



## **Dione Gilmour: Oral History Transcription**

**Name of interviewee(s):**

Dione Gilmour

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

Dione Gilmour is a long standing producer at the ABC NHU in Australia

**Name of interviewer:**

Barry Paine

**Reasons why interviewer chosen:**

Long standing friend and colleague

**Date of interview:**

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**Place of interview:**

Bristol, UK

**WFH tape number(s):**

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Wildscreen

### **1. Early career and starting at the ABC Natural History Unit**

*Int: Dione, start by telling us who you are.*

DG: Dione Gilmour, I'm Australian. I think that's a defining thing being an Australian and I work for the ABC Natural History Unit and have done since I first met you in 1974.

*Int: You is Barry Paine one should actually add in case that's not been transcribed. What's your present position?*

DG: I'm head of the Natural History Unit at the ABC and I have a team of people working with me. I commission programmes from independents in Australia. I review programmes that come in, recommend



whether they should be bought or not. I have time slots and schedule for going to air. I sort of look after natural history in Australia because we're the only group in Australia apart from independents and very small groups. We're the only group of any size in Australia.

*Int: Dione, I first met you in Paris in 1974. You were at an ecological conference in Paris, I think, at that time. When we first met Joel Edgecliff? and all those guys, and later of course that year we were to make a film together down in Melbourne, which you'll talk about later I'm sure. And what I want to know now is before 1974 what happened to you that was perhaps leading to you towards what you have done for the rest of your life?*

DG: I have absolutely no remembrance of meeting you in Paris because that's how long ago it was.

*Int: I'm not surprised because there was a very good party going on there actually.*

DG: What happened was, I started off as a teacher, a primary school teacher. I worked then with ABC presenting programmes for little kids in maths and science. I was fairly dedicated to that. Television was a whole new game. It was in the days when you didn't have stop start video, you'd get out on the studio floor and away you'd go, present a programme for 20 minutes at a time. I was dedicated then to the idea of improved education and I went on a six month trip round the world with my husband who's a marine biologist. Went to schools in the States and decided that education wasn't for me because I really hated what the Americans were doing with primary schools and kids.

So I came back and I resigned and I looked round for another job, I had nothing in mind. I was interested in biology but I knew nothing about, absolutely nothing about it. What did I do then? I think that because I'd been part of the ABC, there are two people in the ABC who were very influential at that stage. One was an executive producer called Robert Horne who looked after special projects, including natural history that was being made then and a producer, a wild, mad man called Ken Taylor. I went to see Robert Horne and I said can I get a job with natural history and he said, "oh, no I don't think so". Then he said, "well, do you think you can control Ken Taylor" and I said, "well, of course I can control anybody". He said, well, I'll give you a six weeks job researching and working with Ken, as long as you can control him. After two days I found I had no hope of controlling him but I did have a six week job researching and I spent the next 18 months, I think, on six week contracts, continuous ones. They got fed up with renewing them.

But my remembrance of meeting you, Barry, was you had just done Year of the Green Centre (1). My very first day was the day before you left Australia having shot. You rushed into this office, very important BBC producer. I was totally and utterly petrified of this man who said, I want this information and I want this, this, this and this, and I want it in two weeks and I want it sent to the BBC so I can cut this film. I thought, my God, I don't even know what this, this and this means but I'll take notes and I'll try and find out. So that was my strong remembrance. I'll never forget the feel of that day, of you coming into the place.

Because of my husband's work I had really good contacts with scientists all round Australia. They were sort of social contacts but I went to lots of conferences with him, that's true. At this stage I was getting really interested about how scientists, particularly biologists, didn't communicate with the public. Now that they had fantastic ideas, none of them were very complicated, they were interesting ideas but they weren't getting out. They were not translating them and they'd sit in meetings and they'd say why don't people understand this and why don't they realise that. I thought, well, this is something that's really important to try and be the interface between the scientists and the community.

So when I started I was never terribly keen on doing the films about the individual animals that some people do so remarkably well. I really wanted to work far more on ecological films, films that actually looked at communities, looked at relationships between communities. Also the ones that had humans as part of that. I think then because you were very influential in those early days, my husband was working on a project where they were looking at Western Port Bay, a large bay close to Melbourne. Where it was interdisciplinary work which was scientists, universities, state government departments, looking at this fairly pristine bay that was about to have industrial organisations built all round it. They were looking and trying to predict the effects of what would happen, and I think that I might have actually got that going, I can't remember. But I think that I came to the BBC, I was enthusiastic about it, and BBC decided to come in with you to make another BBC-ABC co-production on this project. (2)

I think it was the same time that Chris Parsons said to me you want to go down and meet this group called Oxford Scientific Films. Who are Oxford Scientific Films, I had no idea. He said you'll enjoy them. You just drive down the road and you'll find these guys and they're very pleasant, and they all sit round at lunchtimes and eat wholemeal bread and good things, and they're great. So I went down to meet Oxford Scientific Films, vastly impressed because I didn't understand a thing they were doing. I said to them, well, do you want to come out to Australia to work on this project because Peter Parks was doing all the plankton filming. They said, yes, they'd like to come out to Australia, this would be a great idea. Things worked differently in those days and I went back to Bristol and I rang my boss, this wonderful Bob Horne, and remember I was still a six week researcher at this stage. I said, Bob, we've got this fabulous group called Oxford Scientific Films and they're going to come out to Australia to work on this film. He said, that's a good idea Dee. If somebody did it to me now I don't what I'd say to them. But he was just encouraging and, oh yes, I'm sure we can manage that and let's do it. So you came out, Peter Parks came out and John Paling wasn't it?

*Int: Correct.*

DG: And we set up in a laboratory where we had people bringing animals into them and sample of seawater and so on, and they started recording pictures. My remembrance at that time —

*Int: We should say filming pictures at that time because they were on film.*

DG: Absolutely on film and Peter brought out his optical bench, a gigantic piece of equipment. I think that we found and filmed species of animals that had never been known before, unknown to science. It was quite remarkable that you had these images and nobody quite knew what they were because nobody had looked before. To think that you were actually filming unknown animals was one of the most exciting things. I don't know, how did that film go in the U.K. because it was really important to Australia, quite a seminal film in Australia.

