

Martyn Colbeck: Oral History Transcription

Name of interviewee(s):

Martyn Colbeck

Reasons why chosen for an oral history:

Martyn Colbeck is an award winning wildlife cameraman. For over thirty years he has filmed wildlife sequences around the world on many landmark films for both public broadcasting and independent production companies. His documentaries include in-depth observations of primates, tigers and a twenty year study of African elephants.

Name of interviewer:

Brian Leith

Reasons why interviewer chosen:

Colleague and friend

Name of cameraman:

Bob Prince

Date of interview:

4th December 2009

Place of interview:

Bristol, UK

Length of interview:

2 hours 20 minutes

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Special conditions/ restrictions set by the interviewee:

1. The early years

Int: *Can you give me your full name, nationality, current job title and today's date?*

MC: My name's Martyn Colbeck, I'm a wildlife cameraman. It's 4th December 2009.

Int: *How and when did you first become interested in wildlife, I mean wildlife filmmaking?*

MC: I suppose I became interested in wildlife when I was at boarding school and immediately you ask me that question I think of kingfishers because when I was at boarding school in Suffolk, I was at a school called the Royal Hospital School and there were these beautiful, incredible grounds associated with the school. It was a naval school and it went right down to the river. I remember wandering around these beautiful reed beds right down by the edge of the river and one day, I'd never seen a kingfisher before, and I suddenly saw this bright blue flash and I thought what was that? It was the most extraordinary thing. Anyone who's seen a kingfisher in the wild knows that extraordinary colour, and that's my first real memory actually of being completely inspired by wildlife and that was when I was at boarding school.

Int: *How old were you then?*

MC: I was about 12 and I think then I just suddenly thought these reed beds, there's more to these reed beds than meets the eye. I used to go down there more and more frequently and I used to find reed warblers' nests.

The other thing now I think about it was that it was away from the rest of the school, it was away from boys. I used to go down there on my own and I suppose that is now what I love doing, I love being out on my own in the wilds. So that was my first memory. So I got very interested in birds and I joined the Young Ornithologist Club. Then my parents moved to Pembrokeshire in West Wales and I used to spend a lot of time going along the cliffs with them and I got really interested in birds. I went to Skomer and Skokholm with all those lovely Manx shearwater colonies and puffin colonies. My first interest was birds actually.

Int: *Did you see any television programmes at that time? Did you see any programmes that you remember?*

MC: I don't remember sitting down and watching wildlife programmes in those days. I used to be very active, I'd be out all the time. I wouldn't sit down and watch television very much at all, I'd be out playing football and we had very little television at school actually. We were only allowed to watch *Top of the Pops* (1) on a Thursday night, *Pan's People*, and *Match of the Day* (2) on Saturday night. For the rest of the time at boarding school, so that was between the age of 11 and 18, I didn't watch television so I was sort of sheltered from television, if you like. So really I can't remember wildlife programmes before *Life on Earth* (3).

Int: *Was Life on Earth (3) a kind of formative moment for you or at what stage did your interest in birds and wildlife take a more concrete, active form?*

MC: *Life on Earth* (3) was the first series that really made an impact on me and I can still see myself now being captivated by those images. I was at university doing a biological sciences degree and I remember I was in a bar playing pool with some of my mates and there was a television in the corner of the bar. *Life on Earth* (3) had become a bit of an event and I just noticed that in the corner of the bar there were these incredible images, and everyone stopped playing pool and stopped drinking and they were watching *Life on*

Earth (3). I think that was a real moment. It was a moment in television, in wildlife television broadcasting and I think it was a moment for me as well. I was at university, I was doing a biological sciences degree and I think that had quite an effect on me at that point.

Int: *Was there a particular shot or sequence that you remember?*

MC: No. I mean I can remember the gorilla sequence with David (Attenborough), of course. I can remember the early programmes as well when David was talking about algae and so on but there wasn't a particular shot or a particular moment that comes back to me now. But with the gorilla sequence, people are so familiar with it that it's difficult to recall whether it moved me then. But certainly the *Life on Earth (3)* event it raised the bar so much that that was a significant moment in my memory.

Int: *I'm going to skip about 25 years here but just ask at this moment if you feel there are television programmes today that still have that impact on, say, boys, girls of that age now because I remember seeing Life on Earth and being similarly affected by it. I just wonder if you think people are as affected by programmes today in that same way.*

MC: I like to think they are. I mean I think some of the landmark series do have that impact. I would think that with people of similar age, youngsters, who maybe don't watch much wildlife television, if they came to a series like *Planet Earth (4)*, for instance, or *Blue Planet*. I think some of those landmark series do still have an effect on people. I think those series raised the bar. *Blue Planet (5)* was showing you oceans as you'd never seen them before and *Planet Earth (4)* raised the bar in terms of the ability to film from the air, for instance, using new technology which didn't exist during the days of *Life on Earth (4)*.

I think that there will be youngsters, there will be people who would have been inspired by those series. There was talk at the time when they were transmitted of people who weren't that interested in wildlife actually coming to it, there was a buzz about it saying have you seen this, this was extraordinary. So I think the bar is still being raised. I think it's more and more difficult to raise that bar but I think it's still happening.

Int: *Did Life on Earth (4) inspire you to get involved?*

MC: Not immediately. I was doing a biological sciences degree. I didn't know what I wanted to do afterwards. It was only shortly after that that I started getting interested in photography, not cinematography but just stills photography as an art form, and that was towards the end of my time at university. I used to take photographs of fishes in tanks and so on and so forth.

Int: *So even at that stage it was specifically wildlife photography?*

MC: Yes, it was but I'd go off and I'd take black and white photographs of all sorts of things like graveyards, and I got interested in developing my own negatives and doing my own printing. So it became an interest in photography initially and after that, after I graduated I then decided to take a year out and I went to the University of California at Santa Cruz, and I did a three month field semester in photography. I went to Yosemite National Park in California which was extraordinary. So that combined being in one of the most beautiful wilderness areas in North America, indeed the world, spending a lot of time outdoors trekking and hiking which I love to do, and photography.



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So after I did that three month period I then thought maybe I could somehow combine biology with photography with wilderness areas. It was only shortly after I came back actually that I went off to my ex-wife's grandparents, and we sat down one Sunday evening and we watched a wildlife film and it was Hugh Miles's osprey film (6). I sat there and I watched this film and it's a beautiful film, beautifully photographed, extraordinary behaviour. I sat there and thought maybe I could do that, I mean very naively in retrospect.

Int: *So how old were you then?*

MC: Well, I was 21. So I sat there and I thought that would combine everything but of course I had no idea about film or film cameras. I was naïve but that was the moment that I thought that's what I want to do.

Int: *So you were directly inspired by Hugh Miles?*

MC: Absolutely, yes.

Int: *What was your first stills camera?*

MC: My first stills camera was a Canon FTB it was called, which was a clunky old stills camera.

Int: *Yes, like a tank.*

MC: Yes, like a tank, not very rounded like modern stills cameras but I still remember that camera, I mean a fantastic camera. I always remember when I was at university I didn't have any money and there was a camera store right in the middle of Birmingham. I used to look through the window of this camera store and I had this Canon FTB but I wanted the new one, the new Canon. I would look through the window and I'd think can't I just have that camera? I could do so much with that camera if I had that camera. So I gradually I upgraded from these different stills cameras.

Int: *I bet you've still got them all.*

MC: No, I haven't actually.

Int: *Did you sell them? Did you part exchange?*

MC: Yes. I'm not the sort of person who remains attached to bits of equipment. I'm quite happy to let them go once they've done their job. For me they're tools, I'm not that attached to them. I'm quite happy to replace them as time goes on.

www.wildfilmhistory.org



2. London Scientific Films

Int: *So you were fascinated by photography, you were inspired by Hugh Miles's osprey film (6). What did you do next?*

MC: Well, again I was rather naïve. I then moved to London because Heather, my ex-wife, got a job in London, she'd finished her PhD. So we moved down to London and I thought, okay, well what do I do now? I've got a degree in biology, I've done this year out, I've done a photography course. I've got a collection of photographs from the American west which I was quite happy with.

At the same time as this osprey film went out there was a big *Radio Times* piece all about wildlife filmmaking. It interviewed Martin Saunders, interviewed Hugh Miles, interviewed the Oxford Scientific Films people, Sean Morris and so on. It interviewed London Scientific Films which was a smaller production company than Oxford Scientific Films and there was a photograph of them including Alastair MacEwen. There were the three of them, young and fresh faced, and I thought they look very approachable, maybe I should go and see them.

They were in central London so I literally put my best degree day suit on with my photographs under my arm and I knocked on the door unannounced, I didn't phone them. They were a little bit taken aback but Alastair being Alastair basically said, yes, come and sit down and had a chat. He said, well, what can you do and I said, well, I've got a degree and I can take some still pictures, here look at my still photographs. He said what about filming and I said, no, I don't know anything about filming.

Int: *But was that something you wanted to get into at that moment? Is that why you'd gone there?*

MC: Yes, absolutely.

Int: *You'd made the decision you wanted to become a movie cameraman.*

MC: Yes, exactly but I didn't know anything about it and so naively I thought photography, filming, it can't be that different. Alastair was wonderful actually. He was very generous and very encouraging and in fact he had been in exactly the same position as me several years earlier. He'd gone to Oxford Scientific Films trying to get into the industry and basically they'd ignored him. So he thought well, okay, I'll go and set up my own company then and call it London Scientific Films and that's what he did. So he was to a certain extent sympathetic of my situation. Anyway he said we'll give you a ring in a couple of weeks and I thought I'm never going to hear from the again, so I said why don't I call you, I'll call you in two weeks' time. He said, yes, okay, that's fine.

A week later it wasn't Alastair that called it was a guy called Mike Coburn who was the managing director of the company. He called me up and he said can you start to morrow and I said as what, and he said we need a runner. Of course, runners basically deliver post all over the place and make coffee and tea and are just around but I thought great, that's amazing.

Int: *So you were happy, you knew enough at that stage to know that this wasn't being treated as a minion but it was a good way in?*

MC: Well, I guess, yes. I mean I was astounded that they offered me this job. I couldn't believe it and it was such an opportunity. It was my opportunity to make the most of it.

Int: *What did they offer? What was your opening salary?*

MC: My opening salary I think was £3,500 a year.

Int: *What year was that?*

MC: This was 1980 which felt like quite a lot to me.

So I started the next day and I remember I used to have to deliver parcels all over London. They gave me this bike with no brakes and a basket on the front and my front brake was in the basket. I used to have deliver parcels and all sorts of stuff like that but there were three other cameramen. There was Alastair and Alastair was doing a certain amount of filming but he wasn't filming as much as he had done previously, he was more in a directorial role. They did wildlife sequences, specialist wildlife sequences, **macro** sequences this is, for TV and they did a lot of corporate and medical stuff as well, so specialists.

Int: *So they weren't making their own films at that stage?*

MC: They were, yes. They were making corporate stuff for medical companies.

