



Doug Allan: Oral History Transcription

Name of interviewee(s):

Doug Allan

Reasons why chosen for an oral history: Award winning natural history cameraman who has spent over twenty-five years filming in some of the planet's most extreme environments.

Name of interviewer:

Peter Bassett

Reasons why interviewer chosen: Longstanding colleague and friend

Name of cameraman:

Bob Prince

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1. The Early Years

PB: Today is Thursday, 26 April, we're at Roxburgh House, the home of Doug Allan who's one of the most respected wildlife cameramen there has ever been actually. No, it's true. So if you could just say who you are, nationality, all those basic things, and then just say what inspire you, what's your earliest memories, whether it was wildlife or whether it was the underwater world or whether it was filming.

DA: Roughly how I got into it in a nutshell? Well, I'm Doug Allan. I was born in Scotland and I've been making wildlife films or involved in wildlife films since about 1983 and I'm now 55 years old, in my prime.



How I started. Well, my father was a photojournalist. I began as a photojournalist and then ran a photographic business in Dunfermline in Scotland. But I don't really feel that I'm following in his footsteps in a way. In fact, when I look back I think no matter what I did in my life it would have to have involved the outdoors. I think that's the single biggest thing and actually when I took up wildlife filmmaking it seemed to involve lots of things that I enjoyed doing at the time. But anyway, more of that.

Did you ask me how I started? What inspired me?

PB: Because your father was a photojournalist and looking at people. Did you think there's a couple of wildlife stills there?

DA: He had a shrewd eye for a photograph, stills photograph, and I'm a twin and me and my brother right from the time when we were wee, we were always appearing in little snippets in the newspaper. Wherever he could find a personal angle on what we were doing, a wee filler piece, we would always go in there. So I kind of got used to being in front of the camera for a long time and there are a few occasions I remember going with my dad on assignment when he did some aerials, for example, over the River Forth. Then also he was filming sport for Scottish television in 1961 when Dunfermline Athletic got into the Scottish Cup Final and beat Celtic, and because he was the cameraman he got us seats in the stand right next to the filming position. I was only 10 years old at the time and very much into football, and that was really exciting.

I think maybe a little bit of the fact that he had a very varied life and got to go to different places, albeit on the scale of around Fife or Scotland. I think that maybe just rubbed off a little bit. But I think I was generally into the outdoors and adventure kind of things. The first significant adult book that I remember reading was *The Silent World* (1971) which was written by Jacques Cousteau, all about his diving exploits which obviously involved a lot of filming as well. I remember seeing that and remember catching some of the early Cousteau stuff, kind of 63, 64, when a few came onto British television.

But I think there was a photographic influence there. I definitely got into diving, for example, before I got into photography which is actually the way you want to do it. The best underwater cameramen or camera people are divers before they become camera people because the diving needs to be second nature. So historically I suppose there is a photographic element, well, a strong photographic element in fact.

PB: So when did you start diving then, was it a thing at university?

DA: Well, we were lucky. Our family was one of the first to go on package deals to Spain and I remember going on these in the early 60s, going to the Mediterranean where you could snorkel with no special equipment. So my brother and I got a lot into snorkelling. We were always good at swimming from an early age but we got into snorkelling on these Mediterranean holidays through 64, 65, that kind of thing, so I was a good snorkeller. Then when I went to university I found that I had the means and a little bit of spare cash so I began to dive with the local club when I began at university, so this is 69 we're talking about.

Really it was the diving that then led me to specialise in marine biology which is what I did at university, and by the time I graduated I was really more into diving than I was into science. So I started to look for chances to dive, to assist scientists, so I ended up going to the Red Sea in 1973 and that was where I was first exposed to a spectacular environment that I wanted to take photographs of. So I began to take underwater stills in 73 and then kicked around, went out to the Red Sea three times actually in the next three years with this bunch of biologists as an assistant, helping to collect data, shooting some stills, repairing engines, what have you.

2. The British Antarctic Survey

Then I got this big break in 1976 when I went down to the Antarctic and worked for the British Antarctic Survey as a research diver and that was an 18 month contract. I went down and I had a fairly simple stills photography thing. But I went down and I spent a year and a half down there and had a really good time underwater and topside, so lived amongst the animals for a year, and that was really good. I came out of that determined to go back, but most importantly with a real keen urge to do photography. That was when it really bit my ear.

PB: That was stills though still?

DA: Yes, that was just stills. So when I came back in 77, worked as a commercial diver for a year over in Germany and got together enough money that when I went back down south again in October 78, I went down with a really good professional set of stills gear. A couple of **Nikon F2s**, **housing**, and all the rest of it. I really got into underwater photography within that, in the next 18 months. I was supposed to be down for 18 months. When the time came for the ship to come we had unseasonably early, heavy pack ice and the ship couldn't get out. So there were seven of us that got stuck for an extra year in the Antarctic, which gave me even more time to refine my stills skill.

It was funny, at the end of winter or the last spring that I was there, so we're talking about February of 1981, David Attenborough and a film crew, Ned Kelly, Hugh Maynard, David and Dickie Bird, arrived on the base that I was on. They were travelling on HMS Endurance and they were filming for the *Living Planet* (15). They'd been given this opportunity to go down on Endurance at very short notice to the Antarctic so they all piled on board. They radioed our base and said can we come ashore for a few days to do some pieces to camera, to get some shots of some of the animals. Also, can you collect some underwater animals, because we'd like to do some filming of ice fish, things like this.

So I was diving officer and they came on base and the biggest place on the base that had space for them to spread their gear out was the dive store. So these guys came on board and I remember how exciting it was working with Hugh, helping him underwater, talking to David. But most importantly after they'd finished filming for the day they would all chill out in the lounge in the base, and they were really happy to talk to me about how the business worked and freelancers and all the rest of it. I got the chance to show them some of the stills that I'd been taking and David in particular was very encouraging. I think it was at that point, January 80, that I began to think - no, January 81 that I began to think these guys are doing something that I could see myself fitting in with.

So I went back to the UK and I got another chance to go south with the British Antarctic Survey but this time to a very different base. This was to one much further south where they had some Emperor penguins. Now if you want to see Emperor penguins you have to spend the whole winter. So the job was base commander on that station while the whole station got rebuilt but I saw it as an opportunity to get down and be with some Emperor penguins, or visit some Emperor penguins through the year.

So before I went south I went to Ned Kelly at the BBC and I said I'm going south, I'm thinking of taking a movie camera, are you interested in anything? Ned said, well, unfortunately by the time you get back it's too late for *Living Planet* (16) but here's Jeffery Boswell, he's got this *Birds for All Seasons* (1) series coming up. So I contacted Jeffery and he basically gave me some footage or gave me some stock and said when you come back let me see what you've got, and I'll take first refusal on it.

So that's what happened. I went south, came back with some shots, and it's funny I made a real cock-up over what it was. Because Jeffery gave me this stock from the BBC intending that I would shoot that specially for the BBC and then give it all back. I just mixed in with all the stuff that I'd been shooting for myself so it was all over the place, the seven or eight rolls. When we got back Jeffery found bits that he wanted from the 20 or so rolls that I'd exposed. To his eternal credit he didn't do, as some people might have done, which was just pick the best of it and then say you've screwed it up, etc. He did a very fair deal he said, look, go and buy some new film stock, give it to me, forget about the fact I gave it to you in the first

place, give it to me. Then we'll treat all this as yours and I will buy from you however much I want at so much a minute. So that's how he did it.

So just to leap ahead, I've just sold some of that same footage that I shot in 1983. I've just sold it to another programme far more than Jeffery paid me in the first place but that shows you how stuff lasts.

PB: Actually would that have been topside as well as underwater?

DA: No, just topside. I hadn't really got into underwater filming at that point.

PB: And what camera did you use and where did you (inaudible - over speaking)?

DA: I was using a **Bolex**.

PB: Bolex, so that's a hand cranked.

DA: I had two Bolex down there. We had one hand cranked one and one electrically driven which I just picked them up as a job lot before I went south. I think that was another area where my dad influenced me, because I had been almost ready to go down to the Emperor penguins just with my stills equipment. It was my dad who said "We could pick up some 60ml gear I'm sure pretty easy, and you could take some 60ml stuff". I don't know whether he thought that in the long-term movies was more.

Remember that was a couple of years after I'd met David and the *Living Planet* (15) team.

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DA: So just to recap I met David in the January/February 81. He kind of gave me a feeling that there was something in this movie business. Then in 1983 I got the chance to go down and spend a winter with the Emperor penguins, and for that winter I took movie and stills gear. Before I went down I contacted Jeffery, he gave me some footage.

PB: So it was all 100ft rolls then, was it?

DA: No, I had a 400ft **mag**. I did have a 400ft mag. But, yes, we were shooting 100ft rolls too. I came back with some stuff, a lot of it is technically pretty poor but there was enough in it that Jeffery bought 11 minutes. So when I came back and got all the encouragement from Jeffery. Well, I got back in the middle of 1984 from that trip. Jeffery decided that he wanted to buy 11 minutes of footage.

The other break that I got was that he was at a stage in his series, *Birds for All Seasons* (1), where he really needed some footage from the Antarctic but the budget was practically gone due to overspending by another producer who will remain nameless. But Jeffery needed all this stuff from the Antarctic and he got me in to look at what he wanted and to roughly give him an idea where he had to go. By pure luck mostly he wanted could be got on this island called Signy which where I had spent winters and summers and I knew Signy inside out. I said to Jeffery you'll get all of what you want if you got to Signy but because you want penguins on their eggs, all the way through to penguins fledging and going into the water, you're going to have spend three months down there.

Mike Richards was the main cameraman on that series, *Birds for All Seasons* (1), and Mike was busy elsewhere but also Jeffery didn't have the money left to pay Mike. So Jeffery offered me the princely sum of £25 a day to go down with my Bolex and shoot these sequences through the summer. Because I was dirt cheap I could stay there for 3½ months and get all the stuff that he wanted. However, it did mean that by the spring of 85 when I finished that chunk, when that programme came out later that year me, a complete unknown, was responsible for about 20 minutes of the Emperor penguins in the Antarctic stuff. I had about

20 minutes in this high profile BBC series.

So it's kind of that I went from nothing to having something that I could show other people fairly quick which was really useful. But at that stage I then knew that, first of all the Bolex was definitely not the camera to have, you had to have an **Arriflex**. But also I knew that where I really wanted to make a film, or where I had the big advantage, was in the Antarctic. The Antarctic back then in the mid 80s was still a very hard place to access. There weren't the tourist ships going down, there wasn't the infrastructure to support. But more importantly the film that I wanted to do had to be done in the winter, not just through the summer.

So if you were a camera person or a producer and you went to someone like the British Antarctic Survey and said I want to put a cameraman on base for the winter, they would be pretty leery about doing that because it would be an unknown in there, not really connected to the base, etc. They wouldn't want to do it. Because I had worked for BAS for four seasons in various guises, because I knew Signy inside out, because I was personally a good friend of the director at the time, I said to the director "If I could get projects off the ground that needed me to winter on Signy would you be willing to support me?" He said, "Well yes, depending on the project, depending who it was that wanted it, sure".

So I wrote up a couple of ideas, one for a film about weddell seals, one for a film about diving underwater researching the Antarctic, both of which I knew could be done at Signy through the winter. I took them to Survival and it just so happen that Survival were about to do a two hour special on the Arctic, and they wanted some material of underwater research and divers and things through the winter. So in the space of a lunchtime meeting with Mike Hay, who at that time was the big boss at Survival, it was great. He invited into their offices in Park Lane and I remember there was smoked salmon and roast beef sandwiches. It was the classic buttering this little guy up.

The only thing I had to go on with regard to how much I should charge was I had spoken to Mark Deveau and Vicky Stone, who at that time were just beginning to get established with Survival. I said I've got a half hour film I want to make, there are no real costs to making it, because BAS were going to take me down, they were going to look after me through the winter but what should my fee be for a half hour film? They said about £15,000.

So when Mike sat me down and said, "Okay, we're interested in your two films and we want about half hour contribution to this, what's your fees?" I said 45, he said right, and I thought "Do more, far too low, he's agreed immediately". But that was the deal. So the deal was that I would go down between March and December of 1987 and make the two films that I had intended to do, the weddell seal and the diving, and shoot a list of things that they wanted for their two hour special. The fee for me was £45,000 which I took care to spread into three tax years. I got a third before I went, a third that would be in the middle and a third when I came home and when I wanted.