*Int: I think it was transmitted and it vanished into the ether. What I've never found out is what happened to the project after the film was made, whether it was worth doing. Whether the collaboration between industry and science really worked.*

DG: The science really worked and what happened, I don't know.

*Int: Nobody does, I've never had an answer to it, never.*

DG: No, there's not an answer. I mean various things went wrong, various things went right. How much of what went wrong was helped by the fact that all that science had taken place, I have no idea. Certainly raised the consciousness that you could do science in a different way in Australia. I mean it was a major project for Australia, at that stage.

So we made that film and I worked as your sort of PA/researcher.

*Int: You gave me a really hard time because you're not going to say it but I'm going to say it.*

DG: And we all lived down in a house on location and we revolted against the BBC producer who never washed up. But we did learn an enormous amount, I learnt an enormous amount from you because you were presenting as well. I thought it was really interesting how somebody could look after the scientific side and the filming but also present at the same time. There were little things and I'll never forget you standing on a little edge which was about three inches high and talking about the micro clips in the mangroves. It suddenly made me realise that you had to look at the most commonplace things with a new eye and it was part of what filmmaking was all about. So that was a real lesson for me.

We went on after that to — when I say we, the ABC went on after that to bring more Oxford Scientific Film people out to Australia at times. In fact, they all came out. In fact, the very first time the next group came out it was Gerald Thompson and John Cooke, both about 6ft 4, 6ft 5, I was still the researcher. I went to the airport to pick them up as my job said and then these two giants walked out of the plane, clad totally in khakis as if they were going out into Central Africa, and I thought, oh my God, do I even speak to them, this is so embarrassing. They even had putties on to protect themselves from the snakes in the middle of Melbourne, it was very funny.

We made some half hour films with them. Because I was riveted at that stage by the idea that there were all these things that everybody knew but there was a whole heap of stuff that was small that nobody had seen before, and nobody knew anything about the behaviour. Most Australians didn't recognise what they had. So I think that the techniques of Oxford Scientific Films actually exposed a lot again to the Australian audience. Do you remember a bloke who was in charge of the Fishes and Wildlife Department, Alf Butcher?

*Int: Alf Butcher, yes.*

DG: He was a man who had vision, who actually gave us money to be able to do these things.

*Int: Yes, he got us the first authorisation and the cash to get OSF paid to come down, didn't he?*

DG: That's right.

*Int: He was obviously doing that, yes.*

DG: Again, things that would never happen these days but he made sure that we actually had something



from the minister that said we could capture any native animals and keep them for as long as we like for filming. Now you'd have to go through 25 ethics committees and heavens knows what. But he helped ease the way because he understood about publicity. He understood about conveying these ideas to the public that it was really a supplement to the sort of work that he did.

Meanwhile in the unit at this stage, run by Bob Horne, there was this brilliant young man who we saw at intervals. He'd been working in the Antarctic. He then went up and filmed in Papua New Guinea for great periods of time. Then he went down to the Antarctic, then he went back up to Papua New Guinea, and in between times he'd come into the office and he would spend 12, 14, 16 hours a day editing his films. It's David Parer who's still there. Probably, not probably, he is one of the most successful and without any doubt one of the best cameraman/director/producers on this planet I think. A man who's won two Golden Pandas at Wildscreen which I don't think anybody's yet done apart from David. He's still working, he's making a film about platypus at the moment.<sup>(3)</sup> He went in the field in early January for three or four weeks. He came out six months later because he had difficulties, so he just stuck there till he can do it. This is a man of total dedication, total vision and the most fabulous cameraman you can possibly find, and a wonderful person and a close friend. I think it was really the combination of David Parer with his skill, his genius. The two of us together really became the core of the Natural History Unit and people came and went but David and I went on, and were able to build up some sort of skills in the whole natural history side in Australia.

So it was encouraged by Bob Horne initially but then we went on with other people but I think that's always been the heart of the Unit is the two of us. A great man, an absolutely great man.

## **2. ABC Natural History Unit and Nature of Australia**

*Int: Because you then had a change of Unit head I think, didn't you?*

DG: We had, yes. Bob Horne had to retire at 65 and off he went. The rest of the ABC always finds natural history very amusing. It's a small unit right away from the headquarters in Sydney. It's in Melbourne, it's out of sight, out of mind. Every so often we'd produce a film and they'd put it to air and it would do extraordinarily well. But we were people who took so long and they never knew what we were doing, and we did things that nobody else did and they really didn't want to know about us.

So we had a change of leadership of the Unit and they advertised and they employed a chap who had been in charge of current affairs. His name was John Vandenberg and he had been looking after a programme that went out every night of the week, five nights a week. So 3 o'clock every afternoon he'd get to it and he'd start walking around the editing rooms waiting for the programme because he knew it had to be on air by 7.30. So he came into natural history with certain policies. He was going to make programmes much more quickly, much more cheaply and reform this group that was absolutely uncontrollable. He was going to take control and he tried, he really did try. For six months he tried and then he gave up, and he sank, he became like the rest of us. He took a long time and a lot of thought to make programmes.

He had vision with other people that, Australia was coming up to a bicentenary in 1988 and we wanted a celebration for this 200 years. So people put in various ideas for doing a series of programmes, and I think for something like six major series was suggested at that time. We put up one for natural history on Australia, and again BBC came into that with us as a co-production. <sup>(4)</sup> I think that was the first time that we disappeared. We didn't come to anything overseas, we didn't do anything else. We just worked for four years on that series. We were encouraged by Chris Parsons over in the BBC. John Sparks was the exec producer from the BBC who used to swan out on the odd occasion but mostly go bird watching. We really sweated it





out trying to make the series, and David Parer produced three and I produced three of these. It took a long time. John Vandenbeld wrote them.

You've got to realise that most Australians know very little about Australia and very little about natural history. I can remember the first couple of meetings we had talking to John Vandenbeld about this big project. We talked to him about marsupials in South America and he actually didn't believe it. He thought marsupials were only in Australia. So if you think of the extent of the change in knowledge that he had to acquire over the four years of making that series, and we all learnt a lot of things about the biology of Australia. We got a lot of help from scientists and so on. We did a lot of filming, and it was the time when you didn't go out and do three days filming here and four days filming there. You'd go out and you'd get lost for three months. Often you wouldn't be near a phone for three months and this is literally true, you wouldn't ring home for three months.

