



Julian Pettifer: Oral History Transcription

Name of interviewee:

Julian Pettifer

Reasons why chosen for an oral history:

Television presenter and conservationist.

Name of interviewer:

Robin Brown

Reasons why interviewer chosen:

Robin has worked with Julian a lot, particularly on the *Nature Watch* series for which he was Executive Producer.

Date of interview:

Monday 29th June 2010

Place of interview:

Chalford, Gloucestershire

Length of interview:

68 minutes

Copyright:

© Wildscreen

1. Background

JP: My name's Julian Pettifer, I'm British. I am a retired person mostly here but I still do a bit of writing but a retired television presenter and radio presenter, and today's date is 29th June 2010.

Int: *How did you first become interested in natural history television?*





JP: I didn't become interested in natural history television or indeed any television for a very long time because we had no television. I grew up in the days before television and I became interested in natural history I guess because it was part of life. I grew up in a little village in Wiltshire and we're talking about pre war days now, we're talking about 1935 onwards. My dad was a vet and therefore animals and wildlife were part of everyday life.

To begin with my job at home was doing things like helping to look after the hens so you had to be very much aware of the fox, so a lot of wildlife was the enemy then. It was an enemy and it was a resource. You went out into the fields and you picked mushrooms, you picked blackberries. There was the conker season, there was the walnut season. There was the season when we went crayfishing on the River Avon. So every season of the year was marked out by some kind of harvesting of natural resources and that was just part of life, and also guarding the chicken against the fox was part of life. Indeed, when my brother once forgot to shut in the chicken and the fox got the chicken, my goodness, he wasn't very popular I tell you because chickens were very important in those days.

We're now talking about the early days of the war and food was very short, and wildlife and wild stuff, wild produce, was even more important because it added that little bit of extra variety to your diet. People who were involved with wildlife, things like the hunt were very much part of village life and when the hunt used to meet it was a big thing and everyone used to go out. I know it's terribly politically incorrect now but not then, it was very much part of what everyone did. Everyone had shotguns and indeed rifles and everyone used to shoot. We had ferrets, we used to go rabbiting. Keeping ferrets was great fun I must say, they stink a bit but they're great.

My father was a pretty good amateur naturalist. We all knew our birds because he used to point them out to us all the time. He was pretty good on plants as well because part of the business, as well as being a vet, he helped to run the old family business which had been going since about the 1840s which was making animal medicines. Therefore they would go out collecting herbs which they would use to make all kinds of animal drenches and potions of one kind or another. I always used to know, I could smell in the morning if they were making Santovin, because Santovin was a drench which was made from wormwood. Wormwood was a common weed which grew on the side of the road and every year we'd go out cutting this stuff, collecting it, and then they'd boil it up in great big vats.

Wildlife in its broadest sense, wild plants and wild animals, were very much part of everyday life. We knew our trees because trees are important: ah, that's a good tree because that makes very good firewood or that one's no good because it's no good for firewood, it doesn't burn properly, that sort of stuff.

Int: There is this contemporary view that conservation is something that arrived in the early 1980s and has been imposed on us since or that we've developed since. What you're actually saying is the people who went hunting and who raised animals and had to conserve them were there long before the so called conservationists.

JP: There is absolutely no doubt about that, that people who were interested in hunting and shooting were also interested in conservation. It was the hunting community that no doubt conserved a lot of the woodland and if it hadn't been for them it would have been chopped down and used as a resource. In the same way, those that were interested in shooting partridges and pheasants and things wanted there to be the habitat for them to breed and live in so they made sure that it was preserved but it was done for a practical reason. It wasn't done for sentimental reasons. Okay, they liked their wildlife but they liked it partly because it was on the table. They admired it, they liked it aesthetically, they liked to have it around and expected it to be there.

www.wildfilmhistory.org



But, of course, what happened was that because of the war that's when intensive agriculture started and had to start and, of course, that did have in some respects a devastating impact upon wildlife because lots and lots of land, a lot of the old pastures were ploughed up because we had to grow food. That's when the wild flowers and the wild herbs and that's when the hedgerows came down which were such fantastic habitat for birds and animals and plants, and unfortunately it didn't finish with the war.

The other thing that happened, of course, was that a lot of pesticides and insecticides, particularly DDT, was invented during the war and it was rightly considered to be a complete lifesaver because it helped to protect our troops from malaria because it killed the mosquitoes. There was a whole range of new herbicides which were also developed. There was an old phrase during the war, 'Dig for Victory', and we all did. We all had our bits of garden as kids and we used to grow things and that I think gave us a lot of interest in plants and animals and growing things and, of course, in pests, what used to eat the lettuces and eat the cabbages.

After the war that intensification of agriculture did not end, it became even more intense because there was a worldwide shortage of food. Apart from feeding ourselves we had to help feed a starving Europe and the technologies of intensive farming became much more sophisticated, the widespread use of insecticides and pesticides. Everybody, of course, in those days considered it a blessing, it was the best thing that had ever happened. Nobody realised the price that we would eventually pay for it.