I immediately invested the whole of the 15 upfront, plus some other savings that I'd got, and I bought two Arris and an underwater **housing**. So I went south with two Arriflexes, two second hand Arris, an underwater housing for them, and to this day I don't know how I had the balls to do it because I went into the station with the ship's last call, so I went in March. The ship put me ashore one day, left the following day, and then in the next 10 months there was no chance to get any rushes out, nothing. So I emerged 10 months later clutching about 100 rolls of film, on which none of them processed, none of which I'd seen anything, and took them all back to Survival. They processed them, looked at them, and lo and behold we had two films plus what they wanted.

PB: So you took 100 rolls.

DA: Yes, it was about 110 rolls.

PB: So the old film stocks then, what would it have been for your underwater and topside?

DA: Well it was either 7297, it was all negative stuff. I don't know if 7245 was around then, but you basically had a 50 **ASA** and a 320 **ASA tungsten** balance was your first stock and you just used them. You used the tungsten stuff without a filter so as to keep the full speed up and just colour correct afterwards. But the only check that I had was I arranged a standard exposure test, where I took my two interior lights and put them a certain distance away from a grey scale, took the camera back, used the same lens. And that way every month I could check that my metering was the same this month as it had been last month

Then I took down the means to develop two or three feet at a time of 16mm because you could buy the chemicals, C41 was the process. You could buy those chemicals for processing the film. You could get kits from Kodak. You know how you get these 35mm, well you won't. In the old film days you could take 35mm film and you got these special coils and in the dark you could wind them on and then develop yourself. Well, you could get some 16mm ones. So every month I used just to run a little 10 second burst of 16mm film and then wind it in the dark onto this and process it. Then I could look it with a magnifying glass and make sure that there was an image on each of the frames and the frames were separated.

But it was basically so the Arris they knew they were working mechanically. But you obviously had no feedback on the rushes.

PB: So it meant you could sleep at night.

DA: Yes, exactly. But you had no feedback on the rushes, on the quality of them or the content of them. But, of course, that's what we used to do.

PB: I hear you say we because you would have been down there diving, so would there have been anybody with you when you were underwater?

DA: Yes. There was a full scientific research underwater programme going on with different scientists collecting different things, setting up experiments, things like that. The guys were really good. They helped me by co-operating when they working or when I wanted people just to go there and do a nice scenic dive underneath the ice. Folk were always wanting to do that.

You see that was my real, full-time professional entry into filmmaking. The huge advantage that I had was that while I was very inexperienced as a filmmaker, I was going along with an intimate knowledge and contacts of a very desirable area. I was very confident that what I promised to deliver I could deliver. I'd been through all the weddell seal stuff, helping the biologists and then diving with them myself to get stills and stuff like that. So I really could be confident about what I was going to see and what I could capture. It was only a case of applying, dare I say, the rules of filmic grammar. So that I brought back stuff which I knew an editor could cut.

I knew I had an eye for composition because of all the stills I'd shot and stuff like that. So it was just a case of learning the knack of telling stories as a movie, as opposed to just grabbing the instant as a stills photographer.

PB: But I suppose you would have known what Jacques Cousteau and Hans and Lotte Hass, they wouldn't have been in that sort of area. This was in underwater filming for the first time of these creatures.

DA: In the Antarctic?

PB: Yes.

DA: Yes. I mean there probably was some kind of footage kicking around. Yes, there had been some earlier. Hugh, for example, had come down in the summer of those years before, Hugh Maynard. But I think that was maybe the first significant underwater, under ice filming through the winter that had been tried. If you see that movie now it is still nice to this day. You would cut out about the filming but the underwater stuff three years on.

PB: *What was the movie called again, that one?*

DA: One was called *Deep South Seal* (3) was the half an hour about weddell seals, and the other one I think was called *Eye Beneath the Ice* (4), the one that I did about the research divers, and I forget what the Antarctica special was. But again, the Antarctica special for Survival, I think that won a prize at Wildscreen in 1988. So again, it was nice to see your name flash up on the credits there. It definitely established me as cold water, cold places was the niche.

So that was in 87. So it was really in 88 again with something to hawk around I started seriously going back to the BBC and other companies. I just became a camera person like anyone else I suppose. You go down and introduce yourself to producers, show them what you've done, get involved with things.

The next sort of big break, in a way, was I was doing a little bit of work for *Trials of Life* (19). I came in too late to do a lot of work for *Trials of Life* (19) but Keenan Smart, maybe it's the fact he's a Scotsman, he got hold of this story about narwhals in the Arctic, these small whales with big long tusks. He was doing the fighting programme and there was an article in *Geographic* that came out which showed these narwhals underwater, and gave a story about how an underwater photographer called Flip Neckland had been in the water with these narwhals. It appeared that the males were fighting over this female.

Keenan got hold of this and asked me if I could go to the Arctic and try and film it. It just so happened that I was friendly with John Ford who was a scientist who was also out there at the same time as Flip. So I phone John and we spoke about where to go for narwhals and I went up and tried it. Now it wasn't really successful. I mean the situation that Flip had was quite an unusual situation and as though it was going to happen when I was there. But I did get some stuff, some good underwater stuff of narwhals because I found the friendly female, and I got some shots of tusks coming up and things like that.

3. Trials of Life and Life in the Freezer

But when I brought it back Keenan decided it wasn't a big enough impact for his programme. But Alistair Fothergill, at that stage was an assistant producer on *Trials of Life* (19), had been given the producer's job for the communication programme. Alistair saw my footage of narwhals and narwhals are toothed whales so they do a lot of talking between each other like dolphins and other toothed whales. So he thought it would be nice to use my narwhal stuff in his communication programme, because it was just a bit of a different species rather than doing dolphins again. So he took a lot of the narwhal footage that Keenan didn't want and put it in his programme.

So again here was *Trials of Life* (19), a big series, and suddenly Doug Allan's flashing up again. But more importantly I got on really well with Alistair and he was quite canny, and he came to me as *Trials of Life* (19) began to die down. He was ambitious and he came to me and he said, "Doug, I want to do a series on the Antarctic and I know you've been there and can we knock up something, can we toss around ideas?". So we did and that became *Life in the Freezer* (6) which was one of the big series in the early 90s.

But interestingly enough our first idea for *Freezer* (6) was actually we thought the BBC are not going to want a standard six half hours, *Wildlife on One* (20) type thing. We've got to package this differently. So we came

up with this idea of doing a Week in the Freezer which was going to be five half hour programmes on consecutive nights of the week, followed by the finale, it would be a live broadcast from the Antarctic, very ambitious. But Alistair had just come off *Reefwatch* (12) - not *Reefwatch* (12) but these live things from the Red Sea. He'd just come of that and so that was flavour of month and we could have the technology.

So our first pitch to the BBC was *Life in the Freezer* (6), see Antarctica as you never have done and actually the Beeb didn't want that. They said, "Well, we'll just have six half hours as usual, one a week spread throughout". But I'd like to think that one of the key ideas that I brought to Alistair was that we've got to have a lot of money for this because independent transport is our key to success. Well, you were on that series, Pete. And for that reason we charged out at very high cost in those days boats to go down there and just move camera crews from A to B. We had two boats for two seasons and that was really the key. So we could book people for as long as they needed to get good sequences to different places.

Alistair and I have this joke that because he and mine's career have kind of moved on in parallel because after *Freezer* (6) he became Head of the Unit, and then he commissioned things like *Polar Bear Special* (18) which was my next big thing. Then he gave up Head of the Unit and took on *Blue Planet* (2) which was something I was involved with, and then *Planet Earth* (9) as well. So I often tell Alistair your career suddenly would have been nowhere without my help, and he says if I wasn't giving you that work you would be nowhere.

PB: But actually around that time though you weren't just an underwater cameraman because in the late 80s you were going topside doing films?

DA: Well, I've always liked spreading myself around and, yes, I've always been keen. I can see that the more strings you had to your bow the more useful you were. With things like whales, if you're going to go and film them you rarely just were underwater, you need some topside. So I began to show a lot of topside too. Also I always, maybe surprisingly, shot people as well, often not for the BBC but I've got some other contacts in Italy and *Geographic* and things. So I've often gone and shot series which have had no wildlife in them whatsoever. They've just been series about people, sometimes wildlife scientists, sometimes volcanologists, what have you.

I've always enjoyed bringing a different eye to different things because underwater's very different from topside wildlife, which is very different from scripting people, which is very different from unscripted people. It's great to put different hats on and slide into a different mindset, and work with different directors or producers in order to get the best out of it. I've always found that exciting and enjoyable and I like it.

Underwater, back in the days when it started, it was all film because tape just wasn't up to quality and the cameras weren't reliable. But underwater you had a 10 minute load, less if you were running slow motion, and with a lot of underwater things you would run slow motion because underwater you'd often have the camera moving around. So if you could slow down you slow the movement down and you get away with more. So a 7 minute, that gave you maybe 7 or 8 minutes by the time you had over-cranked, before you had to come back to the boat, get the camera out, split the housing in half, take off one magazine, put in another one, go back in, find your subject which might have gone somewhere else. And all this through a little dark viewfinder which you had to keep clamped to your eye. I mean tape was just magic.

I've got a lot to thank Pete Scoones. My first big contact with tape was *Life in the Freezer* (6) and Pete was the other underwater photographer in *Life in the Freezer* (6), and Mike DeGruy and others. But Pete was the guy that I worked with closely and Pete was really generous about preparing, giving and then repairing his housings afterward. But he took down two housings and he was very happy about it – "I'll set this one up for you, you use it". The revelation of going onto nice big viewfinders and hour long tape before you had to come out, and Pete's beautiful housings which are lovely to handle. They're just neutrally buoyant, they don't float away from you, they don't sink, everything's just to hand. It was a real revelation.

Since then film has been gradually losing ground to tape and Pete's still in there and I'm still there.

PB: I'm just thinking on Life in the Freezer (6) that was probably the first time I'd ever been able to see rushes on location, it wasn't it? We looked at your leopard seals.

DA: Yes, it probably would be. I mean Pete had been doing them before *Sea Trek* (13) and things like that with Martha and I, and Alistair produced that. *Sea Trek* (13) was all tape so therefore they could look at that and that was people talking through bubbles. But I think *Life in the Freezer* (6), because the underwater was such an important component of *Life in the Freezer* (6) and because we had fairly big for wildlife sense of things, fairly big crews in the field. Yes, it was, it was really exciting to be able to bring the rushes back, especially for things like the leopard seal sequence and things like that.

So everybody begun to be a director. Not, I think it's great to be able to see rushes and I think with the very latest advance of HD, I feel myself, when I go into the field that I can bring back better things, because I can look at what I've shot. And if you're critical with it you can see how you can just improve on it or you can see the kind of shot that you really need to complete the sequence, and you can really go for it and you can be more ambitious, because you know what you've got in the can already. But you get fired up by looking at it because you can imagine what impact to get such a shot would make in the film. So I think it's lovely.

There is this huge relaxing effect that if you are away somewhere for five weeks with no contact, to be able to look at your rushes every night does chill you out.

PB: I remember on Life in the Freezer (6) thinking how could they see that far with the camera, and Pete and yourself are trying to tell me how the video actually allowed you to see further into the water.

DA: Well, this has been one of the bones of contention between the advocates of tape and the advocates of film. They have very different looks and it's only with the latest generation of cameras that you can make tape look as much like film as you want. But film, because tape gathers its images in a completely electronic fashion, light hitting electronic components and whizzing away the signals, whereas film is a chemical process onto an emulsion. The two are going to look different and the two in all kinds of subtle and not so subtle ways that one of the things is that video tends, and early video people didn't like, in this country at least because it was just too garish. It was too bright, it was too punchy. Everything had solid, really sharp lines and they went, "Oh! Not for me".

Now the Japanese loved that. I don't know why but culturally tape took off for them far earlier than for us. But anyway people stuck with film. However when you go underwater, particularly in not very good visibility, then that ability that video has to punch itself up to look cleaner, to have sharper edges, to have brighter cause. All those things that you don't like topside more than compensate for the murky, washed out, low contrast sort of the crap that you get underwater all too often. So, therefore, tape underwater, the images straight out of the camera look a lot better.