We separated it out. We tried to sort of work out what sort of concepts we'd use to develop the series, and in the end we decided on regional ones because it also gave us a slight evolutionary feel through the series as well. David, of course, was his own cameraman. I wanted a cameraman to work with me. We had a very good chap, Keith Taylor, who was ABC but we needed somebody else. We got a chap called Neil Rettig from the States who was absolutely perfect for what we wanted. Again a bit of a rebel, a bit of a wild man but a man you could take into the field for three months and would do the most outrageous things. A daredevil, absolute daredevil, and I think he produced some of the most fabulous pictures of Australia that have ever been taken.

So for four years we worked on the series and really the Unit disappeared and anybody else in the Unit disappeared, and it became really David and I working on the series with some support staff.

*Int: We should say the series was called?*

DG: The series was called Nature of Australia (4). At the end of the day we produced this series and I think it's the landmark series. That's why I've talked about it for so long because it was a landmark series for us as a unit and put us on the map. Secondly, it was a landmark series for Australia, everybody in Australia watched it. In a population of Australia we sold something like 110,000 VHS cassettes which is amazing when you think of the population of Australia. We sold 70,000 copies of the book that went with it. The viewing figures were enormous. Even the business newspapers wrote about it. Everybody was talking about it.

A lot of those programmes showed Australians an Australia they didn't even know existed. It showed them animals that were quite a reasonable height and size and so on that people didn't know about. It's because Australia's the most urbanised country on earth, I think, that people know there's an outback. They know it's a sort of romantic, tough place out there but they didn't know what lived there, and so we filmed those things for the very first time. Then we spent a lot of time in editing, pulled them all together. It was one of the toughest, most exciting, conceptually difficult, seeing things that nobody had ever seen before and filming them. It was an amazing series and we still show that series from time to time. We still use the outs from that series to actually make new programmes now.

As I say, David had had all this experience working in the Antarctic and Papua New Guinea, so he had done some of these sorts of things before. A lot of it was pretty new to me and it was very successful. I remember coming across to Wildscreen and on the very first day staying in Drury's Hotel, going down to the very first party, and a whole mob of us had come over from Australia. We were in the lift and there were a couple of

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



people in the lift, and they said, you've got to see the Australian films. It was the first time we realised that we might be successful on an international front. I'll never forget the buzz, the sort of up and down the back of the spine thinking about, my God, we've really entered into the international arena in our own right. We won a Wildscreen award with that. But I think in retrospect it there was our pleasure, but I think in retrospect it was exposing Australians to what was there and showing them some reasons why things were there. That was the important thing.

### **3. Working on Life on Earth**

But going back on some of that, I mean there were things that happened. For instance, Chris Parsons, I've jumped over a whole lot so it's really out of order. But I think one of the things is Chris Parsons started Life on Earth, Chris and David. I wrote to Chris Parsons because I was totally naïve and this is very early days, and said I would really like to come and work on Life on Earth (5), would you have me? Chris Parsons wrote me a delightful, charming letter that basically said, no, go away, and so I thought well, okay, I don't really know much about biology and I'm putting myself up as being a researcher on Life on Earth (5). Because I had said in my initial letter, I think this might be a good way of learning about biology which was probably not the right thing to say anyhow.

Then Chris came out to Australia with John Sparks and they were doing their first recce, and he came and stayed with us and we introduced him to many scientists, we gave him lots of contacts. Chris went home and he rang up a couple of weeks later, about one in the morning, got his times wrong. We were in bed, phone rang, I leapt out of bed to answer it, it was Chris. He said, "do you fancy coming across and working on Life on Earth (5) on a bursary, a BBC bursary?" I said yes, I'll be there, when? I went back to bed and my husband said to me, who was that, and I said it was Chris Parsons from the BBC. He wants me to go and work on Life on Earth for three months and he said, oh, we'll discuss it in the morning. I think that was the beginning of the end of my marriage in fact.

And, again, it was the generosity. What happened was I came over, I spent six weeks living with Chris and Liz Parsons, living in their house, coming to the office every day, researching, working. I don't think I was any help at all but I learnt. I learnt how to actually run a big series. I learnt the organisations, I learnt what the PAs do. I mean it sounds simple stuff but if you haven't had it in your own country you don't know. So to actually go out and see this and be part of this, and to help with this, to go out on location with David and Chris. Again, one of the great memories is David Attenborough, Chris Parsons, would drive round sitting in the front seat, I would sit in the back. They would not stop talking because I was there. All their problems, all the things that they were trying to talk about.

DG: So apart from working in the office we would also go out on location filming. I think the greatest privilege in life was Chris Parsons driving of course as David Attenborough never drives, and David Attenborough sitting in the front seat, me sitting in the back seat. And those two guys obviously had problems. They had problems with the producers they were working with, they had problems with the content. When I say problems they were things that they had to discuss. I never felt that they stopped discussing things because I was there. They were quite happy to expose things to me of things they had to solve, discussions that they had to have. Again, in retrospect that's one of the most valuable things that I've had for managing a unit, is hearing how those guys went about solving the problems. Just amazing.

I can remember we'd go and we'd stay in pubs at night because we filmed on wet Welsh hillsides. The producers at that time, the whole idea was you couldn't argue with David about his scripts, there was no way.

What David said went. If you discussed with him in anyway whatsoever he would smile gently and that was it. So they would have to convince Chris and Chris would then go and discuss with David about how these scripts would go, or if they had a problem with the script. Often they had disagreements about the biology of how things were going to go. Chris would only take certain of these things to do David. So what they would do on a couple of occasions was try and convince me of the problem and ask me to go to David because it didn't matter. He could shoot me down in flames but I was off back to Australia shortly. So they set me up in the firing line and I was naïve and wanting to be helpful, and why not do it? I got wiped off the floor by David Attenborough so many times because of my lack of biological knowledge and not being able to argue things through. It was again a great experience, just a great experience to have that happen. I mean you were mortified at the time but it really taught me about thinking things through in a filmic way.

So I had some weeks doing that and then Chris Parsons said I want you to go to Oxford Scientific Films and you're going to stay with Peter Parks, and you're going to help Peter Parks and Gerald Thompson with the material they're doing. I said, okay, I don't know what on Earth I'll be doing there. So I went and stayed at Peter Parks' house for six weeks, he and his family looked after me.