Int: Do you think your father and you in this time period actually made a difference between what we call wildlife now and, if you like, domestic wildlife?

JP: Well, of course you had your extraordinary childhood in which you grew up in East Africa and you had this extraordinary experience of seeing these great herds of wild animals and growing up with hearing lions outside your tent. Now for me that was wildlife, that was what I considered to be wildlife. I mean this stuff we had that wasn't wildlife. Because there weren't many books being published during the war years the books I was reading were the books my father and grandfather had grown up on. They were authors that have never been heard. They were writing Victorian romances about the expansion of the empire into these wonderful places like Africa and South America, and they wrote these exotic and probably extremely inaccurate books in which wildlife, and that's what I dreamed of. I dreamed of the day when one day maybe I would be able to see these great herds of antelope and have lions outside my tent, and go to the Amazon and see these fantastic snakes.

So that was wildlife to me, the stuff around us that wasn't really seriously wildlife, no.

2. Early Career

Int: I actually don't know, and this is a true statement, how you actually started in journalism. How did you get into journalism?

JP: By mistake really. I'd just like to say one other thing about the kind of books that I was reading during those early days because they did have a big influence on my interest in wildlife in a more serious matter, and also poetry about the countryside. I was always very keen on poetry as a child and I used to love particularly Wordsworth and Thomas Hardy. I mean Thomas Hardy was a poet and a novelist who I loved and [recording interrupted] to really take an interest in the English countryside. But more important than that



was Richard Jefferies.

Now a lot of people these days will never have heard of Richard Jefferies but he was born and grew up near Swindon, and there's now a museum to him there. He died very young as a consumptive but he wrote wonderful books on the English countryside and about the people who lived in the English countryside, about gamekeepers and poachers. For me I suppose those people did start to give me an appreciation for the kind of romance of the English countryside as well as the wildlife that lived over there in other countries.

Int: *Of course, you went on to do the definitive British wildlife series.*

JP: Well, eventually but let me tell you a little bit about what happened before that, the first thing that happened to me after I left school. Incidentally at school I was very lucky because I had an incredibly good biology teacher and they did encourage us to do anything within reason that interested us, and if you were interested in bird watching or if you were interested in plants and things you were encouraged to go out. We had a wonderful biology teacher who used to take wonderful walks in the countryside. So that continued.

Then I went into the army and to my astonishment within about three months I found myself in Korea. There I was, 18 years old, well 19 just, commanding a platoon in Korea. Believe it or not, there were a lot of very interesting things happening wildlife wise there because we were up on what was called the demilitarised zone which hadn't really been demilitarised, it was full of minefields. It was an incredibly dangerous area to be in largely because of the minefields so I feel a great sympathy for our guys out in Afghanistan these days.

But because there were these huge areas of abandoned rice fields and masses of wild rice alive with birds, I have never seen so many pheasants. So what did I do? I'd take my shotgun and I used to go out and shoot them. So pheasant became a regular feature on our platoon dining table and a lot of my guys I guess had never eaten pheasant before but they soon got to like it. So that was fascinating.

Then after that there was university where I think there was less input from wildlife than any other period in my time because I was interested in other kinds of things. I got particularly interested in the theatre and I did lots of acting and I wrote for the university newspaper. At the end of my time there I really didn't know what I was going to do and somebody said to me there's a lot of these new television stations starting up, these new ITV (Independent Television) stations, and there's one in your part of the world and I think it's called Southern Television and hasn't started yet.

So I wrote to the Controller of Programmes, a guy called Roy Rich, and said I'm just graduating from Cambridge and I've always been very interested in the theatre, blah, blah, blah. To my astonishment I got a letter back and I actually had to go down to ITN (Independent Television News) to have an interview and do an on camera presentation, I had to read some news. With the controller, Roy Rich, was his wife who was a rather famous actress called Brenda Bruce and apparently, he tells me, that it was her who afterwards said you must have him. So I got a job.

3. Vietnam

Int: *Then you became a very famous guy in Vietnam, didn't you, quite soon?*

www.wildfilmhistory.org





JP: Yes. I did a few years at Southern Television and it was at that time, Robin, because I was a news reporter and a presenter of a daily current affairs/regional television programme that even then wildlife related stories started to crop up. I found myself reporting about oil spills on the beach in Bournemouth and the damage that it was doing. Of course, once I'd left Southern Television and went to work for the BBC (British Broadcasting Corporation) I was working on a programme called Tonight (1) and was travelling all over the country. More and more often you were finding that wildlife related stories, stories relating to the national environment, were cropping up as news stories and that became even more the case when they sent me out to Vietnam.

Now I was in Vietnam on and off over a period from 1965 to 1975, I think it was 1966 to 1975. I started to realise that the way that war was being waged was having a devastating impact on the environment.