Int: *Okay, but not broadcast wildlife films?*

MC: Not whole films, no, although that happened within a couple of years as I'll explain in a second but it was mainly sequences for broadcast television.

There was a guy called Tim Child there who was a cameraman. Steve Danner, not John Danner's brother but another Steve Danner, and Alastair were sort of in a supervisory role. Dave Spears as well was there who was doing a lot of bacterial stuff, serious **micro** stuff, **microscopy** is actually the correct word. So it was a nice team and I started as a runner.

Anyway, to cut a long story short, they gave me a camera about three months later and I literally didn't really know what to do, other than having watched Tim and Steve using these **Bolex** cameras I really have much idea about what I was doing.

Int: *This was a 16mm **Bolex**?*

MC: This was a standard 16mm. There were wind-up **Bolex** cameras and there were the **Bolex** ELs which was like the electronic version. So the first thing I filmed actually was for a David Bellamy series where he was shrunk down and he was running around the back garden, *Backyard Safari (7)*. So Bellamy was hitting BBC1 at that point and it was *Backyard Safari (7)*.

The first thing I remember doing I was filming a slug and this was serious **macro** stuff. I remember the first shot I did: I was filming this slug and I was filming its breathing hole, its **pneumostome** on the side of its head, and it was a huge **macro** shot. Suddenly this thing opened and this tiny little mite came out and sort of zoomed around outside the hole, and then just before the breathing hole closed again it disappeared back inside this hole. It was amazing. Then when the rushes came back, and we used to sit and watch all the rushes because the film was processed and it used to come back in the morning, and then we all used to sit and look at it together. This shot came up and this hole opened and this little mite came out, and Alastair said you're a lucky cameraman and I have turned out to be quite lucky, touch wood.

Int: *Was that included in David Bellamy's programme?*

MC: Yes, it was.

Int: *Did he talk about that and point it out?*

MC: I don't remember whether he specifically referred to it but it was used and that was the first shot I ever did. So I think Alastair considered me quite lucky. Anyway with three months I was promoted to cameraman, £4,250 I think my salary went up, and really I've got Alastair to thank for this because walking off the street, he didn't know who I was, he didn't know what I could do but he was so incredibly generous and he is the reason I'm sitting here now.

Int: *He's still, of course, a very active filmmaker and his son is now a filmmaker too*

MC: Exactly and now Mark (MacEwen). I remember as a tiny boy and he's been incredibly generous and was generous at that point and I just have him to thank because equally he could have said, sorry, there's no opportunities and I don't know what I'd have done after that. I mean probably I'd got to see somebody else.

Int: *Well, you'd probably have moved on to OSF.*

MC: Well, I might have done but it's so difficult to get into this industry. Anyway I was at London Scientific Films for five years in the end.

3. Going freelance

Int: *Why did you leave?*

MC: Well, eventually the company collapsed, it went bankrupt and so suddenly from one day to the next we were all cast asunder and I had to go freelance.

Int: *What year did it go bankrupt?*

MC: That was 1985 and I remember that because my ex-wife, Heather, was pregnant with my daughter Josephine who's now 14, and at that moment she'd just given up work. So Josephine was just about to be born, this is September 1985, and suddenly my wife wasn't working, I was just about to have a baby and my wife was just about to have a baby and I had no job. So it was a bit of a significant moment and I had to go freelance, and going freelance is a bit alarming really, a bit scary but looking back on it I don't remember it being particularly scary.

I mean I had some sort of confidence obviously that things would work out but that's when I marched off down to the Natural History Unit and met Peter Jones who was head of *Natural World* (8) at that point or *The World About Us* (9) or whatever it was called, and then set off on my freelance career.

Int: *Was it specifically Peter Jones that you had latched onto? Did Alastair say go and see him, he's a good bloke to see?*

MC: Yes, he did, he and Alastair got on very well. In fact I remember when I went to see Peter, Peter again was very generous and heard me and out and so on. But one of the London Scientific Films policies was that they didn't individually credit people so the credit came up as a company credit, London Scientific Films. So no one knew who did what and that actually in the end, I was a bit fed up at the time about it, but it turned out to be an advantage because you weren't pigeonholed, they didn't really know who did what.

So when I went down to see Peter he had no idea what I'd done in any of these films or any of these sequences that we'd done for the NHU. His advice to me was he said I should stick with Alastair because Alastair was known, Alastair was very experienced and no one knew who I was. So he said if I were you I'd stick with Alastair but I decided just to not do that, to go out on my own.

But the other thing that was crucial at this point was that another producer at the NHU, a guy called Pelham Aldrich Blake, and we as a company had done a film about dragonflies then. Pelham then wanted to do a film about the limestone caves in Borneo and he had asked Alastair to do it before the company folded. Alastair in the meantime had started talking to *Survival* (10) about doing a series, so that's what he wanted to do. So after the company folded he had decided that's what he wanted to do.

So Alastair being Alastair, incredibly generous as usual, tried to persuade Pelham that I should do the wildlife filming in the caves. Pelham had worked with Alastair, he knew Alastair, he didn't really know me as well. He was a little bit reluctant but again Alastair persuaded him and Pelham took me on as a freelance to do this film about the limestone caves of Borneo.

Int: *Which ended up with the snappy title of?*



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MC: *Serpents, Swiftlets and the Chasm of Doom (11).*

Int: *That was a lovely film. So that was your first proper wildlife film?*

MC: Yes.

Int: *What year was that?*

MC: That was February 1986.

Int: *So actually you moved from being a runner into being a wildlife filmmaker of some repute within quite a short period, five or six years.*

MC: It happened quite quickly, yes. I was at London Scientific Films for five years. I went freelance 1986 and then that was my first film, and that still is one of the most difficult films I've ever had to do. I mean physically it's demanding and it was a very difficult place to work. David (Attenborough), of course, on *Zoo Quest* (12) had been there, the famous sequence of him on the pile of guano. So it was a pretty intimidating project but, again, this was the break for me really because it was a difficult project. I think John Sparks was head of the NHU at that point and it went very well. We got lovely footage of the white nest swiftlet and the black nest swiftlet high up in the roofs of these limestone caves, and did some nice insect stuff and it worked out very well. I'm very proud of that film actually.

John wrote to me afterwards saying he thought it was nicely lit and dramatic and so on and so forth. So suddenly I was the new kid on the block, I was only 27 at that point and I'd just gone freelance and I'd just done this film. The other advantage of that film was that it got me out of this sort of London Scientific Films **macro** type world because I didn't want to be pigeonholed. It's very easy to be pigeonholed in this industry about, okay, you do long lens, and you do **macro** stuff. I'd decided at this point that I didn't want to do **macro** stuff all the time. I didn't want to be stuck in a studio so this was my escape to the outside world. So I could do the **macro** stuff but that's not what I wanted to be known for, I wanted to do big things.

Int: *So had you bought a camera?*

MC: Yes, I did. When the company folded I bought my **Arriflex** SR1 16mm camera.

Int: *It must have set you back £2,000?*

MC: Again LSF were quite generous. I bought the whole kit.

Int: *From them as they collapsed?*

MC: Yes, exactly. So I bought it from them and I think I paid about £10,500 for a complete kit and I had to



borrow the money from my father, and paid him back relatively quickly because of course I was very busy the following year. So, yes, looking back £10,500 to set yourself up even in those days was pretty good actually.

Int: *You mean not too expensive.*

MC: Not too expensive, yes.

Int: *But also, thinking of how that film came to be made, it was quite a big risk that Pelham took as well because you had not actually shot any normal wildlife, non-**macro** sequences really of note, and he wouldn't have known you from Adam in terms of the output of LSF, would he?*

MC: No, not really. So I think it was Alastair's faith and Alastair's power of persuasion that persuaded Pelham to take the risk and it was a risk actually.

Int: *I mean this is another thing. I'd like to just lift the focus out of that moment for a moment because it seems to me that in that sense wildlife filmmaking, getting into it has probably become harder. You couldn't imagine a 27 year old cameraman who's never done something like that being given a half hour film without having a pretty good track record today, could you?*

MC: No. I think you're right. I wouldn't like to try and get into the industry now.

Int: *Because there are no assistant cameramen now either are there?*

MC: Because there are no assistant cameraman really, no, and the only way I would recommend people try and get in is to make their own film. In fact, going back to when I first went to London Scientific Films and sat down with Alastair, he did say to me the thing you should do is maybe go away and make a little film. A, I didn't know how to work a film camera and I didn't even have the faintest idea about how I'd go about doing that. So it was lucky that he gave me the job as a runner. But now the technology has moved sufficiently that you could make a three to five minute short film, you see them on Channel 4, three minute shorts.

Int: *Like on a DV camera or something.*

MC: Yes, exactly. It doesn't need to be amazing quality, it just needs to show that spark of creativity and you can see it in three minutes.

Int: *Yes, you can. So in some ways it's become easier but in other ways harder. The camera equipment, even editing, you could do now on a computer, couldn't you?*

MC: Exactly.

Int: *In that sense it's easier now but actually getting the break to get your film onto a broadcast network*

is probably harder.

MC: It's very difficult although from getting into the wildlife filmmaking industry, if you made your three minute short that was just amazing and then showed it to people like yourself or other executive producers in the Unit and they saw the potential, then you might stand a chance of getting in. So in some ways it's more difficult because of the competition and in some ways it's easier because you have the facilities to go out and make a film on these amazing HD (High Definition) handycams, they're affordable.

Int: *How was it received?*

MC: It was received very well actually. David (Attenborough) really liked it as well. I think he chose it at one point as one of his top 10 favourite *Wildlife on One* (13) which I was very chuffed about, of course, because he knew the place. He been there on *Zoo Quest*, he'd climbed up the guano pile and it was a famous piece from *Zoo Quest*. So for David to like it.

Int: *Eastwards with Attenborough actually (14).*

MC: It was *Eastwards with Attenborough* (14), that was after *Zoo Quest*. That was the Richard Brock series, wasn't it?

Int: *Yes, that's right.*

MC: *Eastwards with Attenborough*, that's right, which I hadn't seen but, of course, I remember that sequence because it's been used frequently and it was well received in the Unit. John wrote to me, John Sparks, and I got another *Wildlife on One* (13) almost immediately and that was about red squirrels (15). (Dilys Breese) was the producer who asked me to do it. That was a film on the Isle of Wight because there are red squirrels down there, working with someone called Jessica Holme. She was a PhD student at that point working on red squirrels and I ended up making the film about her in fact.

Int: *Also that's a significant move on in terms of your own abilities, isn't it, because that would have been sync work, handheld, off the tripod I assume.*

MC: No, there wasn't a lot of handheld sync work. I shot most of it mute. It was Jessica going about her work so we didn't shoot any of it sync actually and very little of it handheld. So it was a very sort of distant observational type of film, it was kind of in there, on the shoulder with her, it was very carefully set up. In fact it kind of evolved because it was originally a red squirrel film and then as time went on Jessica being Jessica it was clear that actually the film would be better if it involved her. So it evolved like that and I filmed various shots of her going out with her dog. She had an Italian Spinone dog which became very popular after that apparently, that breed. Everyone wanted an Italian Spinone because they'd seen this film. She's also a very good artist so I filmed her drawing squirrels. So it wasn't that kind of documentary type feel, it was very observational stuff.