Video has the ability to look into soft images in murky water and make them look punchier. So tape was just great, it just looked stunning.

*PB: And the light levels as well. I remember on Life in the Freezer (6) where we couldn't film topside and yet we saw **rushes**, it was a terribly dull day.*

DA: Underwater on an overcast day is a very low contrast environment, which video really likes. Now back in those days, **Beta SP**, when you put a tape in, it was the equivalent of working with about 320 ASA film, which is a little bit faster than the fastest stock that was around. But, of course, those fast stops also had quite a lot of grain in them whereas tape didn't have the grain. If you were willing to put up with putting

in what they call gain, which is extra sensitivity into the camera which did make the picture a little bit more grainy. But if you were willing to put up with that little bit grainy then you could push the equivalent of 500 and 600 ASA.

So therefore with tape you could venture into low light conditions where film would really struggle, tape kept bringing back a picture. So there were a lot of advantages with film and again, I see the lucky parts of my career is that I have worked at a time when video's been developing and the cameras have been getting better. But also I do owe a lot of debt or I do feel fortunate to have been alongside and close to Pete and his housings and worked with him on projects. But also been around with Alistair who's been a great underwater advocate of underwater films shot on tape. He's recognised the advantages early on. He's delivered on programmes which he shot on tape and therefore has encouraged commissioners to bring decent amounts of money to the table.

As I say, I mean I have been fortunate. You can argue and get wild, as I often do with the BBC, but there is no doubt that at the top end of their scale they do recognise how much time and money big series cost. The senior producers do do all they can to bring as much money as they can to get these things made, and then to get as much of that money as possible into the field. So that camera people do get the time that they need. I'm not absolutely that that's happening as much as it should be. I think now it's a bit tougher.

PB: But the video cameras were almost out-of-date before they arrived in the shops. So at the time you had two Arris and water housing for your Arri. So what were you thinking about the video cameras? Did you buy one of these as well?

DA: No. Well, having said that, once I'd used the Beta SP on *Life in the Freezer* (6), I could see there was an advantage, so I did go out buy an SP Betacam. But that was only after going into a deal with a small production company in London who I contacted who were looking to buy an SP Betacam but weren't quite sure if they could afford it. So I made sure that when I bought my digital Betacam, when I wasn't using it they were able to hire it out on a lot of their shoots, so it subsidised itself. So I was able to do that, which gave me the best of both worlds, and I did do the same with a digital betacam as well because, yes, that's the big difference.

Well I've almost stopped using Arris to be honest but I'm still using the same Arriflexes that I bought in 1987. One of them's a little bit like the Anticax. You know the Anticax that had four new blades and three new handles. My Arriflex is a bit like that, there's not a lot of it that's still the same. But I'm still basically using them because they're such fantastic workhorses. But as you say, with top end video, first of all there was always an initial shakedown so you never bought the first new model that they made. Because they would put it out and within a year they would bring out the next one, and the next one always had the little kinks ironed out of it.

Then you might have a camera that was state-of-the-art for, if you were lucky, five years, sometimes less. But usually by the end of three years, if it was working hard, it would be needing replaced, it was beginning to get tired. So there was a much higher turnaround. To be honest, there's only a few camera people who've managed to make the economics of top end broadcast film work for them. Most tape cameras you have to work really hard. You have to hire out if you're not using it and all the rest of it.

But I did go into tape. I haven't got an HD camera because I think they are very expensive and at the moment people are willing to rent them so you don't need one.

4. Keeping up-to-date

PB: Before we come onto the more modern day, just thinking about those early days because it's always that for a cameraman who spends so much time abroad, how do they keep up-to-date in terms of just

knowing what other people are doing and seeing other wildlife programmes?

DA: I don't know. I think most good cameramen or camera people would spend somewhere between 160 and 220 days in the field every year. I've been in it just long enough. I mean when I started it was before video cameras were really available. Maybe it's worth saying that I'm completely self-taught, I've never had a lesson in any kind of photography in my life really. On the stills front I just looked at photographs that impressed me and tried to copy them, and then when I started to shoot movie I basically went down to friends that I had in OSF, Oxford Scientific Films. I had some stills with them. I went down and sat with a Steenbeck which is an old reel-to-reel movie viewer, if you want, that the editors used to use. I went down and they have prints of all the films they'd made and I picked a couple that I liked and I ran through them, and they ran through a **Steenbeck** because you can stop and rewind and look at them.

I took these programmes apart, shot by shot, I wrote down the commentary and I went through and I wrote down the shots that went with the commentary and a description of them if they were a close-up, a wide, and basically began to see how the grammar of filmmaking. And also to see the little tricks, things that you thought were really nifty. You could actually see how the editor had put them together and that's how I taught myself to film.

PB: *So it wasn't with an editor, it was just you going through a Steenbeck yourself?*

DA: Yes. There's nothing better with sitting down with an honest editor who will tell you where the good points and bad points of your rushes are.

PB: *Who would those editors have been? It would be nice to talk about those people who you worked with or who you were inspired by?*

DA: Yes, you asked me how people stayed in touch. Luckily the wildlife filmmaking community, and again just as I started was the kick off of what is now the International Association of Wildlife Filmmakers which is an aggregation, a club if you want, of wildlife filmmakers. We used to have get-togethers at Wildscreen and once a year, a social get together somewhere, and anyone who was in the country would come down and you would chat to them.

But luckily the wildlife fraternity, that's a good word for it really, all the camera people, well most of them, are happy to discuss with their counterparts how they've done things or rates or any problems and that kind of thing. So you meet them at Wildscreen every couple of years. You bump into them at the BBC. The IAWF, I think you could get a list of numbers and things and contact people. So we used to keep in touch with each other there and then. You could always get copies of films that you'd missed from down the road. You would watch them on the TV and things like that. Again you could make video copies of them. So we kept in touch with things more or less that way.

You also get a feeling or you get in conversation with a producer. He or she will describe what they think is hot, what is the new style, and therefore you'll talk about how to shoot things in a certain style. So we kept in touch with things that way. I came into just when video recorders were just beginning to be accessible and available so we could keep in touch with what was happening.

Wildlife in a way was, certainly for those early years, the first five years let's say until about 92, 93 which was when the cable explosion started. Wildlife films were, wasn't the range of styles that there is now, there certainly wasn't the mad, frenetic presenter which came about with I would say that explosion of channels, and seemed to hold sway for the next 10 or 11 years. It's started to die down a wee bit.

5. Northern Flights



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PB: I'd be intrigued to ask you actually about working with Jeffery Boswall because you actually made a film, didn't you, with Jeffery? Anything about characters of those times. That was for the RSPB?

DA: Again that was 88. That was one of my first films after I came back from the Antarctic and it was my first film really with what I would call wild animals, real wild animals. Because in the Antarctic they just sit there and you can sit yourself next to them whereas these things they flew away and all this sort of stuff. But Jeffery again, to his eternal credit, he encouraged to do that film. We had 30 rolls of film to make it more which is 10 to 1, Jeffery's shooting ratio. I did great pleasure at the end of giving him one roll back.

I don't know whether this is the place to tell you this story. Do you know the one about me and the Kittiwakes?

PB: Yes. Go on.

DA: This is how good I was. I went up there on a recce and met the RSPB officer, Eric Meake and he was a really nice guy, and Jeffery was there for the recce. Everything was fine. So I went up a couple of weeks later to actually do it and we decided to start with something simple which was kittiwakes nest building. All these kittiwakes fly down onto this area of mossy marshland and they pick the stuff up with their beaks, and they fly away back to the cliffs. So Eric and I went out one day and we said, "Okay, we'll put the hide down today, the day will be enough for them to get accustomed and we'll come back tomorrow and we'll film".

So set it up and went back the next day. Eric walked me into the hide because at the time two people walk into the hide and one leaves, and the birds all think that there's nobody inside. So there I was inside my hide and the plan was that Eric would come back in a couple of hours and I would have the sequence and the cut. So I'm just getting to film away when I realised to my horror that there are two kinds of black and white seagulls out here, and I don't know which ones the kittiwake. This is not a good plan, because I'm the expert filmmaker here and I don't really want to let on to Eric when he comes back "Which one's the kittiwake?".

So I sat still and looked at them, and eventually one kind of black and white gull outnumbered the others by 4 or 5 to 1 and seemed to be picking up more of this material. So I shot a very tight sequence on this one and when Eric picked me up I did subtly ask him which one was the kittiwake without actually revealing that I didn't know which one was the kittiwake. Things like "Amazing birds those one with the black wing tips", "Aye, the kittiwakes are always like that" and I thought "We've got it".

That was *Northern Flights* (8) which ended up a nice wee film. It was good. It was four sequences, one on each different habitat, designed to be shown to school kids and things, and give them a little bit flavour.

PB: And also it was shown at the Royal Festival Hall, wasn't it, at that point?

DA: Quite possibly. It was an RSPB film and they used to do these public screenings, didn't they? I don't know whether they still do. But, no, it was good and again it's always nice to do a whole film yourself. Now Mike Richards and Stephen De Vere shot little bits for it but I was lucky, I got most of it. But it was good, it was a nice 10 weeks in Orkney. Again it was after the Antarctic which I knew intimately, it was good to take on something that I really didn't know much about and it was a topside film as well which was good.

PB: I think that's really quite interesting, you mentioned it then. The fact that Jeffery was working to 10:1 and I remember that he was quite a strict producer on 10:1 and some people were 15:1. I'm just thinking today with video we're 100, 200:1.

www.wildfilmhistory.org





DA: Yes, it can be ridiculous.

PB: But it just shows how things have changed and how the discipline you had to have then, and the anticipation of knowing when something's going to happen and not just switching the camera on and leaving it, hoping it will, because you didn't have that then, did you?

DA: You didn't have that but on the other hand I think 10:1 is unrealistic to film hard things, ambitious things. Because if you film ambitious things you can expect more misses in a way when you turn the camera. If you really want to cover a sequence from all angles, inside out and give the editor lots and lots of choice or if you're using very high speed film or something like that, I think a more realistic ratio for ambitious film should be somewhere between 35 and 50:1. If you start to go a lot above 50 or 60:1 you're giving the editor an awful lot of stuff just to look at, because that's the main thing remember, somebody's got to look at all this crap.

Particularly if you take seven or eight takes of something that's almost the same with just tiny bits of difference, people don't really have the time to pick up on what you thought was the best one. So you need to be reasonable but, no, it can go mad especially with tape. People tend to forget, as I say, somebody has to look through this and if you shoot 40 hours of material, then even for an editor to look at that once is going to take him a whole week in real time. Some editors can do it, some producers can do it, but I think most people cannot look at something on fast forward and decide if it was good, you have to look at it in real time.

PB: How have the producer briefings changed over the years because obviously keeping the ratio down then? With Jeffery at that point was he saying no slow motion to you?

DA: He was, that was another one of Jeffery's things that he didn't feel that slow motion should be used unless it was very obviously slow motion, and was to show something that you couldn't see in real time. He didn't really believe in it for dramatic effect, let's say that. That again, that varied. John Downer would be at the other end of the scale, for example.

I don't know everybody's entitled to their own way of what they think is best. Ultimately filmmaking is a completely subjective business. It's just that the successful producers happen to have their finger on the public's subjective feeling of what is good. But I think it would be a shame if all programmes became the same and there's a case for slower pace, slow motion type stuff. A good producer would have his programme worked out, you would know what sequences are coming where - what comes before, what comes after, roughly how long your piece is going to run and what you're trying to say in it.

I think on the other hand if you've got a complicated piece of behaviour that you're going to film involving two or even three predators and one prey, and lots of different outcomes and things, then a good producer should have the flexibility to run to different lengths according to how he eventually wants it in the finished programme.

I think the camera person's job is to deliver all the building blocks that they possibly can so at no point in the creative process thereafter is anyone limited by a lack of shot. But at the same time, eventually you have three people in the edit - camera person, editor, producer - that's one too many to make a decision really and I can see why a lot of producers maybe want to work on their own. A third person, like a camera person, can be just too many people to keep happy.