Peter Parks was just incredible. He was very private about his gear because that was his capital but he explained his gear absolutely thoroughly to me because he knew I didn't understand one single word about it. So he could really talk to me about things. Chris said, look, one of your big jobs here is Gerald Thompson always films everything against cabbage leaves. Now you've got to persuade him that this is not a good idea and that you really need to get a slightly better set than this, and you don't need cabbage leaves particularly for Amazon whatever's or Papua New Guinea something or other else's.

I managed to convince Gerald eventually of this but at this stage I think Peter Parks was shooting all his plankton material against black. Chris really wanted me to try and work with Peter to get a colour background, to actually get some depth and dimension in the background of the plankton work. I like to think in a little way I helped do some of these things too. It was really exciting but they made me for the bunny.

For instance, I saw a clip of the film last night about David Attenborough walking along seeing the horseshoe crabs in Delaware Bay and the *Limulus* (6). They then imported the eggs so OSF could do the hatching of the eggs. So they sent me, bunny, down to Heathrow to collect the *Limulus* eggs, and you can imagine trying to get *Limulus* eggs through quarantine into this country. *Limulus*, not on the list, no, you can't bring these things into the country. I spent hours with these guys. So in the end I just got a chair and I sat opposite the manager's desk, and I said I'm staying here until I get these eggs because I was too frightened to go back to Peter Parks without the eggs. I just couldn't do it. So then I thought, come on, this is like filming, think laterally. I said let me have a look at your list of what I can bring in and then I thought I could bring in crabs. So I said these are crab eggs, that's exactly what they are. Why didn't you tell me that in the first place?

So I took my little packets of crab eggs back to OSF because I had to get them straightaway because they might have died. Then we tried to film them hatching and this was very difficult, and then we found out that they actually had to move like they would move in the sand with the waves. It was the abrasion of the sand that would actually cause the *Limulus* eggs to hatch. So we did some of that and eventually that sequence happened.

We also worked on millipedes and I used to have to go out into Whitham Wood and dig round and collect millipedes. I learned how to sex a millipede and one of my great achievements in life, I can still sex a millipede. It's really important, you never know when you might want to sex a millipede.



But again, for an Australian, going into the leaf litter in Whitham Wood and pulling out and finding out millipedes, I would never do this at home because you never know what you're going to find there. You're going to find really venomous spiders or insects or be bitten. A totally different experience of learning to do these things, and having collected all these millipedes and put them in the fridge, and sexed them and paired them up so you could get copulation of millipedes, they decided they were too small. They sent for these lovely ones from Sri Lanka that were this long which made life a whole lot easier, and all my millipede work went out the window.

It's that arrangement then, and I'm not sure it happens now. I think the bigger picture of all this that I'm saying is that attitude of, okay, here's someone who is a woman and there were very few women in the Natural History Unit in BBC at this stage, very few. Here's a woman from the colonies, and there was certainly a feeling of that at times, but we will do everything to help her. I look a lot of the decision making and a lot of way I've run the Natural History Unit, and it came from the experiences in that time. Probably the most pivotal in my life to actually give me a sense of management style, story telling, problem solving, film making, audiences. All of those things really started with that time.

I think one of the most important pieces of advice, Chris Parsons always gave me advice, every day he gave me advice. But the one piece that stuck in my mind was you'll be asked to make decisions all the time you're filming, all the time you're out working. He said the biggest problem in our business is people never make a decision. He said always give a yes or a no. He said you'll be 50% right and they're good odds. I've used that because so many times people come to you with these problems and you think, oh my God, we should really look at this, what are all the options. Sometimes the right thing is to just say, here it is, so everybody knows where they're going and I think that was the whole point. Let the guys working with you know exactly where they're going and how they're going.

So there were very practical things I got out of that but also much more attitudinal things. I think they gave me a vision of what we might possibly be able to do in Australia. So I still think of Chris Parsons in some ways as the father of the Natural History Unit in ABC Australia. Because it was that sort of support, gentle encouragement, not putting me down except when I really needed to be put down, the help, and we've always gone back to him. If we've had a problem with the programme we'll send over a VHS and say, Chris, we've got a structural problem here, how do we solve it and so on.

#### **4. Keeping the ABC Natural History Unit going**

The next thing, and I know I'm rabbiting on a lot about the BBC but because it was so important to our Unit. We had a BBC producer come out, Peter Bale, and I remember the requirement was we want a BBC producer who really knows the nuts and bolts of making programmes. So some of the junior producers, including me from Australia, were going to work with Peter and the other producer didn't want to do it because we would have been an associate producer. I just grabbed this opportunity and worked with Peter Bale. Again, just Chris organising the fact of Peter Bale being there for some time, of working with him, of Peter Bale saying to me do you want to remain a would be if you could be all your life? Well, come on write a script, and I wrote a script and it was awful, I didn't know how to write and David Attenborough refused to read it and sent it back.

So then I wrote another script and now you can write a script standing on your head but it was all these things that happened. So back in the Australia there were very few things happening. You had the individual like Dave Parer making these wonderful films that he made, which were very much really him working just as an individual, not much support from the ABC but, of course, financial support. Then we built into Nature of Australia (4) and really started to build a unit.



I say that but I think the interesting thing is that in Nature of Australia (4) we had made this impressive, international series that people still talk to me about, and even here people still talk to me about. At the end of that David Parer took a year off, he had a year's leave due to him. The exec producer took a year off and I thought I can't take a year off because the Unit's going to disappear. Because at this stage ABC Australia was saying to Television New Zealand do you want a natural history unit, we're sell them off to you. I was so angry and I said, well, what am I going to do, and they said, oh well, you can make a film about yacht racing. I said I'm not making a film about yacht racing, I don't know anything about yacht racing, I couldn't care less about yacht racing.

So I went to Michael Steadman of Television New Zealand. I said I can't get money. They want to do this, I don't agree with it. Michael Steadman to his credit said, okay, I'll give you money to make a series of six half hours. So I had to take producers that nobody else wanted in the ABC and make a series of half hour programmes. They weren't enormously successful. It was called the Gilmour revolving door, people came in one end and out the other very quickly. But we did find some good people through that and we actually started to rebuild the Unit. Because what happened is the Unit got totally run down and there was nobody around and we almost lost the Unit.