Int: *I seem to remember that film as being one of the first of a new trend in wildlife films where people were characters brought into the story much more and, of course, it happens all the time now but at that time it was quite unusual, wasn't it?*

MC: Yes, it was. There was a very purist approach to wildlife filmmaking particularly on *Wildlife on Ones*.

4. Meeting Echo

Int: *Now I'm going to skip ahead a little bit although not very far because within a couple of years, was it 89 or 90, you actually worked on a very famous film which still ranks as one of the best wildlife films. Tell us about that one.*

MC: Which one was that?

Int: *Echo of the Elephants (16). How did that come to be?*

MC: So the David Attenborough series the *Trials of Life (17)* started and in fact I did I think the first trip on the *Trials of Life (17)* series which was to film southern sea lions in Patagonia. I was asked to do this by a wonderful lady who we both know, Marion Zunz who sadly died in a skiing accident subsequently. But Marion was part of the *Trials of Life (17)* team and I still have visions of Marion, this lovely, black curly hair and dark clothes and big handbag and a huge set of keys. If you remember she always had these enormous numbers of keys and she was just full of energy and full of enthusiasm.

She had obviously seen my films and obviously wanted me to work on *Trials of Life (17)*. I didn't even know her at that point but she was very keen for me to film this first sequence for her on southern sea lions in Patagonia. So that's what I did, I went down and I filmed that sequence for her. Even at that point she said look, Martyn, I want to do this sequence on the elephants and I said elephants, fantastic. She said you're the person to do it, I want you to do it. I've been talking to someone called Cynthia Moss in Amboseli who's got this long-term project on elephants and I met her in the Cambridge Large Animal Research Group at the University. I've been working on her for several years to try and get her to let us film her elephants, and she'd always dismissed it and said, no, I'm too busy with my research, I don't want film crews there.

Anyway she'd finally persuaded Cynthia that maybe we should come out and film a couple of sequences for her, and this was in 1989. So in February 1989 I went out and it was a combined trip. It was one to Amboseli for about two weeks and then one to the Masai Mara to film topi, high predation on topi.

Int: *These shots were again for Trials of Life (17)?*

MC: This was for *Trials of Life (17)* and David (Attenborough) also turned up in Amboseli and the Mara but independently of me. It was Hugh Maynard who was filming David.

So I went off to Amboseli and Marion came with and we got lost on the way I remember. We actually went the wrong way to Amboseli and got hopelessly lost and arrived very late. Cynthia took us out to meet the elephants the next day and I can still remember that as if it were yesterday.

Int: *Did you stay in Cynthia's camp?*

MC: No, no one was allowed to stay in Cynthia's camp other than the researchers. So we stayed in the lodge, the nearby lodge in Ol Tukia. Marion and I piled into this little tiny Land Rover and off we went to meet these elephants, and I can still remember it as if it was yesterday. We literally drove right up into the middle of this herd of elephants and they completely ignored us, they just carried on doing their stuff. Cynthia switched off the engine and then she started to tell us about every individual in this family. It was a moment for me. A, it was extraordinary to be sitting in amongst all these wild elephants because I'd never seen an elephant before and, b, just to be like introduced to people at a party. She knew all these individuals, she knew their history and she started telling anecdotes about all these individuals and it just opened a whole new world that I hadn't even realised was there. So that was a very significant moment for me.

I stayed on there about two weeks and they wanted some sequences on calf development and also they wanted mating elephants which I don't think up until that point had been filmed before. So I spent two weeks. I didn't work with Cynthia specifically on that *Trials of Life* (17) shoots, I worked with her assistants. There was Soila and there Norah, Norah's Kikuyu and Soila's Masai. These wonderful assistants that Cynthia had employed not long before then actually and they're still there. In fact I'm going out on Monday and I'll see them.

Int: *After 20 years?*

MC: So I've known them a long time, they're absolutely wonderful girls.

So I was working with them mainly on this behavioural stuff and that went well. Marion had also decided that what she really wanted to do was not only to do these sequences for *Trials of Life* (17), she wanted to do an animal soap opera. She had done a meerkat film with Richard Goss.

Int: *Meerkats United* (18), a famous film.

MC: Exactly, which followed individuals and this is what she wanted to do with the elephants. She wanted this long-term following individuals like a soap opera, like an elephant soap opera and it wasn't just film that she wanted to do, she wanted it to continue. As a result of the *Trials of Life* (17) filming she then approached Cynthia again and Cynthia finally agreed. She thought this is a team that I can work with, let's do it.

Int: *In fact, just an aside on this, mentioning the origins of the Echo films, Marion was really years ahead of the game because of her decision to focus both with meerkats and then elephants on this sort of soap opera because that too has become normal. But at that time it was considered almost a little bit too anthropomorphic, a little bit too intimate. What's your feeling about that?*

MC: Yes, I agree, it was ahead of its time. Scientists are still nervous about being **anthropomorphic** but they're more relaxed about accepting that elephants have personalities, are individuals. It has changed

although scientists are still very, very careful about the way they describe this. But I think, yes, she was ahead of her time and it was a novel idea. I was so lucky really again that she had asked me originally to do the elephant sequences for her because I then kind of adopted this film she wanted me to do.

But we nearly lost it because Mike Salisbury was Head of *Natural World* (8) at that point and the Jouberts (Dereck and Beverly) from southern Africa, I think they'd proposed to do another elephant film in Amboseli. They'd wanted to do something in east Africa as opposed to southern Africa. It really looked at one point as though we were going to lose it to the Jouberts.

Int: *Had Cynthia wanted to work with the Jouberts?*

MC: No. I think they would have done it independently and I think there was some kind of co-production coming from Partridge or Mike Rosenberg that might have swung the deal. I remember thinking we're going to lose this one but anyway I can't remember. I don't know what they decided to do in the end but they wouldn't have worked with Cynthia I don't think. So we got it and so we started January 1990.

Int: *It's still going.*

MC: As I sit here in December 2009 I'm going on Monday to do the final, final part which is a retrospective now looking back on Echo's life so it's lasted a long time, it's 19 years.

Int: *I think we should launch into a whole Echo kind of series of questions at this stage but I would like just to go back a moment, and bearing in mind that you have the right to hold any parts of these interviews separate until the appropriate moment. The first time you went to Amboseli you were working as a kind of junior to Hugh Maynard I think. How did that go?*

MC: Yes, *Trials of Life*, I was asked by Marion to do the behavioural sequences both of the elephants and of the topi, and Hugh Maynard was asked to do the sync stuff with David. There was Dickie Bird as well I think who was the sound recordist. I had a bit of a problem actually with Hugh Maynard because when they turned up in Amboseli with the crew Hugh Maynard completely blanked me, it was like I didn't exist, and everybody noticed this. David (Attenborough) noticed this and Di Williams who was the PC noticed it and Marion noticed it and Cynthia noticed it. It was very, very uncomfortable situation actually. It was the first I'd met David, it was the first time I'd been part of anything like this, and here was this cameraman, this well established BBC cameraman, Hugh Maynard, who I also respected from his work on other projects completely blanked me as if I wasn't there.

Int: *So he was the big silverback there to film David (Attenborough), the star.*

MC: He was the big cheese, he was the big silverback and here's the up and coming little chap. It turned out in fact that Marion approached Peter Jones who was the executive producer of the series. Peter Jones wrote to me afterwards apologising for this situation because it was very upsetting actually, really, really upsetting and it's not what I expected. I was very keen to talk to Hugh and to listen to his stories, his experiences and so on and it was like I wasn't there. It turned out in the end when he was spoken to about it that he was basically jealous that I was doing the elephant behavioural sequences and he was doing the sync stuff.

But it was one of the most uncomfortable situations I found myself in, in the last 20, 25 years. It was quite unpleasant and very uncharacteristic of people in this industry I have to say.

Int: *But it was also a time of a sort of changing of the guard, wasn't it, because there was an older generation - Hugh, Martin Saunders and a few others - who had been the big stars for, say, Life on Earth (3) and were kind of being supplanted by the youngsters. So it must have been a difficult time for a lot of the younger cameramen who were coming up and moving into that space.*

MC: I guess it was you know but I think anyone with a sense of self-confidence and maturity will understand that that is always going to happen. Then I was young, now I'm at the other end and I don't think you should discourage people from coming into the industry by treating them like that. There was an arrogance about it. He worked with David (Attenborough) a lot, he was part of that crew that went round the world with David which was very privileged. But to treat newcomers in the industry like that I don't think was very fair and I have to say that he miscalculated because he suffered as a result of doing that because it became a bit of an issue, it became public knowledge and he didn't do himself any favours at all actually by doing that.

Now there are people who phone me up. I always try and encourage young people. It's hard to know what to suggest sometimes but you can't feel threatened by them because they're not going to take your work. If you're good at what you do then you'll get the job, if you're not then you won't. It's not going to make much difference. New people are always coming up. So that saddened me actually, that experience.

5. Animal behaviour

Int: *I'm going to move onto chapter three or whatever it is. You must have spent in the last 20 years, if you were to add it up you must have spent several years in Amboseli filming elephants with Cynthia. How do you feel differently about it now than you did 20 years ago?*

MC: Well, I still love elephants. I've learnt a lot. When I think back to Cynthia introducing me to the elephants and then working with the elephants, I've learnt a huge amount about not only elephants but about animal behaviour generally, and also working with people on a long-term project. It's been extraordinary. I would do exactly the same thing again and I think to be given that insight by Cynthia into those animals was enormously privileged. There are a lot of people who wouldn't be as generous as Cynthia was. Her knowledge of elephants is second to none of course, she probably knows more about wild elephants than anybody else in the world. To be allowed into that world is an enormous privilege and she was always incredibly generous. She never held back, she was never resentful about anything. She basically wanted to share it with me and she wanted to share it more importantly with the world for the sake of elephants. So this was a vehicle really to be able to tell people how special elephants are and to conserve them and to stop people poaching them, and open a window on their complex lives.

So for me it was a huge privilege, I was that vehicle if you like and so there was a lot to learn. Cynthia still says to me now I don't know what I don't know about elephants and I think I know a lot about elephants. But she's been looking at them for 37 years and I've been looking at them for 20 years, that's still a big difference. I think I have Marion to thank for it for basically choosing me to work with Cynthia in the first place and I have Cynthia to thank for giving me that opportunity, and allowing me to convey her knowledge of the

elephants to the world.