But if I'm delivering a set of rushes, whether on video or otherwise, of something which the producer hasn't been there to witness himself, then I will write down what I think is a storyline, and I will point out certain shots that I've taken specifically because they may fit in here, they may fit there. Because the more information you have, the more complete a story they can make if they choose. Sometimes they make it very simple and say it's too complicated. But as I say, a good producer, he or she should give you lots of confidence to try things and be ambitious. But at the same time there's an underlying understanding that if it



doesn't work out it's not going to be your fault, they will understand. Because inevitably as you become more ambitious you come across no shows.

PB: I always wondered what a producer should be doing, thanks for that. I'll take a few notes.

DA: You listen to me and you can get somewhere young Bassett.

6. Most satisfying moment

PB: You were talking about the subjective, what's good and what is the best. From your point of view, looking back over the things you've filmed and they've been some fantastic moments. But just from a Doug Allan personal point of view, what would be the most satisfying? Because actually what is necessarily the most spectacular is not necessarily the most satisfying sometimes, is it, because you've had to think things through. What would you say could be the most spectacular or the most satisfying?

DA: Things that I've done?

PB: Yes.

DA: They are probably some little things. It was very satisfying getting the leopard seal in *Freezer* (6) because a lot of people said it's too dangerous or the seals are too wary you won't get anything. All I had to go on, because it was one of the sequences that I raised with Alistair early on, and it was based on an afternoon's experience of a leopard seal that I'd had many years before when I was diving at Signy. Where I'd been in its company, hadn't actually seen it hunting, but I'd been in its company and I felt this animal was tolerating me. So it's one of the early high impact sequences that we scripted into *Freezer* (6) was a leopard seal hunt and kill. So it was really satisfying to get that, because it was based on a hunch but it was based on an understanding of the animal, which I didn't feel anyone else would have. But Alistair was willing to go with and he put the time and money into it. So it was satisfying to get that.

PB: Just to say I remember on that being very concerned that you going into the water for the leopard seal, and we all were obviously. I can remember looking at the signs of the largest prey item of a leopard seal and it was a young crabeater, and we worked how high it was and what it weighed, and tried to compare it with you. I think it was just about okay.

DA: Well, a sad fact is a leopard killed a diver last year, took a diver off the surface and just took her down. In terms of other things, I've enjoyed working with marine mammals in the water because mammals are intelligent, they're like you and I, and you genuinely can't establish a relationship with a mammal, either surface or underwater. But you can genuinely establish a rapport with a mammal, which you can't with a fish or an insect or something like that. Luckily whales are among the most intelligent, certainly toothed whales, they're among the most intelligent mammals that there are.

So it's really satisfying to go into the water and establish a relationship with an animal you want to film because underwater, first of all you have to work closer, that's the great thing about working underwater. You can't sit there with a 600mm lens hidden in a box with only a lens poking out. You have to get in the water and you have to see your prey. Bear in mind that good visibility underwater is a thick fog here. In fact, if I can say, people sometimes ask "Underwater, well, what's the big problems you've got?", expecting to hear about depth and decompression sickness and bends and all that.

My response is, "Well, imagine if you went outside. You got up from your tent in the Serengeti where you've been filming and you throw open the tent flap and there's a thick fog descending and you can see 100 feet. That's a good day underwater, that's really clear".

Secondly, all the animals that you are going to film can fly so they don't just walk around on the ground, they can take off and be up into the fog before you know where you are. Secondly, there's a very gentle earthquake going all the time, that's a calm day. You put all these three things together and that's a good day, that's a good day underwater. That's a calm, clear day with decent sized animals. So the miracle is not that we get as good as we get, it's actually that we get anything at all.

So when you go into that environment with all the lumpiness and the bad visibility and all the rest of it, and you approach and therefore are seen by whatever you're filming, it's a great challenge and a great satisfaction to come back with a genuine piece of behaviour. That's why it's nice filming mammals because of all these animals have got a very easy option of a couple of flicks of their tail and they're away, they're out of sight. So it takes a lot of good field craft, underwater field craft, to get close enough, to get the confidence of these animals that they will carry on behaving in front of you. Because imagine doing that with a topside animal, you just hardly ever do that and yet here we are doing it with big, huge animals that look you in the eye and there's something that goes between you.

DA: Yes, it's funny. I trained as a scientist and then really became a camera person. I think a camera person is my perfect job, for me and it's good because I was trained to use whatever half of your brain it is that's logic and scientific, let's say the left hand. But it's actually the right hand that gets used in all the creative stuff and it's great having the ability, being trained as a scientist and then something creative, to flip and flop between the two sides of your head. It really feels like you're using your whole lot.

That's reminded me. I did a shoot with some scientists in Alaska and they could barely speak English. I just couldn't get them to say, to come down out of science onto a way of communicating normally. But, no, it's always been good.

I still think there's a great film to get made using camera people in front of the lens to talk about what they do. It's been tried but never really hit home properly. We do these little 'Making of' things at the end but if you really had a good director to go out and shoot genuinely ob doc, observational documentary, with very little input. But you have a good cameraman and a good director along with the film crew, shooting the bits and pieces, you get a great story. You get a great little series of films. If you chose six good camera people going to six different places, trying to do something difficult with no guarantee that they might even be successful, to follow the whole thing but give a good budget instead of tagging it on the end.

PB: *Yes, it's these little 10 minute' making ofs' at the moment.*

DA: Yes, little 10 minutes. I'm not saying that maybe it's too much to expect one camera person to cover half an hour. But if you had two contrasting ones and flipped between them and made a series of 30 or 50 minute programmes, you could get a really nice six part series. In fact, I'll take that up.

PB: *That was an aside, because we're going to get back to the most satisfying or spectacular moment about the whale.*

DA: Yes, I was working I think it was mid 88 or 89, John Waters, another good cameraman, a friend of mine, he was making a film about Patagonia and he wanted to do a sequence on right whales. I asked him to go down for about a month to films these right whales. They're called right whales because they used to be the right whales to hunt. They're slow moving, fairly placid and they used to float when you killed them so it made it easy to get them to shore.

Off Argentina there's a large population of right whales through the months of September to November. So I started diving and getting bits and pieces with them and I came across a mating female one day, a male and female mating. So I went in and I had an aqualung on my back and I moved in towards them, got some nice shots of them mating just quite near the surface. Then I dived down and I was kneeling on the bottom

hoping that I would get them swimming over the top as a silhouette. I was peering around, the visibility wasn't great, it was only about 10 metres, something like that. I was looking around and then I just felt rather than saw this something out of the corner of my eye, and this enormous whale came along. I was kneeling on the bottom and it came along with its belly virtually scraping the bottom. I just couldn't move and it slid along and it stopped dead opposite me, close enough that I could have touched.

I remember the eye was just level with my eye and it was about the size of a grapefruit and I was just looking at it. I remember thinking "If I play my cards right here this guy's going to be okay, he's as interested as I am or she's as interested as I am". So I looked up and we did nothing for a minute, we just looked. There was a bit of a swell going, just a gentle swell, and this swell picked up from one side and it started to move me against the whale. I put one hand just instinctively so I didn't knock against it completely. When I touched the whale it was just like you touch a sleeping person, you could feel the muscle tone change underneath. You could feel a slight flinch but then it calmed off ok.

So I just stood or kneeled there with my hand against the whale and the eye just looking straight back at me. I could see the whale had little moulting bits of skin, little peely bits of skin coming off its head. You must remember this whale, I don't think I could see the top of its head. I mean it kind of went up into the bad vis because this whale was maybe 12, 14 foot high at this point. So I saw this peeling skin and I don't know why but I had these gloves with little rubber dimples on them for better grip, and I just started rubbing the whale very gently, just like you would rub a dog and I rubbed. It wasn't flinching, it didn't pull away. In fact, when I stopped actually, I could feel the whale pushing against me just like a dog pushes up with its head when you scratch it between the ears.

So I started to rub a bit more vigorously, I was a bit more confident then. So I was rubbing away at this whale and the whale was pushing harder, and I was getting bigger and bigger rubs on it. It was like washing windows, this black mass of whale. The camera was attached to me so I let the camera go and I had both hands and I was like this.

So it went on like that for a wee while and I thought I'd better move and go up to the surface because the guys will wonder. Because the idea was that I would pop up every so often and let them know I was okay. So I started making my way up towards the surface and I got to the top and gave an okay to the boat. This whale had come up with me and it did a quick bit of a loop and it came back at me. This whale is maybe 40 feet long and probably weighs about 50 tons, and it put its nose flat on my chest and very gently pushing me through the water. I had no option but to put both my hands either side of its head and I started rubbing it like this. I don't know, I guess if whales could let out a sigh of, "Ah, this is nice", it would do that. It just pushed me around for a few minutes and I was rubbing its head like this.

It actually wouldn't let me go back to the boat. I pushed off and I started swimming towards the boat and it would put itself between me and the boat, and then just push me away, give me a rub. I was quite happy to keep on doing that and that was really good. That was my first experience of a friendly whale.

I don't know if it's the same with any topside mammals but if you're in the water with whales, the one thing to remember is that sooner or later, and it may not even be that trip, those 10 days you've got filming with them. But somewhere in the water there's a friendly whale of that species. It may be one in five whales that's friendly or it may be one in 10,000. But if you can spend the time in the water with them you will find the friendly one eventually, and when you've got that one everything just comes together, because you bond with it. Then that whale will let you do all the filming that you want.

There's a film out just now by Phil Pitcairn which has got humpbacks in it and there's some lovely humpback behaviour shot from quite deep. I spoke to Bob Cranston who filmed that, he's another good underwater cameraman, expecting Bob to say that they were using full rebreathers and things like that because normally whales just don't like scuba. Because when you're working with mammals underwater, if a seal or a whale is unhappy or wants to threaten or show dominance over another seal or whale, usually they'll send out a puff

of bubbles through their blowhole or their mouth. So if you're down there with that aqualung on, bubbling away, you're actually giving off all the wrong signs to a whale.

So I phoned Bob about this and he said, well, actually the strange thing about that dive was we did all that on scuba, he wasn't bothered with filming. He was so friendly, that female and calf, that we could do whatever the hell we wanted. So that's the other challenge with mammals is to find that friendly one.

7. Most scary moment

PB: On the flip side then, are there not so friendly animals that caused a problem for you?

DA: Yes, any mammal or any fish in the sea is in its home environment and they will be able to swim faster than you, can swim rings round about you. They may not intend to but they can do you damage. It is an odd situation where what you want to be as a filmmaker is completely accepted by the animal. Remember underwater it can see you. So you need to give off all the right vibes so that animal accepts your presence.

But if you take it too far in the case of some animals where they really do accept you into their group and then start behaving towards you like you are one of the group, then that can lead to - for example, fur seals, sea lions, can very boisterous groups which will be tangled and all swimming round about each other and things. One of the ways for the dominant ones to establish a little bit of order is to start pecking at the flippers of other ones. Well, if you get involved in that and a big sea lion starts to hold on, you need to show him who's the boss. Then they'll start coming at you and they'll peck, nip at you and things. What is a nip to another sea lion is half your elbow gone. So you need to know when to back out.

Likewise I know of cameramen, it hasn't happened to me, but whales, if their baby gets a bit boisterous then they'll often tuck them underneath a flipper. I know of a cameraman who was close to some right whales who decided that he was getting a bit too boisterous, a bit too full of himself. They tried to pull him under their flipper which is a bit dangerous, especially if you're snorkelling, then obviously you can't be taken under the water because you might drown.

The worst thing I had was when I was snorkelling off the ice edge in Lancaster Sound in North Baffin Island. I was just snorkelling because I was doing some Belugas and some diving birds. I remember I had the camera up in front, I was actually taking some stills at the time. I had the camera up in front of me and I suddenly felt like somebody or something had grabbed me round about the thighs and was really holding me tight and that. I looked down and a walrus had come up from underneath and it grabbed round me round the thighs and that's how they take seals. Young seals, especially naive ones, will go to sleep and they bob up and down in the water just like bottles, just with the tip of their nose up and down. The walrus will see a seal and it'll dive down underneath and then it'll come straight up from underneath where the seal can't see. They grab it and take it down.

This seal attacked me in exactly the same way. Luckily it didn't grab me and sink, it came up sort of grabbed me and for a split second I was at the surface. In that minute I kind of thumped down hard on its head and it released me in surprise, swam away, about as far away as you are, a couple of metres away, looked back and me and by that time I was heading back to the ice edge which was 10 metres away. Straight out on the ice edge on the top, and it was only really when I was safe that suddenly the adrenaline got going.