Int: *Agent Orange.*

JP: Agent Orange. Operation Ranch Hand it was called and you know but a lot of people may not know that in order to inhibit the North Vietnamese from infiltrating down what was called the Ho Chi Minh Trail, and that was along the frontier with Cambodia down into Vietnam, the US used extraordinary means, parts of which was to actually spray these vast areas of jungle with this very, very toxic substance which they called Agent Orange. Of course, it wasn't only toxic, it didn't just kill trees and vegetation, it killed animals and birds and people because the stuff got into the water table. Apparently I'm told that up until very recently and even now there are children being born in Vietnam with terrible congenital deformities because of the use of this terrifying poison.

So then I started to become aware of the horrendous effects of modern technology upon the natural environment, I mean the bombing as well. They used to do intensive bombing with B52s and I can remember doing a report on some of this. There they were, these great pools of water and all these shattered trees and I can remember a line that I used: 'these piles of matchwood and a few stunned parrots'.

Int: *I've always believed having worked with you for a very long time that you've always had much more awareness of the kind of humanity side of this, man's inhumanity to man. Is this where it got started?*

JP: Well, yes, because you know I was lucky. I wasn't working just as a news reporter, I didn't have to produce three minute, what we used to call bang bang pieces. So we tried to give a much more general picture of the war, of what it was doing to the people of Vietnam, what it was doing to traditional life in Vietnam. We used to go out and just do very general pieces about the impact of the war on everyday life, on the children, and this had to do with their health, with their welfare, and of course to do with things like farming because it had a devastating effect upon farming as well. There were whole areas which they couldn't use.

Int: *I know I'm skipping around a bit but do you think that you have a more conscious awareness of what's been called disaster theory, the end of the earth theories, as a result of those Vietnamese experiences than most people do? I mean I find it quite difficult to understand the idea that the earth is ever going to actually end, global warming is somebody else's problem. Do you think that this was fixed more in your mind by those experiences?*

www.wildfilmhistory.org



JP: No, but what I will say is absolutely without any doubt that I am deeply depressed by the fact that we seem to learn very little from experience. A lot of those mistakes that were made in Vietnam are being made today in Afghanistan and I can see that becoming a quagmire just as Vietnam became a quagmire, and for many of the same reasons.

Int: *But do you think it's inevitable? Do you think this is human nature in the raw? Does it do this?*

JP: Well, I haven't seen very much evidence that we are learning very much. Well, we are perhaps to some extent. I think we are beginning to learn to look more at the consequences of what we are doing to the environment at least. To be honest with you, I think that television and radio have something to do with this, I think people are becoming more aware.

I remember one thing. You asked me whether television had any part. Well, of course, television had no part in my childhood at all but radio did. I remember that the only natural history programme was on what I think was called the Home Service. It was called Out with Romany by Meadow and Stream (2). It was delivered by a man who the conceit was that he was a Romany and that he was bringing you all this folklore of the countryside. Now I don't know that he was a Romany but it was one way of getting this stuff across. It was pretty folksy stuff.

4. Conservation

Int: *Has it ever occurred to you, Julian, that wildlife television and conservation are both children of our generation? We started all this.*

JP: Yes, exactly.

Int: *By making films about conservationists and about conservation efforts, there was nothing much here before them.*

JP: When I did start to see some television, I didn't see a great deal of it because for most of my life I literally spent two thirds of my time out of the country. I was travelling so I didn't see very much but I did occasionally. I remember seeing Armand and Michaela [Denis] (3) and there was somebody who did rather good underwater films, Jacques Cousteau and I met Jacques Cousteau.

Int: *Okay, let's pause and hear about Jacques Cousteau for a second. What was he like in those days?*

JP: He was very much what he was, a former French naval officer and there was still a lot of that about him. I mean when you were with Cousteau you knew who was in charge and, of course, he was very much the pioneer of all this underwater filming and didn't you know about it, didn't you hear about it.

Int: *Did you know that he invented the aqualung?*

JP: Yes, I did hear that he invented the aqualung because he told you, that was probably the second thing that he told you. He was a commanding figure, let's put it like that.

Int: *In fact, because of the invention of the aqualung of course the whole of underwater filming in television became possible because before that it was all oxygen re breathing gear which lasted about 10 minutes.*

JP: His pioneering work was obviously incredibly important and enabled underwater natural history filming really to take off, to do the incredible things that they do today.

As you say, we grew up during the early days of natural history filming, most of that natural history stuff was not, as you will well remember, conservation orientated, it was gee whiz stuff. It was, wow, isn't nature wonderful or extraordinary or cute but it wasn't, isn't nature in danger, aren't we threatening, aren't we doing something to it, that was the next step. Of course, the funny thing was that that happened because people like you and I had been involved in natural history as a current affairs subject about some crisis that would come up, about an oil spill which was a news story. Therefore you were dealing with the consequences of something and then you started to realise.