Int: *Cynthia's work with elephants must be unique in terms of an insight into truly wild animals that you can get close to and understand. At the same time Cynthia and your films are quite emotional at times. To what extent do you think there's a romanticising of elephants here because of the way in which Cynthia might interpret them, and to what extent do you think this is a true picture of elephant life if you were an elephant yourself as it were?*

MC: Well, Cynthia's a scientist, she has scientific credibility and she has been careful not to be **anthropomorphic** as well. The elephant films, the Echo films are not **anthropomorphic**. They are following individuals and if you listen to the commentaries, most of which are written by Cynthia, her wording is very, very careful. She's not attributing emotions to these elephants. She's basically telling the audience from her experience what is happening. She's not attributing emotions to them. They are quite emotional films because of what's happening and interestingly enough, I mean myself as a filmmaker would probably go further than that. You can see what's happening. I know you can't be inside an elephant's head, you can't really know what's going on in there but it's often quite plain to see when an animal is upset, emotional.

You might go out or anyone might go out and they might look at an elephant and they won't know what that elephant's feeling. But if you've spent years as we have working with these animals you know when an animal is stressed, you know when it's being indecisive, you know when it's hesitating. You know if its upset, upset is a human emotion but you know its upset. You know if your dog's upset, you know if your dog's nervous. So it's being a little bit brave and it's being brave enough to convey those sorts of emotions, no, not emotions, describing behaviour in that way that I think we've done. But I don't think we've been **anthropomorphic** at all.

Int: *So in other words you think Cynthia is a very good scientist, it's just that elephants really do have an emotional life?*

MC: I think they do, yes. I know they do.

Int: *It's a funny thing, I think they do too and I think it's become clearer from those films and you're right, I mean Cynthia bends over backwards. We made one of those films together. She bends over backwards to be objective and scientific but it is so obvious that these creatures have moods, emotions, personality and I think that is a big change in the course of our careers, an acceptance by the world that creatures have personality, emotions, anger, love, affection. It's quite a major thing, isn't it?*

MC: But when you think about it these long-term studies on these big animals have only been going since the 60s. So Ian Douglas-Hamilton started his work on elephants as individuals in the late 60s. Dian Fossey, Jane Goodall, Birutė Galdikas, Cynthia, the safe files on baboons, they all started around the 60s and early 70s, and it's only when you spend that amount of time with animals that you know. I've spent lots of time with lots of animals including great apes and it's the same, they are emotional animals a lot of them. They do have emotions. They're very individual.

So I think science has changed over that time. I think our perception of animals has changed over that time because of these long-term studies. They've gone hand in hand in other words.

Int: *You've worked in some detail on elephants. You've probably filmed more elephants than anyone else in the world by a long chalk and similarly you've done a lot of filming with the great apes, chimps in particular and they have an emotional life as well, don't they?*

MC: They do, chimps do and bonobos do, yes.

Int: *Do you think this is just a tip of an iceberg where the more we look at all the other creatures right the way down through the taxa we will find that they all are much more emotional, they have personalities, they have feelings? Do you think this will happen all the way down or is it just these few higher mammals, as it were?*

MC: I think it's hard to know. I wouldn't like to say where but clearly animals like dogs, for instance. I think anyone who owns a dog or to a less extent cats but certainly a dog, people attribute emotions to them: the dog's happy, the dog's sad, the dog's angry, the dog's stressed and they're all individuals. But how far down the taxa you go I don't know. But I think certainly we have become more broad-minded about certainly considering it as a possibility. I don't think seahorses would necessarily have different personalities but primates I would say, the ones that I've experienced, would vary in their intelligence and in their individuality. I mean certainly it's the great apes and I would definitely say elephants, elephants and dolphins, whales.

Int: *So social mammals?*

MC: Social mammals particularly. Well, that brings on to an interesting question because elephants live in a matriarchal society, all their lives the females live together. We know living with other animals, other people like we do is complicated. There's bargaining, there's a lot of social interaction that goes on, and there's a lot of 'politics' and that requires intelligence to understand that. There's been a lot of intelligence found in baboons, for instance, about I'll give you this if you give me that. Certainly in chimps there's a lot of politics most of which, when you're watching chimps, is really difficult to interpret but there's no doubt that it's there.

Going back to elephants, they've got a big brain. They've got a big brain probably because they're highly social mammals and constantly they're interacting, constantly they're communicating, constantly they know where everybody else is. It's a fascinating world to watch actually and most people don't have the privilege to be there but when you have been there for that long you can see it. It's like a wonderful jigsaw. It's like going into a party. It's almost Christmas time, you go into a party and there's a whole room full of people, and immediately you're trying to work out who's who and who's doing what. Well, that person's a smiley person, that person looks a bit miserable, that person is a bit aggressive. You go into a group of elephants or chimps and if you're experienced with animals you can start to very quickly work out who's the funny one, who's the agitated one, etc.

I mean that's one of the really amazing things about this job I think is to be able to have enough to spend time with animals to get to know them that well. That's one of the things that I enjoy most about this work.

Int: *It's interesting, isn't it, as well because it's not just intelligence in the sense of knowing where the fruit is or the water's over there, it's emotional intelligence, isn't it, that we're becoming more aware of us ourselves in our own society. But elephants have a lot of emotional intelligence, don't they?*

MC: Yes, they do. I can't speak of specific examples, emotional intelligence.

Int: *I mean a sensitivity to illness, a sensitivity to distress in others.*

MC: Yes, they do. Elephants will react very interestingly in different situations, for instance with a dead elephant. I'm going to give you a really, really interesting example actually which happened to me quite recently and it's really hard to interpret what this meant but it affected me enormously. It happened last year when I was working on a 13 part series for *Animal Planet* called *Echo and the Elephants of Amboseli (19)*. So again Echo and the family is the thread. It's a very documentary style, it's looking at the work of the girls, the work of the project, the context that the elephants are in: the Masai, the poaching, conflict, issues with crops and so on.

But towards the end of the seven month period, and I was there seven months every day out with the elephants, I found this elephant called Orlanda who's a big old matriarch. I found her one evening and I knew immediately from just the way she was standing that she was in distress and the chances are that she was in labour. That's the other interesting thing that Cynthia has taught me, is that I can look at an elephant three miles away and just by the way it's standing I know that there could be something wrong, that it could be in **oestrus**, that it's alarmed. It's just the extraordinary experience that one has. Sometimes I can tell individuals from about five miles away just by their shape.

But this female I knew immediately it looked like she was in labour because I've filmed two or three births now so I know exactly the sort of postures. So I stayed with her a while. The only other thing that is similar to labour is when elephants have gut contortions. Sometimes their intestines get twisted and they can die from it and they can recover as well. So she was basically leaning from side to side and rocking back and forth. So I thought she could either have a stomach problem or she could be in labour and I thought that she was going to be in labour.

Anyway after about two hours she shook her head and marched off and so I thought that's a bit odd, maybe it was a stomach problem. Anyway I went out at dawn the next day and I found her again and this time she was actually kneeling down on all fours quite frequently, and she was looking very, very uncomfortable. So I thought, okay, she's definitely in labour but there's definitely something wrong. Elephants normally give birth at night so I would have expected if she was going to have calf she would have it that night. So I followed her all that day and she was on her way into the central swamps in Amboseli, and every time she walked she had to kneel down. She was obviously in a lot of distress and a lot of discomfort and I just kept with her. The rest of her family just started drifting off so it was just her and myself.

She eventually got to some water and spent the rest of the day at this waterhole. During that time her daughter and her grand offspring would come back and they would greet her and there was a bit of emotion, and the offspring didn't really know what was going on. They looked uncertain and confused and there was a lot of calling, a lot of rumbling, 'quite emotional' and then they would go off again.

Int: *Leaving her?*

MC: Leaving her there and I was there the whole time, all day. Now at about 6.45 in the evening it was getting dark. I wasn't set up to do any night filming so basically I thought I've got to go. Up until this point it

was like I wasn't there. She didn't approach the car, she didn't react to me, she didn't look at me, she was just there and I was here, just as it is normally in Amboseli, they just don't take any notice of you.

6.45 I start the car and I start to drive off and she immediately turns and starts to follow me. So I look in the mirror of the Land Rover and she's literally marching after me. So I stop the car and she comes up and she stands right beside the Land Rover. The whole of the right hand side of the Land Rover's open. I take both doors off, I have this huge great balcony that I film from, and she comes and stands right here and looks at me.

Int: *Turns her head and looks at you?*

MC: Yes, turned and just looked straight in at me like this. I talk to the elephants because they know the researchers and myself from our sound and our smell. So often if elephants have been distressed by something like a metallic noise in the car if you talk to them they recognise your voice and you can see them visibly relax, it's extraordinary. If there's a slight bit of alarm you talk to them and they immediately relax.

So I was talking to her, I can't remember what I said to her but I was just talking. We sort of looked at each other in the half light for a while and I then thought, well, I've got to go, I can't stay, so I drove off again. I drove a little bit faster and I look in the mirror and she's coming after me, filling the rear view mirror completely running after me. This really freaked me out because clearly in my mind, my interpretation of this is that she didn't want to be left on her own, she didn't want me to go. I'd been there all day, she was in distress and she was on her own, she was in pain, probably a huge amount of pain, and she didn't want me to go.

Int: *And she recognised you?*

MC: Well, whether she recognised me or not is immaterial but I was there, I was some sort of comfort. So she did it again, she came and stood right beside me and I'm going this is extraordinary. She hasn't taken any notice of me all day now I'm leaving she doesn't want me to go. What does she want, what is she doing and my interpretation is that she didn't want me to go which is really difficult because I knew she was in a lot of pain. I knew she might die. If she was in labour and she couldn't give birth she would die.

So I thought I can't stay here, I can't stay, and so I drove off much more quickly. I thought I've got to leave. It really was quite upsetting. So I drove off really quickly and I look in the mirror and she's running after me, full tilt running after me and I couldn't bear it anymore. I just left and went back to camp and I told Cynthia about this and she knew exactly what I was talking about. She said that's extraordinary. It's really upsetting when something like that happens because you suddenly realise that these animals are much more than you think. It's not just an animal in pain. There's some kind of link, there's something, I don't know what it is but it was extraordinary.

Anyway I went out the next day and found her again and she'd given birth during the night to a stillborn baby. So it must have been some kind of breech birth that the baby had got stuck. I think, I suspect, that when she ran after me that might have actually saved her. I don't know that for sure but the fact that she was in labour for a day and a half and then she ran after the car that might have been enough to dislodge this baby.

Int: *Was she okay?*

MC: She was okay, yes, she's still alive. It took her quite some time to recover because I think there were all sorts of internal problems with her but she was okay. She joined up with her family. I actually filmed her being reunited with the family. She stayed with the calf not a huge amount of time. She was right beside it when I got there in the morning and again she completely ignored me. There was no association in the morning at all. It was just that one time when I drove off that she wouldn't let me go.