I could never believe the short-sightedness of the place that felt that way, and meanwhile the executive producer became very ill and virtually died, well he died and I became head of the Unit. I think I'm known in the ABC as fiercely territorial and nobody dare cross me in terms of natural history things but that's why. It's that experience of knowing you can do something really successful and they still want you out. They do not understand the value of natural history and I think that a broadcasting organisation, a public broadcaster is defined by many things. I think it's defined by its news and current affairs, I think it's defined by its drama, I think it's defined by its comedy. But I think particularly in places like Australia it's also defined by its natural history because this is what makes us different from any other place on earth. I think unless we convey this, and I think unless we're part of the normal agenda for Australia, I think we've failed in our duty as a public broadcaster and I think people forget that. They're very happy for me to buy in BBC programmes but do you really need to make this.

We've gone on and David Parer's made some wonderful films, and we have a very substantial unit now who, I think, do interesting things. But what I try and do now is restrict most of our filming to our region of the world because other people make the other areas. We do have to as a public service responsibility, I think public broadcaster responsibility, have to explore our region of the world for the audience. I think we forget about these audiences and what they're doing.

*Int: Can I just say, your situation there is of course you're in the state of Victoria and you have to deal with the federal end of the ABC, don't you? So when you talk about 'they', 'them', is this in Sydney or is this in Melbourne, or probably both I suppose?*

DG: No, it's a bit like London and Bristol that the headquarters of ABC, the people who make all the decisions are in Sydney, we're in Melbourne. We're the only programme unit outside Sydney or we were for a long time the only programme unit outside Sydney. So it really made it difficult, where lots of conversations would happen in canteens which would happen in the next to next to next thing. They never saw us, so out of sight out of mind, and our programmes are expensive or can be expensive and they are slow. So you can sort of understand that.

There's a passion in the U.K. for natural history which has never been there in Australia. I think part of the

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problem is that we haven't put out enough material to actually develop that. We haven't done kid shows, and this is the big thing that I think we should have always done and we haven't done. If you don't start doing these sort of programmes for children and then track them through, you're not going to build that knowledge, you're not going to build the audiences as well.

So anyhow we ended up commissioning programmes from independents and I did a lot of that. Also heads of television come in and heads of television usually come in from a drama background. We've got the same thing at the moment where heads of television is drama background, the head of ABC is an accountant. Why would they worry about natural history?

### **5. Freelance workers, problem areas and new ideas**

*Int: You've got a ground base of some freelance people outside, have you not still, or you used to have. I'm thinking of people like Jim Frazier and whatever, people who used to contribute.*

DG: We have freelance camera people, all our camera people are now freelance. We don't have any in-house ones and so we've got, I suppose, a dozen, 15, 20 people who are good freelance camera people. I think we've got some of the best camera people in the world and I sort of feel I've jumped over some of David Parer's achievements. I mean I just really want to say that he made *Wolves of the Sea* (7), the killer whale film which I think was one of the most dramatic successes around the world. He made *Mysteries of the Ocean Wanderers* (8), a beautiful film about albatross which won the Panda at Wildscreen. When Dave's wife, Liz, got up to go with him to collect the award she was heard to say, "but that's not the best film, *Wolves of the Sea* (7) should be getting it." You and I know what jurors, you never know.

They went and spent three years in the Galapagos where they made *Dragons of the Galapagos* (9) and *Islands of the Vampire Birds* (10). *Dragons of the Galapagos* (9) won a Golden Panda as well. I went over there with John Sparks from BBC because the BBC was associated, and Nick Noxon from National Geographic. Nick was also the American EP [Executive Producer] of that, very amusing time we had. David and Liz had their small child and spent two years in the Galapagos, over two years I think.

So they were doing, as David always does, these remarkable films. Meanwhile at home I think we were trying new things out. We were making reasonable stuff that's been selling around the world. Everything we make has to be a co-production and we have to go out and get the money for it from somewhere else in the world. So we have no money just to go and make whatever we want to do.

It's always more difficult as you come closer to the present, isn't it, because you don't reflect on things in much the same way. I know that the things that I think now. I mean it's important what we make and how we make it but I tend to think of things like our government has to make a commitment to public broadcasting. Unless they make a commitment to public broadcasting and properly fund, we can't do any of the things we want to do. I think a lot of the questions go back to these in principle things, and it always surprises me by the fact that public broadcasting is not just something like the BBC that's there.

Do you know that the UK three and half times the population of Australia and the BBC has 11 times the budget, and that puts it in some sort of perspective. That my budget for my whole unit is half the cost of one *Natural World*, and I keep 13 people going on this permanently and, of course, a lot of others freelance. So it's a tough job all the time and you've got ideas that you want to do, where you want to do things in slightly different ways. But you've got to then find the money because you've can't make local, parochial stories.



They've got to be international to attract the international money, and I think that's one of the big problems we have that we can't make our local stories. I think that's one of the sadnesses is that we can't make our local stories just for our own local community.

Of course, there's not many big predators in Australia so we don't really appeal to the Americans that much. You can't have killer wombats, they don't do it. Although I did try and sell something to an American once about wombats, and they said make sure you got those good flying shots. So it's always good working with people from different countries, it really helps, they have a great depth of understanding about our place. But I was thinking of something before about where we're going and public service broadcasting, and all those sorts of things.

I think the other major thing is that we have an output deal with BBC, the ABC does have. In fact, the ABC at the moment looks like a BBC Channel 5, there's so much BBC material. So we have access to all the fabulous BBC material. David Attenborough would probably be as popular in Australia, if not more so, than in the UK. Anything where he's there really works.

But on the general run of things I'm coming to a few conclusions, and the few conclusions I'm coming to are that the space for all of us, as we have diversity in natural history, so we've got to have diversity in the programmes we make about natural history. We've got to have cross genre. Too many people think natural history is just cuddly animals when it ain't. It's the absolute width of every sort of science pulled together in the most original way. Humans are well and truly part of natural history, we're affecting that all the time, we're part of that, we're evolving with that. We're changing the landscapes both intellectually and physically all the time.