Because the normal pattern of attack is up from underneath, grab and then they kill the seal, either by crushing it to death or they pull it through their tusks. They rake it through their tusks, crushing most of the seal's body or they do have the other refinement and this is true. Apparently the walruses have got really strong cheek muscles for sucking. They feed on clams in the muddy bottom and they basically uncover the clam and then suck all the flesh out of the clam with their cheeks.

What they do with seals is they put their lips against the head of the seal and they suck and the brains come out and the head explodes. So they do that as well.

PB: So you've had time to think what might have happened have you?

DA: Yeah, look at this hole, he went away with the whole brain! No, it was one of these cases where I think God, you know. But the fact is if an animal's going to attack you it really does come out of the blue, and that is the one reason for having a safety diver looking. Just because as a camera person you do get sucked right into the viewfinder and if you get hit by something it probably won't be the shark that you're following around here, it will be his mate. Or if you're out on the ice doing polar bears. The Inuit have got a saying, they always say "It's not the bear you can see that's going to get you". If you're watching that one you'd better watch out for the other ones that are coming in.

That's how that walrus attack happened, I had no idea. Afterwards you think couldn't I have been a bit more aware of something like that but the fact is you can't. That's why it's good to have another pair of eyes looking around, particularly if you're filmmaking. On the other hand, who's looking after your mate.

PB: You mentioned polar bears and you've got a name as the top polar bear cameraman. With them did you have any dangerous moments?

DA: Yes, I've been charged by a polar bear. Came out of the cabin once and the bear had been up close to the cabin, so we went out. Well, normally you would chase them away with flare guns and things. This guy had been sniffing around the cabin, we'd heard him. We pulled on our clothes, went outside and for some reason we didn't take the gun with us, and the bear was ambling down the slope 20, 30 yards. For some reason he just turned and looked at us and was coming back up the slope at high speed. So we had to jump back into the cabin and grab the flare gun and then fired it through a very narrow crack in the door.

I haven't been in hairy situations particularly with bears. I think because you do learn to behave in the right way around them and you can tell whether they're going to be aggressive from their behaviour, if you see them in enough time. Jason and I now have a technique. Jason Roberts is the field assistant I work with a lot. If we want to film a bear hunting, for example, which is a common sequence where they spend time in one area trying to smash through the snow to get to the seals. We usually have approached the bear, spend a number of hours working closer with the bear with our snow machines.

When you first approach a bear on a snow machine 9 out of 10 will not be happy with the noise and they'll start legging it when you're several hundred yards away. In which case there's no point in chasing them because those bears are not going to settle down as long as you're following them. But if you get a bear that isn't too bothered then you can spend a bit of time, slowly approach, stop, a little bit closer. So we normally spend time getting the skidoos, the snow machines, to about 100 metres, which is usually about as close the bear will be happy with a snow machine. Spend a bit of time just standing there by the snow machines watching and then we think the bear has calmed down, I will take the camera gear and I will walk in slowly to about half of that distance.

So Jason's at the snow machines, I'm at 50 metres, the bear's 50 metres further. 50 metres is because from that distance using the big lenses I can get a range of shot sizes, including close-ups. 50 metres is because generally that's a comfortable, personal distance to get from a bear. If you go much closer you're kind of into his space and bears are normally very solitary animals and they don't tolerate other bears or anything that close to them. But usually 30 metres, so if I leave 50 the bear will often be happy.

Secondly, if a bear is going to attack you, they can run very fast and they often will run the last part of the attack very fast. But they don't usually run more than about 20, 25 metres at top speed, because they overheat quite quickly. So I know that with a bear at that distance if it does decide to stop hunting and come

over for a closer look at me, then it's not suddenly going to look up and charge. It's going to look up, it'll start to walk towards me. If it is going to charge it'll start to lower its ears, it'll start blowing.

Jason meanwhile, he's watching the bear as well from 100 metres away and he periodically starts up the snow machines to keep them warm. If that bear does start to come towards me, I've got every confidence that I'll keep filming, get the close-ups. Jason'll start the skidoo and zoom past and he'll come past me and intercept the bear, chase the bear away before it gets any closer to me. And here I am, living proof that that works. That's the technique that we use.

PB: Well, no, it becomes very obvious that you know the animals intimately. Talking to you yesterday with hippos. Now I thought that you must be mad getting in the water with hippos, you hear these stories. But you had the same thought processes of how to approach, how to (inaudible - over speaking)

DA: Yes, you need to be, I was going to say brave, that's the wrong word. You won't get shots of a polar bear from 200 yards away. You'll see what it's doing but you won't get shots so, therefore, you need to be confident enough to go close. But that confidence remember, I mean I do consider myself very fortunate to have been given so many high quality, long field time programmes to have worked on with something as charismatic and sexy as a polar bear.

When we go to the Arctic it's still one of the greatest things, they're not like national parks in Africa, there's not a lot of people, there's no one else around. You never have other people around you in vehicles looking at it. There are really no rules. There are few rules, apart from commonsense. The only thing that makes a shoot successful or a large factor in the success is all about your field craft and reading the bears. All this in an environment where, without being bullshit, if you don't know how to dress and behave when it's very cold you're not going to die. But you're going to get frostbite and you're going to be very uncomfortable, and you're maybe going to have to cut the shoot short.

It is a genuinely challenging environment, working with one of the top sexy animals in the world, where you're bringing to bear all the skills that you've amassed in order to get the best out of an animal. The only way you'll get the best is to really get it right, so that animal does something. You can't hide from a polar bear that's the other thing. You can't put yourself in a blind and it won't see you, because it'll see the blind, because there's nothing to hide behind. So it'll see the blind. It'll probably smell you. They're very curious, they're very intelligent. So you may as well get out there in the open, show him what you're doing and somehow make this connection with the animals such that they accept you.

It doesn't happen all the time but you need then to have the long time in the field and just a sort of stick-at-it-ness hoping that you'll eventually get it, and it's not always successful. You can be away four weeks, six weeks and come back with nothing or you can have it together. There's a sequence in *Blue Planet (2)* where there's a female hunting with a very small cub. Now that's pretty unusual because usually that was what they call a cub of the year, it was only born three months ago. Normally with small cubs like that, the females really don't like you coming anywhere close, they all take off into the sunset.

But we'd seen this bear a number of times and we knew that it was actually quite laid back and they were quite happy to tolerate our presence. But then there was this tagging programme going down in the regions and we asked them could they stay away from this area until we'd finished filming. "No, I've got to finish my target and I've got another three days of helicopter". They came in and they tagged this thing which meant chasing it, firing it with a revolver, drugging it. They didn't put a number on it luckily, but they tattooed it too and I thought that bear is going to be totally spooked. But miracle of miracles, we saw it two days later and it was still completely fine.

Then we went out one night after it had been blowing all day, it wasn't very good and the weather had picked up. We went out and we found the bear and it was the loveliest light. It was low, a little bit of fog, all backlit, really cold, it was 35° below and the bear was there and it was hunting, splashing up and down. It was the

loveliest, beautifullest light and it was actually on the last day of the shoot. That's another one of these satisfying shoots where everything came together. I had the wee cub and the hunt. The hunt wasn't successful but that didn't really matter. I got these lovely shots of this bear, really looked cold and other worldly, this place. It was really nice and it made a great little line sequence.

PB: Having the time seems to be so important to getting that behaviour. Your longest trips, apart from when you were in Sydney, where you were there for 10 months, presumably that would have the longest you were away on a filming project?

DA: Yes. Well, I was six months in Madagascar doing a film for Survival but there's been a few 10 weeks. *Snow Leopard* (14) that was one of them, I think was eight weeks, then we had a 10 week trip on *Freezer* (6). Yes, but I mean when we go on wildlife filming trips we work every day, except when you're completely weathered out, but it means that you're ready to go at a moment's notice. We work from dawn to dusk and sometimes even through the night as well.

So I think there's a point round about six or seven weeks when everybody begins to run out of steam and you either need to take a definite break there, possibly by coming back to the UK. But also a lot of things that we go for, they only last a finite amount of time, whether it's nest building or breeding behaviour or something. So you aim to be there over the peak time but if you stay very, very long then your chances of the behaviour even happening get less and less.

PB: What would you say then would be your most disappointing trip?

DA: I've been on a number of no-shows. I went to do denning when I was doing *Polar Bear Special* (19) back in 1996 I think it was. I went to try to get denning, bear denning, and a combination of very bad sea ice, all the sea ice basically blew out. When you go looking for bear dens you basically note an area of coastline which ideally has some nice valleys running up from the coast because the bears like to den in those valleys, not too far from shore but just enough out of the way. Normally you would drive up the sea ice and then go up these valleys, check for dens on the sides and then drive back on to the next valley. Basically the sea ice blew out unnaturally early, so we couldn't access these valleys from the shore. So we tried to go along the back of the mountains and come in from the top of the valleys, but it was all crevasse strewn and stuff like that. We did eventually find a bear with its cub and it had a collar on it so we couldn't film it. So we came back with nothing from that one.

There's only really two rules about wildlife filmmaking. Two things to remember that will keep you sane. Number one is, you can only be in one place at one time, so inevitably whenever you arrive people say you should have been here yesterday and you say I was on a plane, or you say well basically we've seen that snow leopard I think up that valley. You come back to find it walked by the camp when you were three or four miles away.

But the other one is if you're not there you'll never get it. So the first rule is just to be out and even shoots that you come back with nothing in the can, you still learned a lot. You learn a negative result is still a result and it's that second one that drives you out, even in the murkiest of weather when your chances of filming are remote. It's still worth sitting in the blind, watching the animal because you just develop a feel for what happens and when.

I always remember, I think it was Mike Richards, he did a lot of bird photography for hours and hours. I said "How are you stopping going to sleep, Mike? You must go to sleep sometimes". He said, "Well, you do go to sleep but you become like an animal because you sleep but you don't sleep, and you can tell the difference in the ambience of the place when the hawk is around or when the bird's about to fly back to the nest with food. Before the bird gets there the chicks somehow know that it's landed close by". He said "So even though you're sleeping you suddenly, ah, chicks are up and you're back there, and you'll start filming often at that point because you know that within 10 seconds the bird's going to come from over the back here, come

down there”.

That's what you need to. You can't just drop into habitat and get in tune with it and out again. You need to be there for weeks. That's another reason why I am not a great man for taking all the means for emails and sat phones and all the rest of it. I think they just distract me. It's not for everybody. I mean obviously I like it. But I would much rather go somewhere and have minimum contact with the outside world because they're just distractions and they don't let me sink as fully as I would like to into the place.

PB: Actually talking about sinking into the place and also about fast ice and what have you, is this the time to mention perhaps one of the dangerous moments? I think it was yourself and Martha, wasn't it, and Sue?

DA: Yes. It had two outcomes didn't it? I've drifted away on the sea ice three times actually.

PB: Three times was it? That's just careless.

DA: I know. James Boyce said “The first day always happens, the second day was coincidence, the third time it's just bloody stupid”. Yes, the first time I was working with a cameraman called Brando, our producer, and we were trying to film belugas. We flew out in this helicopter in Alaska and he put us down on this ice flow because there were some belugas around, it was a big ice flow. Then Brando for some reasons didn't seem to want the helicopter staying there. He said you go and land somewhere else and the guy quite rightly said, “Well, you're on a floating ice flow, it'd be better if I stayed here”. “No, go and fly somewhere else”.

So he flew off and he didn't fly very far before he flew into some bad weather and he realised that he couldn't really safely get back out to us. So we were floating around on this ice flow and he had to call out the rescue helicopter from Barrow which was completely equipped with full instruments, etc. Brando and I were beginning to think about where the helicopter had got to. I wasn't really getting much on the belugas because the visibility wasn't very good. We didn't know where the hell we were because a mist had come down and there was this great, whoosh, whoosh, and this enormous helicopter came down and landed and took us up.

The other one was when Martha and I were filming on the flow edge on Lancaster Sound. There's a wonderful month in the year, June, where you still have solid ice in these big inlets, which can be tens of miles wide, tens of miles deep but the ice in there is solid. But across the mouth of the bay open water, the ice is all broken and you get lots of open water there. You can stay on the solid ice and all the animals, the mammals and things are busy in the open water right up to the edge and that's called the flow edge.