Int: *That's an amazing story.*

6. The cameraman's responsibilities

Int: *You've either been in situations in Amboseli with the elephants where you've wondered whether you should get involved, let's say you see an elephant in distress or you've even had letters from people who've seen your programmes and got quite angry that you didn't interfere. What does that feel like? From your perspective, knowing the elephants, knowing the place, knowing your role as a cameraman, are you ever tempted to interfere, to step in?*

MC: Generally no. I think as a wildlife cameraman, a wildlife filmmaker, we are there to document events. If one started to interfere I think you would undermine what we do. We're observers, you have to imagine that we're not there. So with a lion kill for instance, everyone feels sorry for the baby wildebeest or the baby zebra or the adult wildebeest or the adult zebra. It's brutal but what about the lions? You can't start to interfere to protect animals from predators and in the same way I think with the elephants, we're there as observers. The viewer has to imagine that we're a window on the elephants' world. We're not there to affect what the elephants are going to do, we're there to show what happens even if we're not there. So I don't feel that wildlife cameramen should be given that responsibility or I don't think they should in any way interfere with so-called natural events.

Now there was a good example in the first Echo film, for instance. The matriarch, Echo, had a calf on 28th February 1990 and we knew she was pregnant. We didn't know exactly when she was going to give birth but we knew she was pregnant, we knew roughly when it would be. Sure enough she gave birth to this calf and it turned out that this calf was crippled. This is the first time that this condition had been seen in elephants ever so again it was an extraordinary bit of luck as it turned out. But the day that Cynthia and I went out and discovered this, Cynthia was very upset. Neither of us could believe it. We'd been waiting for this opportunity: the matriarch has a baby, the baby we can follow over the next 18 months and we get there and it can't stand up, and its front feet are completely bent back like this.

So I start filming and within a very short period of time Cynthia turned to me and she said I don't think you should film this and I said why not, I have to film it. She said the audience are not going to want to see this, this elephant is going to die. If it shuffles around on its knees it'll get raw, it'll get infected, it'll die, I don't think you should film this. Anyway I ignored her because it was an opportunity to record something whatever was going to happen, we didn't know what was going to happen. It was a responsibility to film. In fact, she felt so upset by it that she left the next day and went back to Nairobi.

Int: *Upset with you?*

MC: No, she wasn't upset with me. She had made her opinion clear and I said I've got to film this and she had a meeting in Nairobi I think with the Head of Kenya Wildlife Service so she had to leave anyway. But actually she didn't want to be there, she didn't want to watch this. So I then continued to work with Soila and Norah over the next few days and, as many of the viewers will know, this story turned out with an extraordinary ending. Basically Echo was a small elephant relatively. The calf, Eli as we subsequently named him, was quite large and he was crushed in the womb and he was unable as a foetus to stretch his tendons. So when he was born it was exactly the same but over the course of the next three days, and of course it revealed extraordinary behaviour from Echo and from the calf's older sister, subsequently the tendons stretched and he was able to stand up on the third day and it was a key sequence. It was about 17 minutes long actually in the first Echo film and it was a key sequence, and now still to this day people say what happened to Eli, how is he?

So it was a remarkable event in this elephant's life but if I'd listened to Cynthia I wouldn't have filmed it, and if I'd have interfered in any way then we wouldn't have recorded that extraordinary behaviour that the elephants did. In fact, there was a suggestion that perhaps the vet should come, that the calf should be taken to the orphanage in Nairobi. There were all sorts of things suggested but as it turned out the best thing was not to interfere and just to record what happened.

So that's my justification. I'm there to record events that happen naturally irrespective of whether we're there or not. They happen and if we're lucky enough to see them and we're lucky enough to learn something about elephant behaviour as a result of that, which we did, then that's the justification for doing it.

Int: *It reveals a slightly unscientific side of Cynthia, doesn't it?*

MC: I guess it does because I mean I ended up actually recording it, photographing it and keeping a very detailed diary of that, and as it turned out it would have been very interesting for her to record that as well. In fact she used my notes. So I guess I would say that sometimes Cynthia's very emotionally involved with these animals, there's no doubt. She's a very good scientist. Now they're just publishing with Chicago University Press the definitive document on the Amboseli elephants which is a very scientific book. But there's no doubt that you cannot help but get emotionally involved with these animals. Now I'm not saying that that affects her judgment but perhaps on that occasion it would have been better and more scientifically rigorous to actually stay and record those events.

Now that's my feeling generally about interfering and not interfering and, as you suggested, I get emails, I get people saying don't you feel as though you should interfere and that's my answer. However, during the making of the third Echo film (19) there was an incident that had occurred where I couldn't stop myself interfering, and I haven't told anyone about this before because of what I've just said just now, I generally don't agree with the idea of interfering and I'll tell you what happened.

In the third Echo film (19) Echo's eldest daughter, Erin, was speared by Masai and she must have been in some kind of low waterhole when the Masai turned up, and they speared her between her shoulder blades, right here. Two massive great spear wounds had gone down and because those spear wounds were in her shoulder blades we didn't notice that she'd been speared until she developed a severe infection in her shoulder and her leg. Her whole leg started to swell up and then we realised that there was something wrong. So we realised she had some kind of systemic infection.

In the same way that I don't agree with interfering in terms of filming, if it's a naturally occurring event that's fine. If an injury is the result of human interference like a snare or spearing I think there's a justification to bring a vet in. So as soon as we realised that she'd been speared and that she had a systemic infection we decided to get the vets in, and so the vets came in and treated her.

Now subsequent to that I think it was sufficiently advanced for her not to really recover as a result of the antibiotics. So I stayed with this animal for three weeks every day. Again Cynthia didn't want to be with me to watch this because it was quite difficult and painful to watch.

Int: *Can I just ask, did you film the vets treating Erin?*

MC: Yes.

Int: *So you kind of came clean?*

MC: Yes. So I then for three weeks just stayed with Erin every day and that revealed some interesting stuff about elephant behaviour, in that she was so sick that she could barely move. She had a young calf that we called Email and Email was looked after by his older sister but Email had to come back to Erin to suckle. So there was this flux with the elephants. Erin was here and the calf used to go off with the rest of the family but Echo never went more than about a kilometre and a half away from her during this whole period so, i.e., within communication distance which was remarkable. For three weeks she never left a greater distance than she could communicate with Erin which in itself is extraordinary.

Now then something else extraordinary happened and this is another really strange thing about elephant behaviour. We all know that elephants are extremely intelligent and caring animals. Now the exception to that is when animals get ill and it's like a Jekyll and Hyde thing, it's absolutely extraordinary. It appears that when elephants get sick and demonstrate the fact that they're sick, i.e., it's obvious, they can frequently be attacked by other elephants. It's very rare, very unusual to see it and this happened with Erin. I was with Erin one day, and in fact Email was there with her and this was a sequence in the third Echo film (19). Suddenly she was approached by some big females, the matriarch and a couple of other big females in the family.

Int: *So a completely unrelated family?*

MC: Completely unrelated family. They saw Erin and they knew immediately that she wasn't well, that she was a very sick elephant because at this point she was limping really badly, so it was quite obvious that she was very sick, and they just went for her. Two or three of them went for her and they tusked her and of course she couldn't run away because she was so badly injured, and she screamed and screamed. In fact, they knocked her to the ground. A most extraordinary thing, an adult female being knocked to the ground by two or three other females in another family, and it was horrendous. I filmed this scene, and it's in the film.

They stopped and Erin actually was able to get up to her feet and tried to shuffle away. Meanwhile Email was running in circles because he didn't know what was going on and he was trying to get away. It calmed down and then I could see that they were going to do it again. Under normal circumstances I would never consider interfering but I knew what was going to happen, I thought they were going to kill her and I just intercepted them. I could see them coming and I just drove behind Erin and I cut them off and I prevented them from attacking her again, totally against what I would normally do but I didn't even think about it. It was a

completely automatic reaction, I just couldn't bear to see that happen.

Int: *That's interesting. Was Erin's own family not coming to help?*

MC: No, they were not there.

Int: *Did that surprise you?*

MC: They weren't close so they wouldn't have been aware that that was going on. They would have heard Erin scream but they could have been two kilometres away. They were still within communication distance but they weren't right there.

Int: *But this reminds me actually of your previous story about the female who was obviously in distress about to give birth. My question is why weren't the other elephants there? Why wasn't she following them?*

MC: Well, this is interesting because the perception of elephants is one thing and the reality is often something rather different and that surprised me. I was surprised that Orlanda's family left her. They were again within communication distance and they did come back at certain points but they didn't stay with her all the time. So I was somewhat surprised by that and I've been surprised on a couple of occasions. For instance, moving forward, Echo died last May, this is May 2009, and again the family didn't react in the way that I would have expected them to. I think animals aren't predictable and we often expect elephants to do certain things in certain situations and they don't do exactly what you expect. We like to think that they're going to mourn over this body but with elephants I've found there are particular times when you expect them to do something even with our experience and they do something completely different. So they always surprise you.

7. Anthropomorphism

Int: *But this makes me think that, as we spoke about a little while ago, maybe we over romanticise and read too much into them. I mean that sounds to me like, and I know you have other stories about bonobos that are considered this peace loving, gentle ape, they can be petty brutal to each other. I just wonder if we aren't allowing a bit too much of our own romantic, soft focus interpretation to get in here when in fact a lot of these animals may not be as touchy-feely, emotionally connected, social, loving, whatever you want to call it as perhaps we interpret.*

MC: Yes, you may be right and they have surprised me when I've seen them do things in the past and I've seen a similar situation and I've expected them to do certain things and they don't do it. So it makes it clear that basically, yes, we don't really understand what's going on in their head. There aren't the same triggers, it's not the same context. In the same way that they don't do things that you expect they're going to do, sometimes they do things when you don't expect it as well, like a greeting for instance. When elephants split up for short periods of time, when they get back together they have these most extraordinary greeting ceremonies, this is females within the family. It's extraordinary when it happens and it shows an amazing degree of bonding and emotion.

But actually trying to film it and predict is really difficult because sometimes they'll literally be round behind the bush and they'll come back together, and they'll go 'oh, it's so fantastic to see you, it's amazing' and ear flapping and all that sort of stuff. Then at other times when they've been separated for days and they finally get back together absolutely nothing happens. So you think why didn't they greet each other? So you're right, we still don't really understand these animals.

Int: *When you're observing them, when you're filming them, do you ever find yourself perhaps subconsciously thinking they're just like we are? I've seen women in a cafe meet in the same way or I know a creature that would ignore that distress in a fellow creature, a human being, just as much.*

MC: You can imagine certain human situations but that's **anthropomorphic**.

Int: *But, yes, isn't this the boundary that's breaking down? Isn't this the very thing that we're talking about? The anthropomorphism 50 years ago was a real dirty word. In fact when I first joined the NHU Jeffery Boswell used to say that's **anthropomorphic**, it's unforgivable, unscientific and the truth is that just in the space of 25 or 30 years anthropomorphism has come in from the cold, hasn't it? Especially with elephants, with chimps, with bonobos. If you're not going to interpret their behaviour in terms of emotions, feelings, personality along pretty similar lines to the ones that we have in our own culture, you're probably going to miss half the science, half of the behaviour that's going on, aren't you?*

MC: Yes, that's true but it does require a certain amount of interpretation and it's quite difficult to interpret sometimes but there are certain situations and you can see exactly what's going on. You can see embarrassment in animals. If they do something really stupid they look embarrassed and it's a really difficult thing to describe but if you saw it and if you knew these animals you would know that that animal was embarrassed for what it did.