It was a BBC producer who was the first person to come to me, I shall never forget, his name was Richard Brock and he called me up one day. He said, Julian, I've seen a lot of your stuff on Panorama (4), etc, I think we should be dealing with some aspects of natural history as current affairs and I want you to come and make a film for me about wildlife which is dealt with in the style of a current affairs programme. It was a programme called 'What Use is Wildlife?' (5) in which we went to East Africa and we didn't say isn't it cute or isn't it amazing or isn't it fierce or isn't it fast or isn't it lovely or anything, we said if this is going to survive the worth of it has got to be made clear to the people of this country. If they value it as a resource then they are more likely to look after it. That film, 'What Use is Wildlife?' (5), was the first time that I think a film of that kind had been made about wildlife and, of course, it was followed by lots of others.

Int: *Richard Brock is still around doing it.*

JP: Is he really?

Int: *Well, he's got a little camera like this and now that the big budgets have gone he's off doing his own little exercises elsewhere.*

JP: God bless him!

The next thing that happened was that I got this phone call from a guy called Peter Crawford, another producer in Bristol, who came up with this extraordinary idea, well, to me extraordinary. He said I'd like to make a series with you about British wildlife and we're going to call it The Living Isles (6) and it's going to be about all this extraordinary and fascinating wildlife that's all around us, in the meadows and in the rivers and in the ocean and in our gardens and in our cities. I said are you sure, people are expecting something a bit

more exotic than that. He said, no, they don't realise what there is around them and how fascinating it is and if it's revealed to them I think they're going to find it just as exciting as all this exotic stuff that we're bringing back from abroad.

Anyway that was the beginning and I think I filmed with him for nearly a year on that. It was a very successful series and a wonderful book that he wrote (7), unfortunately I didn't, and it did work well. Of course, that was the first of many, many series about our own wildlife which have continued to enchant.

Int: Can you remember any programmes on television that were of any influence on you? What's the earliest television programme, natural history programme that you can remember?

JP: Well, as I've said I didn't see a great many and I expect that Armand and Michaela [Denis] (3) were one of the first that I saw, and then the underwater films by Cousteau. Of course, yes, I suppose Life on Earth (8), that I do remember although I probably never saw it all at once but I would have seen bits of it now and again because it was repeated, as you remember, on numerous occasions. I think I may have been given eventually a boxed set of it or something like that. That was an extraordinary and pioneering series, that was the first in a whole range of wonderful, what we now call blue chip wildlife films which I don't think we shall ever see the like of them again, I'm pretty sure we won't.

Of course, because they were all shot on film the quality of them is fantastic, the camerawork is fantastic, they are wonderfully presented and beautifully written but they do, of course, present this pristine, idealised picture of the world. I understand why they did it, entirely understood why they did it, but I think it was a bit misleading because I think it did slightly blind people to the fact that a lot of nasty things were already happening out there, and things were not as pristine as these films presented them. Nevertheless they are wonderful, you can still watch them. I think they will be watched for always, they'll be there forever in the archive as a record.

5. Nature Watch and Konrad Lorenz

Int: I know the answer to the next question but I'm going to ask it anyway. When was it that you moved on into a new kind of television?

JP: Well, that was an extraordinary coincidence that one day I was at a New Year's Eve party, and I think this must have been very early in the 1980s. I was in this crowded room seeing in the New Year and I got approached by this guy who came and introduced himself. He said I'm Robin Brown and I work for ATV (Associated Television) and I make all sorts of films and I think we should be making a new kind, a different kind of natural history film. After a long discussion we realised that we agreed entirely that there was a way of making natural history films. We eventually called the series Nature Watch (9) in which you saw the subject and it didn't matter what it was, whether it was exotic animals or fleas or grass seeds, it didn't matter what it was as long as you were seeing it through the eyes of an enthusiast who was capable of transmitting that enthusiasm and fascination to the audience because we both realised that there is so much in the presentation of these things. It's not just the pictures, it's not just the gee whiz factor.

On the whole we communicate pretty well, we humans, and actually animals communicate rather badly with us so we have to communicate through someone else. That was the beginning of Nature Watch (9) which



didn't start terribly well because we chose a long list of subjects. Well first of all, do you remember, we had to sell the idea to Lew Grade who was a wonderful character. He was then running ATV and he was a great character, a great old man. He was a showman, his background was in show business and musical and theatre but he understood television pretty well. We sold the idea to him and he said, yes, puffing on his cigar. He said sounds like a good idea, boy, and that was it. You had no committees, nothing like that. We got a budget, we got a researcher and we went off.

Of course our first task was to choose a list of subjects which we did. I shall never forget because the first choice was somebody and because we thought it would be relatively easy to shoot and not too far away, we shot it in Scotland, I think.

Int: *We did.*

JP: We came home and I've never seen two longer faces because we looked at each other and we said that didn't work. Of course, we both immediately realised why it hadn't worked because we had chosen the wrong person. It wasn't that the subject was boring, it was quite interesting, but the man himself was a complete waste of time.