I look at the BBC with, as you can understand, a great deal of affection but also in a critical way. I think that my feeling about BBC, and it's something that we've done a little too much of through looking at their programmes, is that they tend to be, particularly in the last decade or so, very objective programmes. There's very little warmth, there's very little emotion, there's very little really strong storyline which helps to give you those things. I think that they have succeeded so well with their technology and I look at the new things they're doing now but it's all evolving around technology. You still haven't got that human warmth, that appeal for emotion.

I was again, through seeing Chris Parsons last night, I was thinking about all his early films when he was story telling, and he did Fabre [The Insect Man] (11) and he did Three Men on the Exe (12), and he did David Shepherd [The Man Who Loves Giants](13) and so on, The Major (14). All had this really strong emotional line to them and something's happened. It's almost since Life on Earth (5) I think. Something's happened where we've tended to go more the encyclopaedic or the curious but it's almost as if we're worried about telling emotional stories. I'm really pleased about this because that leaves this wonderful avenue for us to do things that look different, feel different and are different to the BBC.

I mean the BBC is the most successful natural history group in the world, there is no doubt. They also have the most money in the world. They've also got the best people with the best experience in the world. So it's very hard to actually find other markets and that's what they're talking about is markets and appeal. But if you start thinking in this way there's actually vast possibilities out there of doing other things.

We're doing a series with the BBC at the moment on Australasia (15) which is BBC, Animal Planet and ABC, and it's being run by the BBC quite differently from the way we've worked before, where there's 2, 3 BBC producers, one ABC producer. We've got a lot of support staff in there which is good for people because they

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work to somebody that's not me, they get an idea how everybody else works. They also get a feeling about how it is to work with money. But looking at the scripts they're not the scripts that an Australian would have done. Now that's got an advantage but it also lacks insights. It also lacks an understanding. It also lacks the passion and the feel of the countryside. So technically I think it's going to be a much better series than anything we've ever done. There's not been anything cut together and I hope I'm proven totally wrong but I think it's going to be a cold, slightly more clinical, less story driven approach than what we did even back in '88 with Nature of Australia (4). I don't know, maybe I'm wrong.

You look at the American market and National Geographic have helped us a lot and so have Discovery and so on. The American market goes overboard with predation, with the emotions of fear and so on. But who's actually trying to dig in about how people feel about something they know well? Barry, you might like this but from talking to Chris not that long ago, and I knew he was very ill and I was talking to him. He was talking about new technology, that we've got to find new ways of telling stories. I was starting to try and express some of these things to him but he then bounced back at me all these questions, about what we were doing and why we were doing it. I walked out after 25 minutes on the phone and said, yes, this is what we're going to do.

So we've actually gone out and we've done something that I've always wanted to try. I mean I hate the voice of God I've decided. The voice of God narration drives me scats. So what we've done, you know how when you go out in the field and you're actually talking to a scientist, and you're sitting round a campfire at night and they're telling you what they really know about an area. You listen to them and you get all excited and you go out the next day and you film the lesser spotted drongo or something. Somehow none of that spirit, that heart, comes through. So it's a matter of casting.

We actually found scientists who've lived in areas or been part of an area for long periods of time, who know the area well, who are good characters. In fact, many of them have been people who actually helped me in my early days. I've got producers, one is a feature film director. One has directed one of the most successful comedy shows in Australia. I've got these guys to go out and interview these people for two or three days. They've come back and what they've done is they have made a story which is like a radio show. So they've done it with words first which we've never done. So they've cut together a beautifully structured radio programme and then we've used fabulous pictures to show what they're talking about but we never see the person in the programme.

I was listening to radio and I was thinking you always get a picture of what a person's like. You really get an understanding of what they're like. Why do we always have to see sync pieces which sort of restrict you to a certain extent. So there's no narration, no seeing the person, just this voice telling us about this place. In one film we've actually used a conversation between two people as the narration line.

DG: I can't quite remember but talking about this personal point of view and using these scientists to talk about their places. Yes, and what I was saying is sometimes we've inter cut two voices of people who've been in the same place and interviewed totally separately. But occasionally we've actually had a conversation between two people, and it's the first time I've actually heard a natural history programme that almost needs a laugh track. It's really interesting the way it's worked because in each programme there is people talking about their work, what they've done, describing their passion for a place I guess. But each time these people who know a place well have made some sort of impassioned statement about the environment or about conservation, or in some way. It's the sort of thing that if you went to people and said I want to make a film that says this, they'd say, no, no, we don't want to know it. But because it's done in this context and you've led in through the individual it's so strong, it's so compelling.

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I was showing it to a German guy at MIPCOM [a large international audiovisual content trade show] and he said I'm totally impelled by this film, he said, I can't stop watching it. You must send me the tapes. How can I do it in German? Can I do a translation? That won't work because you've got an actor doing it. Can I find German people who've been to these places and use your wonderful pictures and so on. The Italians are interested, the French are interested. It's something about the human story telling ethic which is what we all go back to of actually recreating that which I think we've gotten away from quite a bit in the last few years.

We've used people as presenters. We used people as the sort of ya, ya, aren't we brave, we're great adventurers out there. We've used them to try and give, although I noticed David still does the by David Attenborough, so it is a personal point of view. But we've gotten away from people's stories and I think so much of biology. You and I have seen how biological facts have changed, concepts have changed, ideas have changed since they first started work till now. So there's nothing that is fact in quite that way. So if you are giving a subjective thing, I think it's much better than checking facts and trying to find the right facts because you're saying at this point time this is what these people, who have great experience, feel and understand about the biology, the biota of this particular place. It's story telling.

So inspired by Chris Parsons to actually go and have a go at this, we've made these and we won't tell anybody incredibly cheap programmes. We're only halfway through. The guys do all sorts of things as I say, including telling jokes, including being passionate, with some of the most beautiful pictures out of the library which we've retransferred on the very top telecine. So we took the old Nature of Australia (4) material, telecine did a 16 x 9, spent an awful lot of time de-spotting because we went right back to the neck. It's just fabulous and looks as though we've got an international success on our hands with these incredibly cheap programmes. I have other people do the same thing because anything we can do to get audiences more involved.