Martha and I were shooting on the flow edge for a *Polar Bear Special* (19) it was. We were camped a reasonable distance back from the flow edge and this icebreaker came in that was breaking its way down to one of the communities. The icebreaker passed about a couple of miles away or so, and then basically it was like tearing along the perforated line actually. The wind got up in the night and the channel that the icebreaker had cut became an open lead, and the ice that we were on became a big ice flow and it just moved out.

So we found that we were drifting effectively on the open sea. A very big ice flow but nonetheless drifting and the weather wasn't very good. But luckily we managed to raise the *Resolute* which was about 130 miles away where they have the aircraft. We spent about 24 hours on the ice flow and we were on the front of *The Times*.

PB: I remember it. I recognise that face.



WILDFILMHISTORY

100 YEARS OF WILDLIFE FILMMAKING

DA: It was a pile of old rubbish they reported. We were supposed to be living on Mars bars and all this kind of stuff. We had so much food we didn't know what to do with it. But the danger was that these big ice flows can break into very small ice flows really quickly. But anyway they couldn't pick us up for about 24 hours because it was basically freezing and drizzle. But when the weather cleared, a twin otter came out and picked us up.

That was the second thing and then third thing was when Sue and I were working for *Blue Planet (2)*. Where again there was just three of us, myself, Aliac and Sue camped on the ice. We were about half a mile back from the edge and we finished filming about 1 o'clock one night and a long day. We went to bed and I heard Aliac in the morning about 5.00am, shuffling around saying "Ooh" talking to himself. But I heard the words 'open water' so I thought, "Oh, open water, there shouldn't be open water in there because we're half a mile back from the edge". So I went out and found out that we were adrift. The ice had all broken up when we were sleeping and we were now on a fairly small ice flow.

PB: *How big was that then?*

DA: About 100 feet across.

PB: *That small?*

DA: Yes. Now there were other ice flows packed round about us but it was thick fog, couldn't even see which way it was but it was obvious it had all broken up. So there was no point in trying to drive anywhere because I had no idea which way was the best to get to the shore. So luckily we managed to raise Arctic Bay on the HF radio that we had and from there we patched through connections to Resolute again. By sheer luck I had been talking, about two days before, about the possibility of getting a helicopter and doing some aerals. The flight ops guy had said, "Yes, okay if I have a helicopter available I'll keep it for that day". Very luckily there was a helicopter available rather than being several hundred miles away supporting scientists. I remember saying, "Dave, remember that helicopter that I asked for lunchtime, any chance you could send that a wee bit quicker?" He said, "Well, it's freezing fog here just now but as soon as it clears".

So about noon when things had cleared up the helicopter came down and picked us up off the ice flow. Just after I'd arranged for a helicopter and things, I asked Sue if you would marry me, because Sue and I had been going out for a while and I'd been kind of waiting for a special moment. We'd just bought this house in Ireland and we were planning to go to the house after we got back after this trip. I thought I'll wait until we're in Ireland, that'll be a nice time. But then this ice flow drift came up earlier and I thought, "Well, this is an even better time".

People hear that story and then they say "You must have thought you were going to die". I always say, "Well, it's because I didn't want in 10 years' time this story about taking me back to where you proposed for a nice meal". I thought I'll make that impossible.

So that was it, three times, yes, but each time touch wood okay. No, it is quite an interesting environment. I mean I don't know anywhere else where you can be walking around one day like it was solid land and the next day you need a boat. It's a huge change in an environment and it is great to feel at home in places like that.

PB: *Are you like me it's the quietness, the tranquillity that I love about those places?*

DA: Yes. Well, again it's almost I don't realise really, I'm so lucky. I was just talking with Caroline and Martyn Colbeck, he just did a shoot-up in the Arctic last month, and he came back absolutely enamoured by it. I wouldn't say that I've done so much that I take it for granted but it is something that it's only sometimes when I'm on a shoot do I turn round and think, "Boy, this really is something". But I think I am aware of, as I said before, about this. It's like going to Serengeti or Amaseli 150 years ago when there was nobody there.

www.wildfilmhistory.org



There's some mechanical transport but basically it's you and nature and the animals, and all your experience is coming together to let you feel at home in that place and everything else.

One of the most satisfying shoots, just to go back to that theme again. A couple of years ago myself and Jason got to work at Concallus Land off Svalbard. Now Concallus Land is a small **archipelago** and since 1930 it's been a protected area for bears, and there has never been a film crew allowed out to Concallus Land. The BBC has been pestering the Norwegian government for as long as I can remember, since *Kingdom of the Ice Bear* (5) days to go to Concallus Land because it is known to be a good area for bears.

Finally last year, or two years ago, the Norwegians gave permission for Jason and I to go to Concallus Land. I like to think that partly it was the reputation of the BBC and the quality of film that was going to be produced, i.e. *Planet Earth* (9) but also because it was Jason and I. Because one of the stipulations for going there was we were not allowed any snow machines, we had to do everything on foot. That is very satisfying that the Norwegians had the faith that Jason and I could go there, into a fairly heavy density bear area, and neither come to harm ourselves but even more importantly not have to shoot or damage any bears. They had the confidence that we could go there, be low key, get what we wanted, not hassle the bears and not be eaten by the bears.

That's a reflection of how they trusted us and it's very satisfying to get that. It was good and it was a great shoot because it did deliver.

PB: And without skidoos and what have you.

DA: It was good. It started off, I thought initially, oh God, this is going to be a pain. When we got there it was quite a long walk round checking all the valley, it was cold, it was windier than we thought. There were times we cursed it, but by the end it was the best thing that could happen, because you really felt like you were moving in a bear's environment. You were aware of the direction of the wind, if the wind picked up during the day, the temperature. You found yourself looking ahead and you would read the snow. Whereas with a snow machine you could just go over soft stuff, crunchy stuff, it doesn't matter, you'd find yourself "That's a nice hard ridge I'll just walk along that so I'm not breaking through the crust up to my ankles".

You really found yourself back to the basics and it was great, and you became aware of the sounds and how snow at -35° is like walking on polystyrene chips, whereas at -25° it's got that bit softer sound to it. It was just like everything was heightened. At the end of the day, a good long day when the sun had gone round and it wasn't on the den and the bears had gone back into their den and you knew they weren't going to come out for the rest of night, the walk home into the sunset with the long shadows and the orange light. You really felt alive, it was great, it was lovely.

PB: When you're talking to people, the funny times. You spend so much time away and things happen that the average person will have no idea what people go through. What is your favourite funny story as it were? What would you dine out on?

DA: If I could do a wildlife one. I have to think about that one, a funny wildlife one.

8. Remaining objective

PB: Well, actually whilst you're thinking about that then, can I just change the tone and going back to you have been filming predators and that. Something always intrigues people when I go to talks is what do you do when you see these, what are quite harrowing situations? As a cameraman what is going through your mind when you see a polar bear taking a seal or an orca?

DA: This may sound terribly clinical but I'm often thinking "Have I got all the angles on this". I can be quite detached from it to be honest because I see my job as being, it's hard to say, dispassionate. But if you take, for example, the most harrowing one to most people's minds would be I shot that myself. We shot that grey whale being attacked by the killer whales in *Blue Planet (2)*, and that has got an x-rating, a lot of people don't like that. Or the polar bear attacking the belugas, for example.

But my view on it is that a predator is a part of the natural ecosystem. It's as entitled to make a living from other animals as that animal is to escape from it, if it can manage it. My job is most importantly not to influence the outcome one way or the other, because that's not fair. So it's absolutely not fair to somehow give an advantage to a predator and it's also not fair to give an advantage to the prey so that it escapes. Because both their lives are, quite naturally, balanced on a hair trigger. Predators do not, as a rule, kill more than they can eat. So you don't know when you watch that hunt unfolding, that predator if it doesn't make that kill that may be it, maybe its energy may be gone. Likewise that prey, if it escapes well that's just classic Darwinian survival that we're watching.

So I can just watch it, but that's not to say that there are some anthropomorphic moments, maybe the way that a monkey screams when it gets caught or something like that where you don't feel an attachment to it. But you run up against it morally too, particularly with predator prey. There was a while, not so much now, but it's probably still going on, where less experienced producers, less experienced camera people, people who are trying to make a film on a very small budget, where they will do things which I think are morally reprehensible. Particularly in predator-prey sequences which involves some animal. Even if it's not ultimately eaten it may be tethered down or something but subjected to a lot of stress in order to get some extra shots for the sequence. I don't think that's acceptable. I certainly wouldn't partake of that in any way myself.

Again, I never have to because I've always been fortunate enough to work with series which don't give in for that, which give you the time and know that if you're ambitious then failure also is something you're going to come across. At least none appearance none delivery is what you're going to come across.

PB: *What's it like then, say, for the grey whale sequence? What was it like watching that as it went out?*

DA: Watch as it went out?

PB: *Obviously you had all the emotions at the time but you presumably were not involved with the edit and so you saw a completed sequence.*

DA: I mean I was very pleased with how it went out because I think it depicted accurately what had happened, albeit it shrunk the time, because the actual attack took six hours, whereas the sequence runs for seven minutes on the screen.

No, I mean you do get a satisfaction out of it. There are three key people in making a film, there's an editor and the producer and the camera person. The camera person is the first and there are researchers too, let's not forget them obviously. So the researcher finds the story, the producer says to go for it but the camera person really is the first rung in a great movie, if you don't have great pictures.

So when you get your pictures in the hands of good producers and editors and they're on song and you've given them good stuff, then the final product does transcend the skills of all three of you. When you get them all together and you see it on the big screen particularly or you get recognition for it, yes, of course it's what everybody wants. On the other hand you could pour heart and soul into something which is good and a good job's done on it but it just doesn't somehow connect with the audience. You just have to live with that too.

But it's very satisfying seeing the end product and sometimes when you see the end product you forget. It may have been put together in a way that you never imagined it and then somehow it becomes even more effective and more dramatic than you thought it was. Yes, with some sequences of predator and prey, like that killer whale grey whale, I could see why people got emotionally attached to it because it was cut for real emotion and scored. The music was put on to pull out the emotion, but that's part of TV.

I mean TV is an entertainment and you need to accept that these things are played how they will be played. They're put together and structured in such a way as to increase the drama, not emphasise the drama, but to put the drama in the right places.

9. Talks

PB: I know that you give talks. What sequences have you done in the past do you usually show?

DA: Well, we like to tell the stories behind the scenes. So we'll lace a couple of Arctic sequences, like it might be polar bear hunting. I mean polar bear hunting's a good one because people are fascinated by polar bears, and when you show them hunting it gives you a chance to talk about the whole ecology of the Arctic. Then how you cope with the cold, how you live in the cold, all the background scenes to it. Then you could flip from that. We've taken to showing the eider ducks that we did for *Planet Earth* (9), where the eiders come down and dive underneath the ice for the mussels. That's a good one because it's a different species, it involves underwater rather than topside. Again, more cold, things like that.

What else is there? We've got the Tongan humpbacks where a completely different environment because we've got some lovely stills of two shots with the humpbacks. Because again when people see the humpbacks in the finished sequence there's never any people with it, so people don't realise just how big these things are. You can talk about them and you can talk about all this idea of connecting with the mammals underwater, that sort of side of things.

I like to think when you give a talk that you subliminally shove out lots of information about the ecology and conservation and biology of the animal. That all slides out of you just in general conservation so that people don't feel they're being lectured to. But at the same time they come away with some genuine insights into the environment or the animal, and with a greater appreciation of the animal, but also of what you yourself go through to get the pictures.

PB: I know that people have been greatly inspired by your talks and your pieces on television too. But for you in recent years you've mentioned a few people but who's been the main sources of inspiration for you?

DA: I've got a lot of good friends in the industry and obviously some of them just as people you get on better with. But I've always had a lot of respect for Jeffery for being so fair and reasonable in the first place. Sean Morris is a guy that I like, he used to be a director at OSF, again he gave me some chances early on. He's just such a mad optimist and he's been around for such a long time, and he's just the same now as he ever was. He's daft as a brush but he's great. Mike Salisbury as a producer. I mean everybody will say Mike, but he just had such a laid back, I mean I think he was generally laid back because I've never really worked as much on a programme. I didn't get a chance on various things to work as much for Mike but he always struck me as being in control. They were always happy productions with Mike and people liked working with him, and at the same time he came out with fantastic stuff like *Life of Plants* (16), he did that didn't he? That was amazing.

