (BBC tx 31 October 1966)

26. *Animal Parliament* (BBC Radio, 1947-1966)

27. James Bond (1953-1966) Various publishers.

28. Masters, A. (1986) *The Man Who Was M: Life of Charles Henry Maxwell Knight*. HarperCollins Publishers Ltd., London.

29. *Life on Earth* (BBC, 1979)

30. *The Human Animal* (BBC, 1994-2001)

31. *The Animal Contract*. (Desmond Morris, Co-production: Garner MacLennan and Design Lifetime Productions International, 1991)

32. TIGER ON THE TILES (BBC, tx 24 December 1988)

33. THE WOLF IN YOUR LIVING ROOM (BBC, tx 04 April 1988)

34. BEASTS OF THE FIELD (BBC, tx 24 December 1989)

Copyright