Can I contrast this with Blue Planet (16)? I think Blue Planet (16) was the thing that made me start thinking about these things from the very beginning as being a problem. Blue Planet (16) was not an enormous success in Australia. Having said that, the audiences were far above average to start with. Everybody recognised that they were the most powerful images that we've probably ever seen of natural history on our scenes and most dramatic. But the audiences went very steadily down and when I looked into it, what I went into then was looking at the demographics. A lot of the men stayed there because that encyclopaedic fact after fact after fact worked but the women just went phew. Women did not like Blue Planet (16). Well, what a sweeping generalisation. There were less women that stuck with it for the straight vision and so on, and that's a real pity I think when you've got a series like Blue Planet (16) that is such an expensive series, such an international series. And I understand it's been so successful around the world, really, really successful.

All I can talk about is in Australia that it didn't have the impact it should have had for its effort, its thought, its power and all those sorts of things. It didn't have the impact because I don't think it got the story telling right, and it certainly didn't get the story telling right for females, for women on the whole, no. It's a sweeping generalisation I admit that, and a strong story. You'll never see this because you never watch what ABC had to say anyhow. So that's all right.

*Int: You may even be long dead before that, 50 years.*

## **6. Future directions, new technology and filmmaking advice**

DG: I'm just trying to think of the future new directions. I think that's one of the interesting thing in this sort of job, is you're always trying to create new ways of doing things, new ways of thinking about things and you

never stop. I keep thinking, God, I'm going to retire soon, I'm going to have to retire. I'm always the last person to leave a party, I'm hopeless. Somebody's got to drag me out because I'm always there, you know what I'm like, in the kitchen drinking the dregs of the wine. I don't want to be like that with work. I don't want to hold the Unit down because I've stopped being creative, I've stopped pushing them. I've stopped pulling them, I've stopped controlling them. I've stopped having ideas that are going to work but you're always seeing new things.

You think I haven't tried this yet, I really want to try this, I want to try that because I still think we've got the whole world open to us. So many people say, well, is there anything more that people can do about natural history, haven't they done everything? Well, there's no way people have even touched the surface, the tip of the iceberg stuff it's really all that's been done. I think that the possibilities are limitless out there. I think the possibilities of putting things together in different ways, of looking at it as I'm talking about it at the moment because that's my passion at the moment, it's personal, emotional stories. My passion in a year's time will be something totally different.

But there's all these different things and I keep thinking, okay, the guys that I work with are out there filming, working, making the programmes. They haven't got the time or the opportunity to sit down and think strategically about where they're going and where they could possibly go, and I think that's the role. I think this is where people who are in big organisations have it much better because they do have an executive group, if you like, who can think strategy rather than just from programme to programme.

But I'm concerned that we don't have that and that my role is to think strategically, to try and think creatively, to try and encourage those things that are going to work, to try and push all this on. Also you get terribly frightened in a place like ABC that we all disappear. If I disappear the Unit disappears and I don't want that to happen. I don't want it to happen for the people who work there. I don't want it to happen for the audience. I think it's a crucial importance. So you hang on thinking you've worked in a big organisation for a long time, you know if you wait for long enough everything's going to change. So I keep waiting for that change to be for the better rather than the worse, and for the last few years it's been for the worse. So I'm really thinking we've got to turn round at some stage and make it for the better.

But maybe part of that is the way we're going to tell stories. Maybe it's the way we think about things. I'm not sure how much broadband's going to help. We're putting programmes out on DVD of course but what are these new technologies bringing? I think that in terms of all this digital technology, in terms of broadband, in terms of web, that we're in a transition phase. Nobody knows where it's going yet. Nobody can earn money out of it. It's all important to be in, to be thinking about, because it will go somewhere. But I don't care who tries to tell you that they know where it's going, I don't think anybody does. Maybe that's something that's going to be a really great advantage for us. I think ARKive is a brilliant idea by the way, which actually does have a sense of where that's going, particularly with its film side. I think that we in Australia should be supporting that and we are as much as we possibly can. That to me is one project that is far sighted. Yes, I'm not sure how far sighted the rest of us are.

*Int: Where are your new people coming from?*

DG: New people in the unit are coming from all sorts of directions. A guy who had a big programme that went to air on Sunday night was degree, film school, drove taxis. Every time he drove a taxi pass the Unit he'd come and knock on the door and ask for a job and I'd say, no, haven't got one. Then he came up one day and he said, if you don't give me a job I'm going to murder someone because if I keep driving taxis I cannot stand the passengers, and I cannot stand them vomiting in the back seat on Saturday nights. So I am going to kill them and it'll be on your head. So I said, okay, you can come in and work but you're not going to



get any money. So eventually I gave him some money and then he wrote a script and it was too good not to make, so I said you'd better make this. He got nominated at Wildscreen would you believe, his first film.

Now he's made some absolutely fabulous films, very different style, totally different to David Parer, very filmic styles. Halfway through his last natural history programme he was arguing with the cameraman all the time. The cameraman came to me and said I cannot work with this man anymore. I said, okay, well you'd better go and film it yourself then. So he picked up the camera and had a few glitches but he ended up filming about 80% of the programme himself. He never has a static shot. His gear is a camera, a tripod and a dolly and some poor sod to drive the dolly.

He's just made a series of two history programmes, well he made a football programme for the Unit. I mean I don't tell the ABC what we're doing occasionally, so he handed us this wonderful programme about football come out with the natural history logo on the end which was really exciting. Then he's just made two history programmes as a mini-series, one of which went to air on Sunday night. He spent two years on it. He researched it, he wrote it, he directed, he wrote the book. He's put the series out. It looks like a million dollars. It cost about \$350,000 Australian which is, what £150,000 UK sterling a programme. He's put a whole new look into what we do, it's very different.

We've got a guy who made a feature film called Yolngu Boy (17) about aborigines in the Northern Territory but he's never made natural history. But he's aware of these things. He's now doing directing for us. He's an intelligent person who has done a lot of film making, bringing in totally different skills. As I say, a director of comedy. I don't know whether you ever saw a series out of here called The Games (18) which is about leading up to the Olympic Games, and it was sending up the whole process. It was one of the funniest series I've ever seen in my life. He's now working with us. He again brings a sensitivity and a different feel and a different set of understandings to the place.

You bring those people and you've got to have really good researchers working with them, and that's what we do. We have really good camera people working with them. But most people are multi-skilled. There's a lot of people now who are either directing and camera or directing and editing. So teams are getting smaller and smaller. We never go out with a full crew anymore, it's usually two people go out at the most. I like two people because it's dangerous otherwise.