Int: *How did you rescue yourself from that situation because you were the one on camera?*

JP: Well, I didn't rescue myself at all. I tried desperately to bring him out.

Int: *No, I didn't mean with that programme. We abandoned that programme.*

JP: Yes, of course we abandoned that programme and, thank goodness, we went on to better things. I think it was the next one, Konrad Lorenz. Now you've told all kinds of wonderful stories about Konrad Lorenz.

JP: Konrad Lorenz is an incredibly famous person. He called the father of ethology, that is the man who started the whole science of animal behaviour and of course he entirely put this down, he said what do I do, I spend my time just watching animals which is true. But he was a very good watcher of animals and a wonderful interpreter of animal behaviour. We went to make this film with him and I'd never met him before but I'd read his books, and although they had originally been written in German, translated into English, they were brilliant. So I knew I was going to meet a fascinating man but I didn't realise how fascinating.

We went to this extraordinary property which I think was on the banks of the Danube where he lived with all these geese who of course he studied, and all these dogs which of course he studied. So you were always followed around by flocks of geese and flocks of dogs, and you also had this massive great tank where he spent hours and hours and hours just watching fish because he was studying aggression and the causes for aggression amongst fish. He would sit there hour after hour after hour but he was the most delightful character, one of the most fascinating men I've ever met.

I'm sure you remember that one of the first things he did was to take us upstairs in this wonderful house and there was this huge room in which there was a train set, a huge model train set. He said 'this you must not

www.wildfilmhistory.org



show because people will think I am even more mad than I know I am...more mad than they think I am'. I think I said, well, in that case it's certainly going in the film and I think it did.

Int: Do you remember the other bird story with him when he dressed up and climbed amongst the chimney pots when he was studying?

JP: I do remember that, yes, that's one of the things and this is, of course, something we came across later in life. In order that he wouldn't modify the birds' behaviour he disguised himself as a huge bird I think, didn't he? What was he studying, do you remember?

Int: He was doing his PhD on rooks.

JP: Sorry, I'd forgotten this story. He was doing his PhD on rooks and so he disguised himself as a rook, climbed up among the chimney pots and managed to observe their behaviour and the way that they regarded him I think. I think this upset the neighbours who looked up in there and thought he was the devil or he was haunting them or something like that.

Int: There's thousands and thousands of Nature Watch (9) stories, which ones are the ones that spring to mind most readily?

JP: There is one other Konrad Lorenz story which I must tell you which I don't think you're aware of. I picked up a book when I was up in that upstairs room and I suddenly realised it was a book of English limericks. Now it was a book which you could not obtain at the time in the UK because it was regarded as too vulgar because he had all the dirty ones in there and there are a lot of them. A lot of them are incredibly funny.

'There was a young lady of Chichester
who made all the saints in their niches stir.
One day during matins her form through her satins
made the Bishop of Chichester's britches stir.'

Int: Wasn't a feature of meeting Konrad this extraordinary sense of humour?

JP: A fantastic sense of humour but he particularly loved English limericks and he knew lots of them by heart. He could quote many of them and as a result of that I managed to get a copy of that book of limericks which I still have. I even write limericks every now and then. Yes, there was him but there's so many of them talking about characters.

I like to think it was in the same series. We were lucky enough to do a film with Miriam Rothschild. Now Miriam who is a member of the famous Rothschild family and the granddaughter of a famous eccentric who actually had a team of zebras and had a carriage. The zebras used to pull this carriage around London, great eccentrics. But she herself was an eccentric but a great scientist and her two great passions in life were

insects and particularly fleas and birds and wild flowers.

When we went to visit her at that wonderful home I think the thing that possibly surprised and shocked us most was that we discovered in her greenhouse a large crop of something that looked surprisingly familiar. It was cannabis. Miriam, what is this? She said don't worry, dear, it's perfectly legal, I have a licence to grow it and it's part of the work that I'm doing because I'm feeding this cannabis to a whole range of insects to see how it affects them. She said as I see how it affects them I am quite convinced I am never going to touch the stuff because it's having the most extraordinary effects upon them, and not only upon them but upon the owl which is actually eating the insects which are eating the cannabis. She had this owl which she said was deranged. Now whether it was deranged because it was being fed upon cannabis insects I don't know.

She also had a phantom egg, do you remember?

Int: *Yes, I do but do you remember what she made you wear for that interview?*

JP: No, I don't.

Int: *Okay, let me tell you what you wore. You put on safety glasses because she was convinced her owl had had a phantom pregnancy and was quite likely to attack anyone.*

JP: That's right, yes. She made me put on safety glasses when we came to see the owl, and we were going to film the owl as well, because she said the owl had become very deranged and had laid a phantom egg, and it was terrified that anyone who came anywhere near it was going to steal the phantom egg. I felt rather sorry for that owl because it didn't seem that it had the best cards in the pack dealt it, let's put it like that.