8. The future for Africa's wildlife

Int: *Were you there when Echo died?*

MC: No, I wasn't. This is May 2009 and I was walking in the Quantock Hills down in Somerset and I had a phone call from Mike Birkhead, the producer, to say Echo's down and Echo's dying, what do we do, and I said I've got to go. That was a Saturday afternoon, so I went on the Sunday morning on a flight to Nairobi and I got there a couple of days later and she'd died by the time I got there. We think she died from this drought. There's a terrible drought in Amboseli at the moment, 60, 70, 80% of the herbivores have died. We've lost 130 elephants already.

Int: *Out of how many?*

MC: Out of 1,500 but 5,000 of the 6,000 wildebeest are dead. It's a major, major drought right now. In fact I'm going out on Monday. There's been low rainfall for about two or three days and I think maybe she died as a result of that, just a gradual decline in condition. Of course, their teeth wear out when they're old, even though her teeth hadn't worn out as we subsequently discovered.

But it was sad and Cynthia was in a state and she came back and I went out and the girls were there, and I just think that it was nice for us all to be there together because Echo, she's a famous elephant and she's been part of our lives for 20 years. Well, for Cynthia even longer, she first met Echo in 1972. She was an extraordinary animal and I think Amboseli won't be quite the same without her.

Int: *Was Cynthia upset?*

MC: She was upset. She knew I think that she might not see her again. She went off to the States for a fundraising tour, and I think she actually went and said goodbye to Echo before she left because she suspected that she might not make it. She was starting to look very thin, very slow and Cynthia's seen a lot of elephants die so she knows the signs. So I think she said goodbye to Echo before she went, so I think she had done that. It was very sad actually.

Int: *How old was Echo?*

MC: Well, we haven't established exactly from the teeth yet but she must have been nearly 65.

Int: *Probably the most filmed animal in the world.*

MC: I think so. I think her legacy is she's a well-known elephant and a lot of her behaviour and family have been recorded, and it will be looked at for a long time to come I hope.

Int: *How much longer do you think that study can go on? I mean presumably Cynthia herself must be nearing retirement.*

MC: Yes, she's 70 next year remarkably. I don't know, it's a good question because I think a lot of these long-term studies now have been going 30/35 years, and I think increasingly it's getting more and more difficult to get the funding to keep these projects running. I mean Cynthia constantly now has to raise money to keep the whole thing going and it's expensive. You've got vehicles, you've got staff. They are collecting data every day and you've got to pay these people to collect data. Cynthia's not out there every day but Soila and Norah and Katito are. I think it's getting increasingly difficult to fund these sorts of long-term projects that are literally just collecting data on a daily basis. They're not collaring them, they're not doing short-term projects. They're collecting data for the long-term and, of course, the longer these things go on the more interesting it is because the more things emerge.

So to your answer your question, I don't know. I think it's a real struggle. I mean I think the (Robert) Seyfarth Baboon Project in the Okavango has had to stop. There's Christophe Boesch in Ivory Coast with the chimps that's 30 years old. We've just had the 30th birthday of that and it can't go on forever.

Int: *Is there a next generation coming in to take their place?*



MC: There doesn't seem to be. I think what will happen in Amboseli, for instance, is Cynthia will pass it over to Soila. Cynthia is well-known. It's much more difficult, I think, for someone like Soila as a Masai to have the fundraising ability, the fundraising potential, to really get the funds to run an expensive project like this, and it probably costs \$0.5 million a year to run it. I mean that's a lot of money, particularly at the moment where people aren't putting their hands in their pockets. So I think it has been difficult and I think it's not going to get any easier.

Int: *Do you ever get a sense that you have lived through a kind of high point in our understanding and desire to protect African wildlife, and that as time goes on with human pressures in Africa, with the funding getting more and more difficult, look at the plight of lions in Africa, I mean they are seriously in trouble. Within our lifetimes they will probably begin to disappear, in fact they're disappearing already. Do you think we could look back and think I was there during the peak and now they're just going?*

MC: Yes, sadly I think we will look back at that period and think that. I hoped that with these films, for instance the Echo films, or all the films that we do that we could justify spending that amount of time making these films, and justify spending this amount of money making these films because it educates people. Because ultimately I think, as you say, lions are in serious trouble, chimps which I'm working with at the moment they're not going to make it, and this is not being pessimistic. Well, it is being pessimistic but I can't see an awful lot of room for optimism, genuine optimism and there will be success stories.

In Amboseli, for instance, there are 1,500 elephants so the population is still increasing but with that comes conflict with the human population which, of course, is increasing. There's poaching now and the way the economy changes, I mean China now is a major economic power. They want ivory, they want tiger parts, they want all sorts of things, they want rhino horn, and they're going to get it. They're in Africa now big time with governments. They've got so much money that they can basically do what they like. They're road building nearby Amboseli. They want ivory, the poaching has rocketed in the last few months, in the last year or so. I'm afraid that if people want ivory they're going to pay for it and elephants are going to be poached.

So I don't see any rest. I'm not particularly optimistic in the long-term about the survival of a lot of these animals.

Int: *If for a moment we were to take China out of the equation. I mean China has actually done a U-turn on climate change and is now ahead of the United States in terms of its willingness to participate in solving a perceived problem. Supposing China stopped its ivory trading, supposing they came on board in terms of conservation. Surely Africa's own issues in terms of the spread of human populations, the desire of the Masai to settle and grow crops and drive four wheel drive vehicles or whatever, all the same things that all other cultures and civilisations through history have wanted, surely Africa's wildlife is doomed whatever the outside pressures?*

MC: I think it may be. I think it may be and this always astounds me because it's so valuable in terms of tourism. In a country like Kenya tourism is right up there in terms of its income but still it doesn't seem as though enough value is put on it. The Masai Mara has over 40 camps in it now and to me that's just cynical, that is just a local community making as much money as they possibly can in the shortest period of time as possible. The Mara is such a fragile place and I can't see that being sustainable.

With Amboseli it's a tiny national park. There's talk about (de-gazetting) as a national park even and becoming owned by the Masai as a reserve which is fine because the Masai have historically protected all these animals. But it just makes me wonder what's going to happen. I would have expected there to be more



responsibility for Africa for its wildlife but it doesn't always appear that that's the case.

Int: *You mean responsibility from African nations or from us Westerners?*

MC: In protecting. No, Africa to look after its own wildlife.

Int: *For its own economic benefit?*

MC: For its own economic benefit. But I feel that with African governments they're in there for as long as they can to get as much as the possibly can from whatever source they can. I sometimes am disappointed in that there's not a long-term plan particularly with the wildlife. It just seems to stagger on and there seems to be an issue which is it's left too long, it's not nipped in the bud. I mean when Richard Leakey, for instance, was running the Kenya Wildlife Service, that was the time when wildlife was really valued. He basically put an end to the ivory trade by burning the piles of ivory. Elephants were then listed as CITES Appendix 1, they were protected. Something was done and it was a massive issue and it worked, and now we're back 20 years later to the same situation again, major poaching in Africa. So I worry about the prospects for a lot of these animals.

9. Filming chimpanzees

Int: *I'm going to change the subject. You're now working on a different sort of film, your career has taken a new step into feature films and you're working on a film about chimps for Disney. How do you find chimps compared to elephants?*

MC: Actually I was surprised by chimps. I've never worked with common chimps before. I've worked with bonobos and orang-utans and gorillas but never common chimps. Interestingly what surprised me most about chimps was really how individual they are. I know that there are different elephants but when you look at a chimp it's like looking at a completely different person every time you look at them. They are so different looking. What I find most surprising, and I'm working with chimps that have been habituated for many, many years in the Tai Forest and Ivory Coast.

What surprised me most was even though they were habituated, the individual choices that they make with respect to humans, for instance, were so different in their tolerance of people because mainly when I've worked with habituated animals they're all habituated. They don't show much difference in their response to people. The chimps are clearly making their own decisions on an individual basis about how close they're prepared to come or whether they're prepared to be filmed or even seen by us.

Int: *And they're widely differing in their behaviours in that way?*

MC: Yes, totally.



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Int: *So give me two extremes.*

MC: There's one female that we have in this, this is the south group that we're filming, called Whoppy who's this crazy looking female. She's wonderful actually, she's got these massive ears so she's a very distinctive looking female but quite amusing and we virtually never see her. She is part of the group and chimps live in a sort of fission-fusion society as you know. So sometimes the group are all together but they're constantly changing. So they split up at certain times of the year and they're literally just on their own, other times of the year they're constantly coming together and splitting. We never see Whoppy, virtually never. So whenever people are with the group you don't see her.

There are several individuals who basically couldn't care less, they don't mind you being there at all. It's as if you're not there and there are other individuals, there's a female called Sumatra for instance, who does not want to be filmed. So she's quite happy sitting there playing with her offspring and the moment you, and even if you do it really carefully and slowly, get the camera out and point it at her she just turns her back like that. She just looks the other way.

Int: *So she's happy for you to be there with the camera in the box but you get the camera out and she doesn't like it. She knows what she's doing.*

MC: Well, she knows something's different. It's very odd. I mean these chimps are occasionally poached, and anything that looks vaguely metallic and you point it at them is potentially a gun but if they were that frightened they would leave. This is much more subtle than that. This is not wanting to have this thing pointed at them. Maybe it's the glass on the front, I don't know.

Int: *But isn't that interesting because people are often very wary of being filmed because of the reflection, aren't they?*

MC: I guess possibly, yes, but you don't always see the reflections in the lens if it's got a lens hood and it's not lit but it's amazing, she just turns around and faces the other way. There's another individual, Olivia, for instance. She's perfectly happy and as soon as you start to try and film her she doesn't run away, she doesn't look alarmed, she just gets up and she leaves. So that surprised me. I thought a habituated group of animals, I know what I'm dealing with, and I will choose the characters that I'm going to film. No way, they're choosing.

Int: *That's really interesting.*

MC: They're so individual.

Int: *So in other words your film will be biased by the choice they have made as to whether they want to be filmed, so you'll be seeing what they want you to see.*

MC: Exactly. The conditions in Tai are very difficult so I'm limited in what I can film anyway. Probably 90% of the behaviour I see I can't film because it's too thick or it's too dark, so I'm limited by that. I'm limited by the number of individuals that are prepared to be filmed. So I have to get all my behaviour with the individuals that tolerate me and that's assuming they do it in a filmable place. So it's really, really challenging.

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Int: *Now chimps are also pretty dark characters, aren't they? I mean they're not renowned for being too touchy-feely and they're known to eat other monkeys for lunch and dinner, they can be pretty vicious to each other. Fratricide and 'chimpicide' is quite common. How are you going to make a touchy-feely, family movie out of that?*

MC: Well, who's to say it's going to be a touchy-feely family movie?