Hugh Miles. I mean if you are in business like I've been for 20 years then you have to recognise Hugh. He did the lot and he tried. It's easy to forget how many things Hugh did for the first time and things that folk thought were really hard. He used to really take on hard things. Alistair, I've got a lot of time for Alistair. As I

say, we've kind of advanced through the industry together. He's very loyal to the BBC and I sometimes rib him about that but he gives as good as he gets. I like Alistair. Peter Scoones has been very generous with his time and information.

I'm a great believer in what goes around comes around. I mean sometimes folk have commented on "You give away too much information, Doug, you don't keep it, you should keep these things to yourself", that sort of thing. But I'm quite happy to impart advice because I think if you're nice to people then comes a time they'll be nice to you.

10. Working relationships

PB: That's one of the first things you said to me. Remember in the Birds for All Seasons (1) that tiny little office, do you remember?

DA: Yes, I do.

PB: I was in there and I met you and I were told that you were coming in, and you were incredibly nice to me. You said that I've got to be nice to people like you because you're on the way up and you maybe someone on the top when I'm on my way down and I need a couple of favours

DA: That's funny. When I started Keith Scholey was an assistant producer and people like yourself who was just a researcher. But I mean I don't do it because I think I'll get a favour from you, you owe me one and it'll come back. I just think that people in general, the general human nature is to be good and generous and nice to people. If you are good and nice to them then you create the right sort of atmosphere and they will do the same back to you when you're asking for some information off them. There are a few who are not like that and you just decide not to talk to them.

But, no, I mean there are probably are many more that I haven't mentioned, who don't come immediately to mind, but I think those people, I've always respected them for their professional quality but also their friendliness and openness and lack of bullshit. The sort of high moral values too. I think it is important to have the welfare of somebody to heart but also to be nice as a person and to be reasonable. The sort of people that you could agree on something really important on the strength of a hunch, without all the contracts, that sort of stuff. And that's how it used to be, the way you had to go through.

I mean filmmaking has got definitely much, much more professional and much more businesslike. I mean it has become a big part of television and there is an enormous responsibility now on, especially on the big series, to deliver financially. But at the same time, the time to make them, the budgets and all the rest of it has become squeezed and controlled and they want to know where every pound is spent, and they want to know what they're going to get delivered at the end. In some ways that's appropriate but in other ways it's no more appropriate for wildlife filmmaking than it is for an artist.

If you choose to pay, how can you put a value? You have to obviously put a value on a programme because it has a budget and you shoot it within that budget. But how you spend that money and what you come back with is ultimately subjective. I think if you try to arrive at financial formulas for making things and especially if you take up the time of creative like producers with too much, with finances and things, then that can be very counterproductive for them.

PB: Yes, I definitely agree with all of that. In terms of the programmes that have been made in the last decade or so, say the last two decades, what would you say are those kind of real groundbreaking moments, not necessarily for the audience but for you? In 100 years time, when they look back at wildlife filmmaking, that would be the series that I would tell people to look at first. Is there something like that?

DA: You know that's funny, isn't it? There was a while when if you asked the public that, they always came up with two things. There was the killer whales throwing the seals around in *Trials of Life* (19), and then there was the polar bear sliding down the slope that Hugh Miles shot. I've always wanted to produce a polar bear image that would somehow displace Hugh's sliding down the slope. I thought I'd met someone who actually agreed with that and I was talking about a member of the public about *Polar Bear Special* (19) at some Wildscreen. She said it was such a good film that *Polar Bear Special* (19), you did it, that was fantastic. I loved that shot where the bear came out and slid down the slope. I said "That was *Kingdom of the Ice Bear* (5), you stupid woman".

I've forgotten the question, what was it, pivotal moments?

PB: *In terms of programmes that have come out in the last 20 years that you think, if somebody came from out of space, which would you say to people you have got to watch that programme or you've got watch that series?*

DA: Well, all of mine. No, I think you'd have to choose most of the big David series, particularly let's say *Life on Earth* (7) and then *Trials of Life* (19), *Life of Plants* (16). I think *Blue Planet* (2). *Blue Planet's* (2) got a special place of affection in my heart because I'm at heart an underwater photographer, I guess. That's where I really get the biggest buzz from and *Blue Planet* (2) I think was genuinely was a big, ambitious series. So I'd have to choose them.

In terms of two of just sustained high quality and the range of each of them was genuinely huge in its range and ambitions. If you looked at all those you would just see most of the peachy bits of wildlife things that you wanted to see, and *Plants* (17) especially. *Plants* (17) was an amazing series. I mean how you took something as apparently mundane as plants and yet brought all that magic into with it, with the time lapse and the storylines and all the rest of it. It was a remarkable series, and it might sound snobby, but it was pitched at intellectual level that - I don't know it's been attained a little bit since, but it was pitched at a real good information level. But that's always been David's strength to impart high level of info so effortlessly and slide from one part of the globe to the next.

So I would choose them. Does that answer it?

11. The Future of Wildlife Filmmaking

PB: *That's fine. Actually you talked about peachy moments and obviously for a lot of people there can be no peachy moments left to film. But if you had a limitless budget, if you could just open up your private bank account for a while and think, "Right, I can spend this one go", what would you do, do you think?*

DA: What would I do? There are peachy moments yet to be observed, a number underwater. The classic one is sperm wheeling squid. No on earth you would do that when it takes place in the inky blackness, but you never know. Low level cameras could acquire it, so we'll see. That would be one.

I can probably talk about this because by the time it reaches anyone. There are kinds of deepwater aggregations of animals which are being discovered where you've got a species coming together in big masses, big numbers, and spawning. And then you have the attraction of all kinds of predators with it. There are a number of places where these aggregations are seen or observed and known to exist but having yet been filmed.

So I think there are challenges undoubtedly yet to be faced but it's whether you can deliver the visual images of them that will live up to the expectations of the public. We have set very, very high standards. When the



public sees a sequence they expect to see it from several angles with a slow motion option, with a clear cut, well filmed conclusion, instead of the animals running behind a bush and you miss what happens next, that sort of thing.

Several things may have been seen but rarely and so rarely that for a series which maybe has a long filming span, three years but when you're talking to scientists who've seen this maybe once in 10. Can you really write that into your script and spend the money and time trying for it, if he's seen it once in 10 years and you've got 3?

So there's an element of luck in some of the big things. But increasingly, with new stories and the ease with which you can seek out these stories across the Internet and things, there are big new things come to light. I think Simon King's just filmed cheetahs taking ostriches. So there's that sort of thing. It may be with global warming we get strange environmental things happening which will allow predators and prey to interact in different ways.

PB: What I was going to ask now, Doug, is what you thought of today's wildlife programmes and what you dislike as much as you like? Are there any areas where you think wildlife shouldn't be going, some of the programmes?

DA: Well, it's hard to define where wildlife starts. People tend to think about wildlife is anything with an animal in it, even though the animal content may be tiny and the presenter spends far more time on the screen than the animal does. Then does wildlife go into conservation and global climate change programmes, programmes like this. I mean it may just be mentioned at the end but does that make it a wildlife programme?

I think the last couple of years or the last four or five years have seen the advent of big event television, that's seems to be what's coming on. There's a small number of very high budget programmes that are being made and they are being made almost exclusively by the BBC, where you know that those programmes are big budgets, big expectations. And when they come along they're very carefully timed so that you don't get too many coming along, because each one they have to make an event of it, so that it'll be marketed, that's the other thing. What we're seeing now is that marketing; it's very important how you get the public revved up to make this thing an event so that they will watch it.

So I think we've seen that. It started with *Blue Planet* (2) and I think got more with *Planet Earth* (9). I don't know what the next one they have in line but they'll have other ones. I think it's easy to forget sometimes, when you work for those programmes in whatever capacity, whether as a camera person or as a producer, that they represent in terms of hours about 5% of the wildlife hours available on the multitude of channels. The sad fact is probably that out of all the other 95%, a lot of it is pretty mundane, pretty average stuff which will be here today and gone tomorrow.

There is the odd gem, having said that I can't pick any out of my memory at the moment. But just because it's cheap and quickly made, doesn't necessarily mean it's a bad programme. There are some very good cheaper programmes, thoughtful programmes, which are made. I think the problem is getting these to an audience. Because of the big event a lot of these things pass under the radar for the audience and that's a shame because there are a lot of good, worthwhile programmes coming around.

I think we're just on a change of a big cusp of technology, aren't we? Because the fact is now, without again being bullshit, a camera person like me together with a producer, like my wife Sue, together with an editor that I know who's happy to work for nothing and has final cut pro machine at home. We could make a really top end programme if we all agreed to work for nothing and it was locally based. We could make a fantastic programme for next to nothing and the internet will allow us to, at the moment sell, but I think in just a few years time broadcast that film to whoever wants to pay for it. I think that's something that's going to happen in the next foreseeable future.



PB: Yes. That's interesting because I was going to ask you if somebody from Sterling University came to see who was 19 or 20, champing at the bit, really wanted to get into the industry, what would you say to him or her?

DA: I would say, yes, go for it of course, by all means. When I started it was possible to do nothing but wildlife, nothing but pure wildlife, no presenters. You just went out with a camera and shot animal behaviour. The chances for doing that now are less than they were. They have kicked up a little bit and I'm talking here in April 2007. Well, following on the success of *Planet Earth* (9) there's a big slew of blue chip wildlife things being done at the moment. I suspect that the cycle when pure wildlife is popular it's a bit cyclical and at the moment we're on the top of that cycle. A lot being made. I think it could drop out again. TV's following Hollywood and it kind of ebbs and flows.

So I would say to someone who came to me, I would say, "Look, your chances of making year after year of doing nothing but pure wildlife, you'd be pushed to make a living. You're going to have to shoot. The key is to be as broad as you can. So learn to shoot anything, learnt to shoot it fast, learn to shoot it good. Because you can film very quickly but you can film well as long as you absorb the basic rules of how to follow this filming grammar, so that your stuff can go together. But don't choose or hope, try to pick wildlife, pure wildlife subjects."

"But you'll be hard pressed to make a living because the fact is that these programmes that make pure wildlife there are a lot of people out there who know how to do that, like me and we do tend to get approached to do these pure wildlife, high end things. There's not a great amount of chance for complete newcomers to slide in there."

But on the other hand, it's never been easier to practice and shoot and adopt a professional attitude right from the word go. Very professional equipment is very affordable nowadays, perhaps not full HD but lots of other stuff. There are lots of ways to make a living as a camera person who has an eye for wildlife and does it. So I wouldn't be discouraging in any ways. You just have to go out and get yourself a show reel together and then get it in the hands of a producer, persuade them and you can film new things that they ask you to do, and then you will be given a chance sooner or later. But it's not easy.

PB: Actually talking about things not being easy, everybody thinks, in fact I can remember in the first few years I was at the Unit, the romantic idea of the wildlife filmmaker, cameraman. That was the cutting edge that everybody wanted to be, the cameraman. But you don't realise, that you've mentioned earlier on, it's 200 days a year you're away and so you do have some of the most amazing experiences but there is a trade-off, isn't there?

DA: Yes, there's a trade-off. I think the media emphasis, I don't know if it's higher on average separation rates or divorce rates, but certainly amongst cameramen you do need very understanding partners. But you yourself need to be not tempted by the great number of people, of inspiring people, exciting people that you're now working with. But it is still romantic, it's still by far the best job in the industry, because if everyone gets into this for the love of nature, and most people do, or love of animals, then it's the camera person who gets the bulk of time to spend with that animal. And because animals can't be directed, we're not organising them or directing them to do this, so it's very much in their hands what we get, the camera people's hands.

So a producer to some extent if you really want to spread your budget as far as you can, you have to ask yourself in a lot of cases is a producer necessary in the field. Perhaps now that he or she can see in the evening what you've shot during the day and therefore has some input into what you shoot the following day, there might be more case for it. A good producer will definitely make a better film if he or she has seen something of the environment and the animal that he or she's filming.