Int: *Listening to you I am reminded of how the Nature Watch (9) series depended so indefinitely on eccentricity.*

JP: It did. As far as Miriam went it went on and on and on. Do you remember the fact that she lived with a family of foxes? I shall never forget her taking me into my bedroom and her shouting 'foxy' and this wild fox jumps through the window, and she said he sleeps here every night. She had this extraordinary relationship with wild animals and particularly with foxes, she was devoted to them.

Int: *Thinking down the line of the women in the series there's a couple of others. Do you remember Densy?*

JP: Densy Clyne, fantastic woman, yes, in Australia. This was fascinating because Densy was a suburban housewife basically and she had demonstrated to herself and to the world that a back garden is a wildlife jungle. She had studied every small creature in that garden and had chronicled their activities and she eventually finished up making wonderful films herself, and we made a film about her and her work. She was one of the most fascinating and one of the most eccentric people we met but there were lots of them.



Int: *But potentially a lethal eccentric.*

JP: Absolutely because there were all kinds of poisonous creatures, not least the funnel web spiders. I said, well, where are they and she said there's lots of them in the loo, so I think I probably became costive I think is the word. I went and peed very carefully at the other end of the garden.

Int: *Talking about that same region, do you remember what happened to the fruit bat that Carl Jones dropped during your interview?*

JP: We were making these films with Carl Jones, an extraordinary man who almost single handedly saved by captive breeding some of the most endangered species in Mauritius. Among many of the species that he was breeding were fruit bats which had become very endangered on one of the small islands. This fruit bat he took out of the cage and it hopped across the ground towards me and then started to climb my leg and disappeared under my shorts. He said that's all right, won't do you no harm, doesn't eat nuts.

Int: *Let me tell you a little secret which I've never told you before, he did it deliberately.*

JP: That doesn't surprise me at all, he was very, very naughty. Talking about another, I wouldn't call him eccentric so much but a very funny man, Roger Wilson. David Attenborough obviously had already done that wonderful sequence he did with gorillas when he got up very close to them, etc. Roger Wilson was another man who was studying gorillas, this time in Rwanda, and he'd also habituated a group of gorillas. We went into film them and one had this stunning experience of being close to this family and they were extraordinarily well habituated. Do you remember the one that comes right up to the camera, a little one? Comes in and stares into the lens and actually it can see its reflection in the lens and so is totally fascinated.

Then we're sitting there enjoying watching the gorillas and started to notice these rather strange sounds and I said what are those noises, is that some sort of communication between the gorillas, Roger? He said, well, I suppose you could call it communication, it's farts and I said, farts? He said, well you'd fart if you ate 30 kilos of vegetation a day.

Do you know, it's a funny thing but in the making of that series we interviewed people who later became television stars in their own right: Jonathan Scott who when we met him was a photographer, a stills photographer, working in the Masai Mara. We made a lovely film with him, with Jonathan, in the Mara and of course later I think some people who saw that film thought, wow, or he himself I think saw the possibilities and instead of just shooting stills started to shoot cine film as well. Of course, eventually became not only a wonderful wildlife photographer using film but also became a fantastic presenter as well, so that was the beginning of one wildlife career, and another was Bill Oddie.

Another character we made a film about who later became a great wildlife presenter but at the time he was a comedian and that was Bill Oddie, part of The Goodies. But I knew that he was also a mad keen ornithologist, a real twitcher so I suggested to him and he was very keen on doing it. So we made a film with him just going around his favourite wildlife places which were largely very nothing spectacular, they were just places near his home, reservoirs and rivers and places like that. But, of course, he came across as a wonderful wildlife presenter, end of story, well, beginning of story.

www.wildfilmhistory.org





Int: *And all the offspring of Iain Douglas-Hamilton and Oria.*

Well, of course, yes, Iain Douglas-Hamilton, made that film with him about elephants, met his wife, Oria, and his daughter, Saba, and that was the beginning of another dynasty of wildlife filmmakers and presenters. So we've got a lot to be thankful for, haven't we?

6. The Wildlife Film Industry

Int: *Do you think actually, thinking on all the films that you've made, was it just more than just entertainment? Did you make a difference at all? I know it's an immodest question but did you think that any of the films made a difference?*

JP: I'd like to think that some of the films that we've made have made a difference, I think in a kind of general awareness of the public about, a, the importance of the natural world and, b, of the many unexpected dangers that it encounters. I shall never forget when I was working in the United States which I did for quite a long time as a correspondent. Do you remember that wonderful book called *Silent Spring* (10) was published and we made a report about that, about the complete disappearance of the prairie falcon which was one of the birds that became totally extinct in the United States, and the passenger pigeon, and the dangers of DDT and of other pesticides. So I'm sure that we alerted people to those dangers and the awful things that could happen and would happen unless they were controlled.

Then I also made a film for the BBC a bit later on about El Niño because there was a succession of very violent El Niños and La Niña. You know what El Niño is, it's a movement of super heated water across the Pacific which produces violent storms on the eastern side of the Pacific and acute droughts on the eastern side of the Pacific.