Int: *How are you going to get families to go which is presumably why Disney is paying millions to have it made?*

MC: Well, that's a very good question. This is where this genre is quite interesting. Alastair Fothergill made a film about these chimps for *Wildlife on One* in the early 90s and it was called *Too Close for Comfort* (20), and really for the first time it revealed the fact that chimpanzees eat primates. They hunt which of course has all sorts of interesting questions about our evolution and so on but at the same time it's pretty tough seeing a chimp. We obviously can see the similarities between ourselves and chimps, and to see them eating a primate which is quite closely related I think is fairly difficult, is fairly tough. I can remember that film and being actually quite shocked by it.

Int: *I do, I remember them very clearly.*

MC: I think when you see it in the wild it's quite shocking but then lions kill a wildebeest or hunting dogs tear an impala apart it's quite shocking too.

Int: *But it's not as shocking.*

MC: It's not quite the same, I agree with you and so I think one has to be very careful about showing that kind of behaviour.

Int: *So it'll be a sanitised view of chimps?*

MC: Well, there are ways of doing it, not necessarily a sanitised view, it's the degree to which you show a monkey being killed. We sanitise *Big Cat Diary* (21). We sanitise every lion kill that's ever shown because it's pretty brutal. If lions kill a buffalo it can go on for two hours but we don't intend to do that. We've made the choice that we sanitise predation. The point about the chimps is that they eat meat, and sometimes the monkeys are still alive when they're being disembowelled and they're being eaten but we don't have to see that. The interesting thing is the fact that they share the meat.

So my approach would be and is let's look at the interesting side of what these chimps are doing, let's look at the meat sharing. Let's look at the politics that occur between all the individuals within this group when there's a very stimulating, exciting food source. Extraordinary politics that you see going on. Now interpreting those politics is really difficult but, again, once you know the individuals you can see the politics going on: food for sex, I'll give you some if you'll do me a favour in the future. Who knows whether that's what they're doing but that's what it appears like.

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So part of the function of this film is to make people think positively about chimps. Chimps are in serious trouble. I really, really don't feel very optimistic about long-term survival of chimps in the wild, their population is crashing. Even in Tai, Christophe's original group that Alastair filmed in the early 90s, used to be 80 individuals, there's now 12. The south group that I'm filming used to be 65 individuals, it's 33. As of about two days ago we've lost three more from some kind of infection, some kind of respiratory infection. There's Ebola, there's Anthrax there. We lost four chimps from the east group in April this year, 2009. Chimps have got serious problems.

So I feel a certain responsibility that we have to promote chimps and if we need to get people on the side of chimps we don't necessarily want to show them shredding monkeys, that isn't going to get people into cinemas.

Int: *No. I agree, Martyn, but I think we agree that what we're saying here is that the stories that we tell in these films sometimes become the stories that we think will serve one purpose which may not be to do with revealing the truth about these animals. Alastair's reputation was made on *Too Close for Comfort* (20), a film which for the first time, less than 20 years ago, revealed the true brutality of chimp life. Now it sounds like you're going to be making a film which kind of reverses that trend and says they're really lovely and we've got to look after them. This isn't a criticism, all I'm saying is it's an interesting moment in films and filmmaking and how we get audiences and what we want them to think, isn't it?*

MC: Yes, well I guess it is. I think there's a long way to go on this chimp movie, I'm not the director, I'm the cameraman. There are two other directors and there are a lot of tiers between here and the head of the Disney studio in California. But certainly from my point of view filming it hunting is very hard to film but I do wonder about showing that. I don't think we're lying. I think you can make it clear that chimps hunt monkeys and you can see them eating bits of monkey but at the same time if that means that no one sees the film, and no one cares about chimpanzees, then we're doing ourselves a disservice. We're doing chimps a disservice, we're doing conservation a disservice.

Int: *It's a fine line here, isn't it? I'm not distancing myself from you, we all walk that fine line but, going back to what you said about the cameraman tells the truth, if the truth is that chimps are brutal and then you end up making a film that says chimps are lovely and sharing and kind of cuddly but it helps to save them.*

MC: But let's get this in perspective. The Tai chimpanzees only hunt for a short period every year. They mainly hunt during the rainy season which is September/October. They don't hunt for the rest of the year. They occasionally hunt but the hunting is a very small portion of the time that they spend feeding. Maybe they require some kind of mineral. There's obviously something that they require that is necessary for them to eat meat. So if you look at a year's activity a tiny, tiny, tiny portion of that time is spent eating monkeys. We may be making a big issue of it.

10. Wildlife feature films

Int: *What's your best and worst case scenario for what will happen to this film, and not just this film which is quite a difficult one but all of these feature films which are attempting to bring a big audience to wildlife films, people who are prepared to spend quite a lot of money going out perhaps on a Friday to take their family and spend £25/30? Is this going to work? Is it a whole new audience opening up for wildlife*



programming or is it not? What's your own feeling here, optimism, pessimism?

MC: I'm very excited about wildlife on the big screen. It's very nice, it's very exciting to be involved in it, and it's very challenging for me. There's a precedent here. There have been other feature films. Hugo van Lawick did one on leopards, for instance, *The Leopard Son* (22). There have been other feature films which haven't done that well and it's kind of no surprise. People go to the cinema to be entertained. In this country particularly we have great wildlife films on the television. Why do you go to the cinema? You go to the cinema to be entertained and historically wildlife films have not done that well particularly in the cinema, and that's no surprise to me really.

Int: *Why is it not a surprise to you?*

MC: Well, because I suppose from a personal point of view, even though I love wildlife and I'm involved in the industry, I wouldn't necessarily go and watch a feature film on animals in the cinema.

Int: *Well, you might not because you spend your life with them. Why wouldn't a member of the public?*

MC: It's a very good question.

Int: *I mean they love Planet Earth (4). Why won't they go and see?*

MC: Well, some people did. *The Leopard Son* (22) didn't do that well commercially. What did, however, do very well commercially was the *March of the Penguins* (23) and that was the most profitable documentary wildlife film ever. It made \$130 million or whatever it was. So that's partly why we're where we are now with theatrical release wildlife films because that film made a lot of money. That film made a lot of money for several reasons: penguins are very appealing.

Int: *Anthropomorphism.*

MC: It was **anthropomorphic**. It was a beautiful place but it was an extraordinary story. It's one of the great stories in the wildlife world and it was executed very well and it caught the public's imagination. There was a time, there were certain political reasons why it worked well in America, it was the timing associated with the Iraq War. There weren't many other Disney films going out at the time.

Int: *The one film that clearly has worked in this genre is March of the Penguins. Why do you think it's worked and are there any lessons for what you're engaged in now?*

MC: Well, I think *March of the Penguins* (23) was successful for a number of reasons actually. Penguins are very appealing, the Antarctic's very beautiful, it's the most extraordinary story and, even though you and I are familiar with the story, a lot of people won't have been familiar with that story. I think it was well executed. I don't think it was brilliantly executed. I think it was well filmed but I think it caught the public's imagination, particularly in the States. I think it was about timing, it was about they wanted good news because of the Iraq War. I think it was adopted by the religious right in Middle America as this is the ideal, God given story. I think there are a number of reasons why it was successful, but it was successful.



On the back of that I suppose Disney Nature was launched with the idea of actually having a feature film come out every year on Earth Day in April. April 23rd in the States is Earth Day and every year they wanted a film to come out. This year, 2009, *Earth* (24) came out which was the movie on the back of the *Planet Earth* (4) series which of course did very well in America. *Earth* commercially did very, very well on the back of the *Planet Earth* series.

Now going forward and a number of other films have been commissioned. There's the big cat one (25), there's the chimpanzee one (26) which I'm involved with and there may be others.

Int: *There's also the flamingo (27) one that's just come out.*

MC: There's the flamingo one that's just come out which I haven't seen actually but I think it's a difficult genre and who knows whether it's going to work in the long-term. I think to try and replicate the success of *March of the Penguins* (23) is very, very difficult and to do it consistently every year is difficult because I think it depends on the animal, it depends on the story. I think it depends on all sorts of things. So I think it's an extremely difficult genre and, to be honest, I mean I go to the cinema quite a bit and I ask myself when I'm sitting in the cinema why would people come and sit in this cinema and watch a film about chimpanzees, big cats, flamingos? Why would they do that because it's difficult enough to get people to go and see \$200 million James Cameron films.

It's got to capture the public's imagination and I think that's a very, very difficult thing to do. I think it's fickle, I think there are all sorts of external criteria which determine whether people are going to flood to the cinema. We can't tell. I mean there's one at the moment, *Paranormal Activity* (28) I think it's called. It was made on a shoestring and it's the cinemas and everyone's going to see it. No one can predict what's going to happen in Hollywood. James Cameron can spend \$200 million on a film and no one goes to see it. I can't think of one. *Avatar's* (29) just to come out this December in 3D, this is Hollywood's answer to the future. Is it going to work or are people not going to bother?

So I think the whole feature film industry is fickle and I think putting wildlife in the cinema is very challenging, and I think putting wildlife in the cinema every year is very challenging.

Int: *Yes, I agree. I'll just throw in one thought here. I think people are used to seeing wildlife on the screen at home but they know that it is factually correct and they trust that it is factually correct. I think they have antennae that are quite sensitive to that, and I think if you start telling mumbo jumbo fairy tales about animals in the big screen, I think people get it and they don't like it. I mean look what happened to *Arctic Tale* (30) which was basically pretending that eight polar bears were one polar bear, and creating a story out of nowhere which was a highly romanticised and rather ridiculous story. It didn't work and people saw that.*

*Everyone knows when they go to see *Avatar* that this is make-believe. They don't know when they go to see a wildlife film that it's make-believe. In fact, all their training from *Planet Earth* (4) and *Life on Earth* (3) is that it's not make-believe, this is reality. So we're kind of creating these funny stories and romances in our films when in fact they are not the truth, and I think we're skating on quite thin ice here, aren't we?*

MC: Well, we may not necessarily be if you tell the story. It depends on how the stories emerge but I mean certainly with the cats and the chimps we're following real stories. We're following individuals in the



same way that I did with Echo. The big cats: it's interactions between cheetahs and lions. It's individual lions within a pride, it's takeovers, it's reality actually. You go and see *The Lion King* (31) that's make-believe. These are real lions, real cheetahs, real chimps doing real things.

It's too early at the moment, at this point in time, to know how the stories are going to develop and evolve but I agree with you, I think the audience are sophisticated. But at the same time if there is a very emotional, engaging story that works with lions or chimps or flamingos, then there's no reason why it can't work.

Int: *It'll be interesting to see, won't it?*

MC: It'll be very interesting to see and it's quite scary I think. I think it's a very exciting development and I really hope it works but I think it's very challenging. I think every single film we do with wildlife is a challenge and it's difficult to predict how it's going to turn out, whether it's going to work and I think it's much more difficult on the big screen to persuade people. Look at IMAX, for instance. IMAX hasn't really worked and why hasn't it worked? It's because it's too expensive to get people to go into a big cinema. It's not captivating enough and I think the other reason is, is that the films aren't good enough actually.