But the camera person is the basic building block and he and she can take immense pleasure, he or she is making the key decisions that will later run through the whole film - when to press the trigger and when not to, and how to make the animal look, in terms of beauty and composition and all the rest. And he or she gets the most time to watch it. It is romantic. No, it is an exciting job and that's what first of all drew me to wildlife filmmaking, why I decided. When I made the decision in 1984 to definitely to go for it was partly the meeting with David and the rest of his crew and talking about how the business worked. Partly having spent 10 years with the Antarctic Survey, really enjoying what I'd done and therefore knowing what job satisfaction was all about.

They also say in wildlife filmmaking and I remember sitting down and thinking about it and writing down on a piece of paper 'what is good about this job?'. It's the opportunity to travel, it's an opportunity to be creative. It's also adventurous unless we do some underwater. I enjoy photography. It just brought together all the things I wanted to do and I could see that I had a unique head start in knowing, not much about photography and filmmaking, but a lot about an inaccessible programme-attractive part of the world, i.e., the Antarctic. So it just built from there.

PB: Sounds like a good time then?

DA: It's still continuing. But I have evolved myself. I'm looking to do different ways of doing photography for myself. I'm looking to go to places self-funded so that when I come back I own all the material that I've got, and that material, I may make a film out of it, I may just sell bits and pieces to people who want them. But I also want to hopefully keep getting offered the chance to do things which are at the cutting edge of wildlife filming, either in the Poles and elsewhere. While the Poles have been very good to me and there are still some things I want to do there, there's an awful lot of other bits in the world as well and animals that I'd like to spend time with. Which are just as challenging but, dare I say it, to me a bit more comfortable.

If you're going to spend hours and hours in the water watching an animal would you rather do it at 0° or 25°? Well, 25°'s got certain advantages.

PB: As an aside, I remember in Life in the Freezer (6) you consistently were in the water double the time anybody else can do it. So you must have a certain cold tolerance and everything like that.

DA: I think there are certain physiological, just like some folk can run faster than others, maybe my circulation or something is better. I've always said in lectures and things, it's a debatable point whether I'm more uncomfortable freezing my balls off or Jimmy up in the tree being eaten alive by mosquitoes. Discomfort's part of the game I think but it's also something that makes it exciting. I think most people would like something that's a bit tough. Maybe you don't agree, because I remember you are particularly prone to seasickness.

But everyone who crosses the Drake Passage, that bit between South America and the Antarctic, they would all actually love for it to be rough for about an hour so they could say they had it. They don't want day after day of it but they want it tough. So I think most camera people would like something that stretches them a wee bit. It can be a pain day after day after day, but nobody likes it too easy. Well, you like an easy one now and again but you actually like to stretch your work more.

12. Conservation and Wildlife Filmmaking

PB: Can I ask one last question and then you come in with any final comments. It's interesting, I was at a talk and somebody said "What do you think in 100 years time, that people will look back on wildlife filmmakers and say that they hoodwinked the world with regard to conservation?" i.e., we show these pristine environments and animals doing wonderful things. Yet at the same time we know when we go out it

wasn't like it was 10 years ago. What do you think about the conservation aspect? You've been so fortunate to work with polar bears and at the moment on the news they're saying they could not be around for too much longer.

DA: That's an interesting question. I know that certain filmmakers and producers, etc, and presenters say we have to make the thing look as beautiful as we can, because if people don't know how lovely it is, they won't bother about it so much. And if we were to show something nice and then immediately rabbit on about how endangered it was, then people will turn off, etc.

But I think there's a fine balance and I think that we are becoming right now, we are so aware of the threats that are being posed by global climate change and all the rest of it. That I think it can be more noticeably or more commented. Programme makers who make pure blue chip movies on wildlife, with absolutely no reference to some of the problems, people pick up on that.

It was interesting because I think when they screened *Planet Earth* (9), the first six went out in January/February, the second ones that came out in November had quite a different slant on the commentary to the first six. There was a lot more push towards the environmental stuff. Meantime in that six months the BBC knew from the feedback of *Planet Earth* (9), and so they produced all these *Saving Planet Earth* (10), *Future Planet Earth* (11) which went out on BBC2, 3, 4. I think personally those should have been anticipated way ahead and they should have come out together. I think the BBC's uniquely placed to do the blue chip and then justify the blue chip by saying "Hold on!", in a completely different context do it like that.

In a couple of 100 years time I don't think people will sing about wildlife camera people. I think they'll generally think that the whole world stuck its head in the sand. I think on the other hand it's inevitable. As I say, package holidays started in the 60s, which was the beginnings of cheap, global travel and it's just a trend that's got more and more.

But on the other hand you can definitely see that anywhere you go and make a film about a place, guarantee five or seven years down the line it's been usually spoiled or certainly it's not as nice as when you first of all found it. Hotels have gone up, the environment has been degraded, whether underwater or topside. Does that mean that if you left a place completely unnoticed and didn't make a film about it that it would stay undeveloped? Anyway who says it's worse off, I mean devil's advocate here, certainly the people who live there. Many of them will be enjoying a higher standard of living. They'll have clean water, they'll have some economy and it may be at some cost to the environment but maybe less than you immediately think.

It's a tricky one. Personally, I think there's a way to tell a story about an animal without being mawkish or anthropomorphic or sentimental. There's a way to connect the public to that animal in a way that tells the story of the animal but also lets people become aware of the challenges faced by that animal at the moment.

I myself, I'd love to do a film about polar bears, fronting it, because I think I could talk with a degree of authority and passion that the public could connect with it. It would have an environmental message but it would be hopefully directly told in a way that this wasn't in your face and it would appeal to lots of people. I just have the accent, intelligible problem to get over.

PB: *I think it's a great idea actually. I think it's something you should put forward.*

DA: Yes, well I've tried with it but we've got the BBC Scotland, we'll see.

PB: *Doug, that's been absolutely fantastic. Is there anything else you'd like to mention?*

DA: It's a bit mundane perhaps. I was only going to mention I've been in the business through some pretty big changes. Wildlife filmmaking I think, real wildlife filmmaking, really only started in the early 70s, along with the conservation movement I think and a general increase in interest in wildlife films generally. Along with the advent of colour TV and so on, a whole lot of things worked in its favour.

At that time the whole world was out there to be discovered and I think it progressed very well, very neatly through the next 20 years or so, 30 years. I'm not sure if it's at some sort of turning point now. As I say, it started in the 70s. Let's say *Life on Earth* (7) was the first major worldwide wildlife series that was a big success, and it proved that wildlife could really sell on television screens across the world. *Trials of Life* (19) came along 10 years later and it made a big hit on the TV screens but, even more importantly, the offshoots - the videos, today's DVDs - that became a huge revenue stream for Warner who bought the rights in America. Your bookshelf, your collection wasn't complete without *Trials of Life* (19) on the wall and they made a fortune.

So from that the residual rights and the TV rights became really important. *Blue Planet* (2) rewrote the books 10 years later by being just colossally popular and creating a huge spike in BBC incomes. And also then brought in the idea of the film going alongside it, so yet another revenue stream in a different format. *Planet Earth* (9) has now come along in HD, where now they were shooting a high definition. It can genuinely go onto the big screen with no loss of quality. So suddenly now we're into the stratosphere as far as offshoots from a television programme.

You don't just now talk about a big series. You talk about not just the TV rights but how it's going to do on DVD, how it's going to go on the big screen. Video games aren't far behind. Somebody's going to come in there with the games. You'll go out and shoot the animals for real. But you could make a great video game where you gave people trims to play around with, be your own editor, make your own films, this sort of stuff.

It's got massively more complicated, business-like and I just hope that we don't get what I'm seeing, which seems to be an increasingly large gap between the people who actually make the film, i.e., cameraman, editor, producer and the people who commission the film, who increasingly to me seem to be looking at different criteria for what makes a film a success. But secondly, they are just not linked practically with the world of making wildlife films. You can't snap your fingers and say, "Right, I'll have it, I'll buy it, but you've got to do it in three months", not if you've just missed the one annual event that was the highlight of your film, and yet they do that.

They just need to get a bit more practical up near the top and also they're juggling around with freelancers' livelihoods and lives. You can't keep a person hanging on, will we, won't we make this for six months and then suddenly turn round and say "Go". Because that person, what's he been doing for the six months? He can't wait around, he's got committed to other things. So I wouldn't like to see that trend continuing. But it's looking fine for me.

13. The Future for Doug Allan

PB: So, your next pivotal change then would be what you mentioned earlier, possibly the internet?

DA: Yes, I would like to think that I could make films by a different funding process and hold on to many more of the rights for it, and the internet will be a means by which I can then market or distribute or make those films. You only need 100,000 people around the world to download your film in your own time and that's it, do your own thing. Four or five of them.

PB: Drinks are on you then, I'll be around.



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DA: If I'm looking for a good producer, Pete.

PB: *On that note, Doug Allan, is there anything else that you'd like to add? Dougie, that's fantastic, really, really enjoyable and I think there's some lovely stuff in there actually.*

DA: Yes, it's funny isn't it? Maybe it's something about stages in our career. I would like to personally to do something that felt a bit more worthwhile.

PB: *Actually that kind of polar bear that you mentioned, I think that's an ideal vehicle for that, isn't it?*

DA: It's just that I actually do think that the planet facing a big emergency and whether we can do anything about it I don't know. But I just like to try to make people reconnect with what it is and I think in the hands of the right director, I'm sure I can do it. Tell you what would be even better, if you can make a programme for children because children is where it's at. You don't actually influence the 80 year olds or 25 year olds or older, you've got to get them as kids. You've got to get them when they're 7, 8, 9, 10, 11.

PB: *I think my interest in natural history and love of nature, actually it was even earlier than that I think.*

People, films and organisations mentioned

Alistair Fothergill

Bob Cranston

David Attenborough

Dickie Bird

Eric Meake

Flip Neckland

Hans Hass

Hugh Maynard

Hugh Miles

Jacques Cousteau

James Boyce

Jason Roberts

Jeffery Boswall

John Downer

John Ford

John Waters

Keenan Smart

Keith Scholey

Lotte Hass

Mark Deveau

Martha

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Martyn Colbeck

Mike DeGruy

Mike Hay

Mike Richards

Mike Salisbury

Ned Kelly

Peter Scoones

Phil Pitcairn

Sean Morris

Simon King

Stephen De Vere

Sue Flood

Vicky Stone

British Antarctic Survey (BAS)

British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC)

BBC

HMS Endurance

International Association of Wildlife Filmmakers (IAWF)

Kodak

National Geographic

Oxford Scientific Films (OSF)

Royal Festival Hall

Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB)

Sterling University

The Times

Warner

Wildscreen

Survival Anglia

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5. KINGDOM OF THE ICE BEAR (*The Natural World*) (BBC, 1985)
6. Life in the Freezer (BBC, 1993)
7. Life on Earth (BBC, 1979)
8. Northern Flights - Summer Birds of the Orkney Islands (RSPB, 1989)
9. Planet Earth (BBC, 2006)
10. Planet Earth Under Threat (BBC, 2006-2007)
11. Planet Earth: The Future (BBC, 2006)
12. Reefwatch (BBC, 1988)
13. Sea Trek (BBC, 1991-2001)
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15. The Living Planet (BBC, 1984)
16. The Private Life of Plants (BBC, 1995)
17. The Silent World (J. Cousteau and F. Dumas, Harper and Brothers, New York, 1953)
18. The Wildlife Specials: Polar Bear (BBC, 1997)
19. Trials of Life (BBC, 1990)
20. Wildlife on One (BBC, 1977 – present)

Glossary

American Standards Association (ASA): Refers to the scale of film speeds devised by Kodak

Archipelago: A group of islands

Arri: World wide manufacturer of film equipment

Arriflex: Camera line from Arri

Beta SP (Superior Performance): Video format that was a successor to Sony's Betacam

Betacam Nikon F2: Professional 35mm single lens reflex camera

Bolex: Swiss motion picture camera manufacturers

Housing: Protective, waterproof and robust casing for cameras, designed for underwater or other extreme environments

Magazine (Mag): Light proof chamber in which unexposed film is loaded, before and after it has been exposed by a camera

Rushes: Raw footage that has not been edited

Steenbeck: German manufacturers of editing and viewing machines for 16 and 35mm film since 1953

Tungsten film: Designed to give accurate colour under tungsten light as opposed to natural light which has a higher colour temperature

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