So we went to various places and one of them was a very famous climate observatory in Hawaii because they were telling us all about how they were measuring the temperature of the ocean. He said this graph I'd like to show you which I think may interest you because he said look at that, that is a graph showing the gradual rise in the past 50 years of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere, and that going absolutely in step with it is a rise in ocean temperatures.

Int: *How long ago was this?*

JP: It must have been in the 1980s I guess. Nobody had started to talk about climate change then. So when we'd done our film about El Niño and La Niña we made another film in which we used this information. We also went to some other climate observatories and started to become aware that in the scientific community there was starting to be some concern about this. But, of course, we were accused of being alarmist, the usual thing.

But that was the beginning of the story which started to be told to the general public. Before that it had just been something which was known in the scientific community and in a very limited extent in the scientific

www.wildfilmhistory.org





community but to no one else, and then it started to get into the public domain. So I am pleased about that. I am pleased that I think we've been able to alert people to the potentially nasty things, dangerous things. We did films about big oil spills in the past - the Torrey Canyon, the Exxon Valdez. Look at it now, look at the horrors that are besetting us.

There's a case unfortunately where the warnings were not heeded but perhaps they can't be. Some of the warnings have been heeded. DDT is now banned in lots of places but it's being brought back in some places as well. Of course, there's a whole range of new pesticides and herbicides.

Int: *So does that mean that television is getting better or worse?*

JP: I don't know. This may sound a very self centered thing to say but I think that we've actually possibly lived through a golden age of television because we had the resources and we had the opportunity and we had the audiences. Now everything has become so fragmented, information has become so fragmented. You can make very good programmes but the chances of them being seen by a very large audience are probably much less than they were in our days. Now you may say that the internet has taken its place and that the information is getting out there anyway but I think as far as television is concerned we certainly saw the golden age. I doubt very much whether television will ever be as influential as it was during the days that we were working in it.

Int: *Can you see any situation where we could go back to blue chip?*

JP: I suspect not. Well, possibly if the technology starts to make it possible, as it probably will do and is already doing, to film things which have simply not been accessible to the camera's eye. Filming incredibly small things so you're getting down to the kind of tiny bits of wildlife that have never been accessible to camera. Perhaps it's possible now, I don't know. I seem to remember you saying that they actually made a wildlife film in a period of an hour about worms. Well, fantastic. Now I suspect that that sort of work where you have lopped off cameras and terribly miniaturised cameras that can actually tell you what's happening in the middle of an ant heap, it's probably been done already, I don't know, but that sort of thing interests me. I guess that blue chip of that kind can be done but I think as far as the big stuff is concerned I think they've already done it, and I doubt whether any better films will be made about large mammals and about marine life, for example. They are so fantastic I can't imagine that, a, that there will be the investment or, b, the opportunity to make them again or be the market.

7. Conclusions

Int: *Okay, Julian, we've made a bit of impact. Was there anything that we did that we shouldn't have done?*

JP: Some of the things that wildlife filming has been blamed for and that is as it were setting up, shooting stuff which was allegedly in a wild setting but has actually been done with captive or semi captive animals. Well, we certainly didn't do any of that I don't think. I do remember one film I enjoyed making hugely. Do you remember the wolves?

Int: Yes.





JP: Wonderful. That was a very large enclosure but we did actually reveal that it was an enclosure where the wolves lived as wild but they were thoroughly habituated with that delightful German guy.

Int: *Erik Zimen.*

JP: Yes. That was one of the most thrilling things that happened to me in the making of a Nature Watch (9). There was Erik and I sitting on a log talking about wolves and about how he was able to study their behaviour in this very large enclosure with hundreds of hectares, and suddenly trotting into the glade comes a number of wolves including a very large male. It came round to the back of me and I remember this sniffing going on with this very large muzzle which is over my shoulder, and Erik says I think he likes your aftershave.

Int: *Do you remember how that particular film began?*

JP: No, I don't.

Int: *Going out and Luigi Boitani said to you call a wolf, Julian. Can you tell me that story?*

JP: Yes, that's right. That film began in a very curious way because Luigi Boitani said to me call a wolf and I said, yes, sure, and I [howled] and it worked.

Int: *What happened?*

JP: The wolf came.

Int: *I asked that question to see whether you could still do that.*

JP: I can still do that, yes. I've always been able to do that. I used to do it to upset the dogs and it used to upset them quite a lot and they would all start. Of course, that is the trouble because if you start howling then it tends to be a group activity. [Howl] I don't know what I'm saying incidentally but it's probably something quite rude.

Int: *Just a passing thought, did you have to impose yourself on your environment at all? Were there people you went into who didn't like you being there or didn't want you to be there or any challenges?*

JP: Well, I don't think so because people who agreed to be subjects of Nature Watch (9) I think were largely quite flattered by the idea that you were sufficiently interested not only in their subject but in them. We always used to make it clear, look, this is just not a subject about fleas, this is a subject about you or this is not just a subject about wolves, this is a subject about you and your relationship with your subject. There





were times when I was slightly overcome. I shall never forget making a film with a guy called Mike Stecker. Do you remember him?