We've got a young woman who's done her MA in history who came to be a co-ordinator on the Australasian series with BBC, and she's now directing sequences. I want to get her into one of those half hour series, those sort of people series, because she's an absolute natural sitting there. She is going to make it, absolutely no doubt in my head that she's going to make. What I've got to try and do is find the possibility of her to do it, give her the opportunity to actually go and do it. We've got a few people like that around. We've got the best group of people that I think that I've ever had working in the place.

*Int: That's the next 25 years taken care of, isn't it? That's great.*

DG: Yes because you've got the oldies like me and Dave is not that much younger, and we've got an under 30 year old because she got in on the cheap rate to come here. She's paid for herself to come. We've got two researchers here, both paid for themselves to come. I begged the ABC and eventually they paid their registration but they paid everything else out of their own pockets and they're both here. Now one's under 30, isn't that brilliant? She's already worked in the BBC library, she's worked in the ABC library, and now she's working in the Unit as a researcher. Fabulous stuff.





*Int: The young Dione Gilmour.*

DG: She's going to take the whole tradition on, she is. She's got a visual memory, she can pick out who shot what at 20 paces, she's just brilliant. We've got these people and some of the people who've worked in the Unit have now gone out and become independent, and of course work with us in a commissioning way. So we're keeping them going, well, they're keeping us going too because I always think that we're as healthy as the independent sector. I think once upon a time the ABC used to be like a castle with a moat and a drawbridge, and the drawbridge was up all the time. Well particularly in Melbourne it's down all the time and people come and work in the Unit, they spend time in the Unit. I bring them in for a project at a time. A lot of these cameramen directors I like to go and do things but I wanted them to do the post so I keep a handle on that because that's the thing they have the most difficulty with.

So there's a whole population if you like. I mean we must work with something like 30 or 40 or 50 people in Australia pretty continually. So that's a core group of 11 or 12 bringing up all these other people.

*Int: And newcomers are the key to the future.*

DG: Absolutely. But the newcomers are easy and the oldies you've got to certain things for. I find it's to keep the middle ones who've got a fair whack of experience, they are really good. Is he going to go and make a feature film, I daren't ask him because I sort of suspect that he probably will. But how do you keep these people who have got a stroke of genius about them? Should you? Should you let them go and should you be there for when they come back too? Or should you let them take these skills that they've learnt and go elsewhere? There's nothing you can do about it so you let them do whatever they want to do basically. But you always do lose good people to other avenues of the industry sometimes.

*Int: David Parer still with you?*

DG: David Parer is still with us.

*Int: You've kept him is my point.*

DG: We've kept him. But what do you when you're a cameraman-director and you're in your 50s and you've got a child and a wife who are at home, and you go away for three weeks and you stay five or six months, and you've got a child ringing up and saying, Daddy, I really want you home for the weekend. He's outrun five assistants on this job who are totally exhausted. He has five hours sleep a night. He has shot 650 **digibeta tapes**. We've got two people cataloguing full-time to try and keep up with him. Do not ask me about this project but how can he keep going at this? He keeps saying now I'm going to go and I'm going to grow mangoes. This is the permanent dream, you go and get a mango farm and grow mangoes and just take them off the trees.

The toughness of the industry at the moment doesn't make it easy for people who are very experienced. Do they really have to work within the restrictions that are there now when it just makes the job too difficult? I'm worried about David. I think David will finish his next project, he's got two on the go, and I'm not sure that he'll stay. I think it's getting very close to the edge. I don't think the industry helps these people. You talk to

the Hugh Miles, all these people around the place they're all getting very cynical about what's happening.

But the interesting side, the positive side, is I say people were coming to me at MIPCOM and saying do you have any **blue chip**. Now that hasn't happened for heaven knows how long. They're coming and asking for it because we're still there and because we're renowned for doing **blue chip**. The industry is starting to come up again. But I think that the bureaucrats and the accountants and the fillers in of paperwork and the 'sorry, we don't want one of those animals because they don't eat another animals' groups have really got to look at what they're doing. Otherwise they're going to get formulaic television that's going to go into one of those 3,000 channels that we're going to have in 10 years time that nobody's going to look at. We've got to make these big event things and we've got to support them and we've got to support the people. The whole thing is we've got to support the people more than anything else, that's what my job's about. My job's about supporting people, not about anything else.

I'd go hands-on in the editing room, I'm a totally bitch and people hate me. God, not her in the editing room again but I just do it because I enjoy it. I know they go back and they redo it the way they want to do it afterwards and that's all right. Because really my job is to support them, get the money, make it happen and to keep relationships going internationally. To keep relationships going internationally because we've always had much more of a respect, much more help from our international partners than we've had from inside Australia, strange though it may seem. I will not go down the road that other people have had to go down where they make B class films all the time, to get the quantity out. You can earn money with those B class ones. You don't spend much money. You earn a lot of money because they're great cannon fodder for pay channels. Well, my policy is that's not what we're on about. If we make cheap programmes they've got to be really very good programmes. In fact, the cheaper the programme the better the programme has to be to justify it. It's got to have that intellectual thought content, that entertainment value and so on. So formulate television doesn't work for me.

I had this 12 year old come to me at MIPCOM [a large international audiovisual content trade show], I'm sure she was 12 years old, from one of the big American channels who said we thought you might be interested in making some programmes for us and I said, oh yes. She said, well, we're doing this series. Now we've got 13 of the 16 parts but we need three more. Now they're to a formula and then we've got this series and we need two to fill in this series. I just looked at her and said no. Why? Why would you go and do that? As a public broadcaster what's this doing for your audience? Nothing. It's there to help young filmmakers get going. There are those possibilities who are independents go out and do it but do not expect public broadcasters to do that. But that means we depend on other sorts of support and that is the problem, it's not just the policemen. It's the execs who've become babies. Do you find that? You feel like patting them on the head and saying there, there dear, it will all change you know.

I had breakfast with Brian Leith yesterday morning. His first day in the job of Head of Granada Wild and I had a breakfast meeting with him. My best bit of advice for him was if you don't enjoy it get out quick. I think just about that.

*Int: I think that's a great out line. If you don't enjoy it get out quick. I thought that was fabulous.*

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## Glossary

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

**Digibeta:** The digital version of Betacam - a family of half-inch professional videotape formats developed by Sony from 1982 onwards.

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