Mike Stecker was an extraordinary character. He worked in the Sequoia National Park in California and he spent his entire working life at the top of a 300ft grand sequoia. He used to get up there using a rig that didn't look to me that it would have carried a baby. He used to haul himself up there every day and he would spend his entire time studying the minute flora and fauna that lived up there. These were the lichens and the insects and the spiders, everything that lived in a single grand sequoia tree, absolutely fascinating. But for me getting up there, no, I was a bit daunted by that shall I say. I wasn't daunted by much but I was daunted by that.

Int: *People always say to me you've spent 20 years making natural history films, you must have come close to death quite often. Did that happen? I seem to remember a hippopotamus in the Masai Mara.*

JP: Yes, there was an angry hippopotamus in the Masai Mara, that's right because I was on one side of the river.

Int: *You were standing with Jonathan Scott and suddenly there was this rippling in the river and we could see it coming out because we were on a 10 1 zoom but you guys couldn't see it, and out of the river at 35mph came a hippopotamus.*

JP: Actually filming with Jonathan in the Masai Mara was quite hairy because there were lots of lions around and, of course, he said don't take any notice of them they're perfectly harmless. But I shall never forget, we were on one side of that quite narrow river and there was an extremely angry male lion who didn't like us being there at all. He was pacing up and down and making an awful noise. He said that's bullshit, they're always like that, that sort of male bravado, he won't do you any harm. He's on the wrong side of the river anyway and he's not going to get in there but then there was the occasion when a hippo came out.

Now hippos, as you probably know, are the most dangerous of all. They look possibly the most harmless but more people die from hippo attacks than anything else and this hippo didn't like us being there at all. In that case we did retire.

Int: *Do you remember the boa constrictor in Papua New Guinea?*

JP: Yes, I do remember a boa constrictor in Papua New Guinea. I remember I was walking through this beautiful rainforest and there was a boa constrictor which was actually in the tree as we came underneath it. I didn't see it but of course whoever it was saw it and said, oh, look at that and I thought, oh, a bit too close for comfort, perfectly harmless of course. It wasn't interested.

Int: *It bit you.*

JP: Of course it did. Actually to be fair that boa constrictor was not a very big boa constrictor but it was nevertheless a boa constrictor. I was told it was perfectly harmless but it didn't obviously regard me as



perfectly harmless because it bit me, not I should say severely but enough to leave an interesting scar which I could say I was bitten by a boa constrictor.

Int: If you were in charge of the wildlife history business is there a particular individual that you would of liked to have interviewed or have you just interviewed them all?

JP: Some of the people that I would love to have interviewed I suppose would have been people from the past and probably from the distant past, and there are so many of those that I don't know where to start. There are lots of people. A lot of my heroes, the people I've really admired, I have interviewed, I mean Peter Scott, Gerald Durrell, who both were sort of culture heroes of mine. I've never interviewed David Attenborough but then I think I know him pretty well anyway. If I could have interviewed it would be heroes from the distant past. I was talking about Richard Jefferies and there's somebody I'd loved to have interviewed because I know he would be absolutely fascinating because he was such an approachable man. When you consider the period when he was writing he was so modern so I'm sure he would have been fascinating. I'd have liked to have interviewed Thomas Hardy as well.

I'm sure there are lots of people, Robin, I could think of if I could think of them if you see what I mean.

Int: Yes, I know what you mean and, as I said, you've interviewed so many people. One of the things, of course, that I realise in retrospective is I was the producer of Nature Watch but I only chose to direct about a third of them whereas you went on location for every single programme.

JP: Yes, that's right. I was really lucky. I'm quite sure that some of the most fascinating and some of the incidents I've just forgotten, there's just too many of them and they're all come to me tonight when I'm thinking about it.

Int: Is there anything that you want to say.

JP: No, I think I've said far too much.

References:

1. *Tonight* (BBC, 1957).
2. *OUT WITH ROMANY BY MEADOW AND STREAM* (Children's Hour) (BBC Home Service).
3. *Armand and Michaela Denis* (BBC, 1955–58).
4. *Panorama* (BBC, 1953 - present).
5. *WHAT USE IS WILDLIFE?* (Tuesday Documentary) (BBC, tx 13 May 1975)
6. *The Living Isles* (BBC, 1986).
7. Crawford, P. (1985) *The Living Isles: A Natural History of Britain and Ireland*. BBC Books, London.
8. *Life on Earth* (BBC, 1979).



9. *Nature Watch* (Central Television, 1981-92).

10. Carson, R. (1962) *Silent Spring*. Houghton Mifflin, Boston.

Copyright

All material contained in this document is © Wildscreen or its contributors.

For terms and conditions of use, please see www.wildfilmhistory.org/termsfuse

www.wildfilmhistory.org