Int: *They don't have any stories.*

MC: There's no story. Probably the most successful IMAX film was the Everest one (32), that's an extraordinary story.

Int: *And they stumbled upon it.*

MC: And they stumbled upon it but it's a true story, it's an extraordinary story and that was the most successful IMAX film. A lot of the others rely on their size. They're limited by the cameras that they can use and the techniques, and there's very little story. People don't go because it's too expensive and they're closing.

Int: *Is it possible that 3D to go the same way?*

MC: Well, right now, December 17th, 2009, is the moment I think where we find out whether 3D, digital projection for the future is going to work.

Int: *Yes, okay, but digital projection, you're talking about the launch of Avatar (30) in a few weeks' time. I mean Avatar (30) is a different matter, isn't it?*

MC: Do you mean wildlife?

Int: *Yes, I mean wildlife.*

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MC: Well, there are a few 3D IMAX films. I think 3D could work. Anything that is immersive and takes you closer to being next to a humpback or closer to elephants, for instance, I think could work but I don't know.

Int: *No, I don't think any of us do.*

MC: It's really hard to know and in a year's time we will know whether 3D works from Hollywood. We'll know whether we're going to be doing 3D wildlife films. I think it'll all be decided in the next few months in terms of what the future is.

Int: *I'm just going to bring you back to wildlife television and look into the future but look at it also from the perspective of your 25 years or so in the business. How do you see it going now? Where do you think wildlife television is going? What do you think are the emerging styles that we're going to see more of and what do you think we may see less of in the future?*

MC: Wildlife television, well, I've been surprised actually recently because I thought, as one of my friends put it, the golden age of wildlife filmmaking is over and he said this a few years ago. I felt actually the same at that point. I thought people are going to get tired of this. How are we going to move it on? The economy's changing, people's expectations are changing, people's lifestyles are changing, and whereas 30 years ago you could watch David climbing up that guano heap in *Eastwards with Attenborough* (14) no one could get to those places. He was taking you somewhere that you couldn't go to. Now you can get on a plane and be there on two days, there's a road into that place. Any of us could book a ticket tomorrow and we could be there in three days. So that's changed, people can actually go to anywhere they want practically.

So I always wondered whether it would run out of steam. We can't surprise people as much as we used to but it appears that the appetite for wildlife films hasn't really diminished. I think if you can come up with new stories, you can come up with different ways of looking at things you can still surprise people.

Int: *So what are the successes that you would point to now? Where is it heading?*

MC: Where is it heading? Well, I suppose looking back briefly *Planet Earth* was very successful, that I think moved things on a bit. I think it created a buzz, it created excitement, it was commercially very successful. There are more landmark series coming up and everyone is trying to raise the bar. I think the producers, I think the cameramen, I think the technology is still changing, I think it's still evolving. There's high definition, there's ultra sensitive **infrared** cameras. Just yesterday I was looking at an extraordinary test of an **infrared** camera, it's so sharp. I can remember when I filmed Echo giving birth all those years ago it was on a terrible camera, it just looked awful. I was looking at stuff yesterday and it looks extraordinary, high definition video, **infrared**. So that is allowing us to try things that we couldn't try before.

It's getting more difficult to move things on but I still think there's room and it seems like there's an appetite. I do worry that there's not going to be the money in the future. I think television is changing. I think there are less people watching more channels. The viewing figures on BBC1 now you get very excited if you get 5 million but *Wildlife on One* (13) used to consistently get 12, 13 million, even higher. So I think the way that people watch television is changing. Everyone will want to watch television on the internet.

So it's hard to predict I would say but I've been surprised up until this point that there's still an appetite, and I have to say from a cameraman's point of view I'm now going round in circles. I'm now re-filming things that

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I've done two or three times.

Int: *Just with new technology?*

MC: With new technology. Oh, it's high definition now so we'll film it in high definition and there'll be super high definition next and then there'll be 3D. So that's the reason why Hollywood's coming out with 3D perhaps to inject more reality into the cinema experience.

Int: *Do you think that as well as technology advances are needed in style, genre, storytelling?*

MC: Storytelling is a good one because I think with wildlife films it seems very hard to tell really good stories, and I think that's probably where a lot of these programmes fall down. They rely on spectacle, they rely on the individual sequences around certain species, and there aren't that many films that tell a really good, gripping story. But maybe that doesn't matter, maybe it doesn't matter. If people want a bit of escape, they want to look at something that they don't know about, that they haven't seen, they want that escape. Maybe they don't necessarily need a story. Maybe if there's a story to be told we can tell it but maybe that's not always what people want. Maybe they want a bit of escapism on a Monday night or a Sunday night. Maybe they just want to be taken somewhere and for it to be beautiful and to be immersed in this wonderful wildlife experience.

I worry about the future a lot as a freelance cameraman but it just seems to me that there's an appetite for it and I hope it continues as long as there are animals to film.

11. Personal reflections

Int: *You have chosen a career which has taken you to far flung corners of a very wild world for lengthy periods and you've come back with some remarkable stuff but do you feel you've paid a price for this? Do you feel it has come at a cost in terms of your life, your family, with the connections in your own life?*

MC: I would say yes, unreservedly I would say yes. I was married and I'm no longer married and I have two lovely daughters but I think spending that amount of time away there is a price to pay, there's no doubt about it. I don't think anyone can deny that. If you're separated for long periods of time you evolve, your personality evolves, and your outlook on life evolves. You change all the time and I think you're changed by experience. So I think the danger of spending long periods of time apart is that your life experience has become different, and you become more remote from each other.

So I think that's one thing with regard to a partner and I think also with my daughters, for instance. I think overall I'll have to ask them when they're older what sort of effect it had on them but ever since Josephine was born, and she's the eldest, dad's been away, that's what he does. So I think they've grown up with that and they accept that and I think they're proud of what I do, and they're excited about the stories. But there's no doubt that I wasn't there for them during all those crucial birthdays and crucial moments. I was there for some of them but I want there for an awful lot of them. My ex-wife, Heather, essentially brought the girls up and did an amazing job and I'm very lucky that she did but I think undoubtedly I made that choice, I made that sacrifice.

Int: *Were you aware you were making it as you made it?*

MC: Not really, no. If someone had said to me at the beginning this is how it's going to pan out, these are the choices you're going to have to make, it may have been different. I may have made a different choice, I may not have made a different choice but I think you only learn those things as time goes on. They only become apparent as time goes on. I have a very good relationship with Jo and Em and we're very close but maybe I'd have been much closer, I don't know. But certainly I haven't been there anywhere near as much as a normal father would be.

Int: *I think wildlife cameramen to a man have been through this and, of course, there are some women, it'd be interesting to get their perspective on it as well. But do you feel now, you've seen a marriage dissolve, you've presumably lived through that and realised what happened, have you changed now or do you feel you've found somebody more tolerant of the life that you have chosen?*

MC: I think anyone who you're with has to be incredibly tolerant and I'm now much more honest about saying, well, this is the deal, this is what it's going to be like. It doesn't get any easier particularly. I think it's just the way we live and I think anyone who goes into a relationship with a cameraman has to go in with their eyes wide open because that's the reality. I'm just over 50 now, I don't imagine it changing very much going forward assuming that there are wildlife films being made for the next 10 or 15 years. I love doing it, this is what I have to do to make a living and that's hopefully what I'll do.

Int: *So that's kind of non-negotiable, that's a fixed point in your life that everything else is going to have to fit around?*

MC: I guess selfishly it is. I can't do what I do without having to spend that amount of time in the field. Hugh Miles, for instance, in his interview said that six weeks was the optimum period and that he's been married to Sue for many, many years and that's fine and it's worked. I've done trips of five months. I won't put a limit on it, some cameramen do and maybe that's a sensible thing to do, to put a time limit on it, to not allow yourself to become too detached from each other. But I haven't done that and so I guess in reality, yes, I suppose I'm saying that this is what I do, this is the package, this is the deal. I would find it very difficult to change that at this point.

Int: *Is it only in relationships with a loved one? Is it also something that has an impact on your relationship with other people? In that sense you're away from this culture, this civilisation for lengthy periods. Do you come back sometimes and feel a stranger?*

MC: Absolutely. I can remember when I was married I would go off and I'd spend 10 weeks in the Amazon, for instance, and in those days there were no sat phones. You went for 10 weeks and you came back, and you sat around the dinner table at home and they were GPs and they were vets and they'd been there the whole time, and I remember feeling very detached. I'd had this extraordinary experience which I hadn't shared with anybody else sitting around the table, and everyone at home had planted their carrots and they'd done this and they'd one that and they had a normal life at home and I would feel quite detached actually. I would feel as though I didn't really belong, and I also felt as though I couldn't sit there and talk about it because you can't sit there talking to a whole table of people about you, you, you all the time and what you've experienced. Because there's only a limited amount of time that people are prepared to listen to you.

So I did the opposite, I tended not to talk about it. So I would come back, fit into family life and that's particularly important for the children, and basically fit in but, of course, you don't fit in up here. It's like a double life and even now I find that I go off to the Tai Forest with the chimpanzees for two months, and there's a whole thing happening there with the people there that are completely unrelated to happening here. It's literally like a double life.

I think it compromises your relationship with your kids, with your parents, with my brother, with my friends even because they're pretty intense experiences these trips. You come back and part of me just wants to step back and be on my own but everyone else's life has moved on and you've missed out on that, and it's difficult actually.

Int: *I remember we both knew Marion Zunz very well and Marion was single, and I think rather tragically died single never really having had a good relationship as I understood it. But I remember thinking with Marion that what had happened with her is that she had become so addicted to the adrenaline, the fun, the excitement of the filming trips, I think she felt her real self was out in Patagonia or Amboseli and I think she felt more at home there than she did back here. Do you ever feel like that?*

MC: No. I like being here, I like Bristol. I love coming home actually, really like coming home but I always need to know what's coming next. I think if I had a yawning gap in front of me very quickly I would feel very itchy feet. But I think I have a general feeling of being unsettled because I don't know whether I belong here or somewhere else. There isn't anywhere else that I would go permanently.

Int: *So you don't want to live in Amboseli or Southern Africa?*

MC: No.

Int: *So you think you'll come back here and retire and hang up your jodhpurs and you're **Aaton** and retire to Devon and be happy here?*

MC: I think I probably would, yes. I think I would still want to travel. I think I would still want to give lectures on boats. I would still want that, I'd still need that travel thing but I wouldn't go and live in the bush. Some filmmakers live in the bush permanently and I don't want to do that, that's work and I love it but I like it when it stops. I think as we get older it's harder to maintain those close personal friendships anyway because everyone's life is slightly different, whether you've got children or you haven't got children and things change and you move away. So it becomes difficult to keep a big group of friends together anyway I think. But when you're not there for three months and no one hears from you for three months and then you come, it's very difficult to maintain very close relationships with people I think. So you tend to be closer to the people who you're working with in the field back here.

Int: *You're one of a group of people who has spent a fair amount of time with David Attenborough one way or another over the years, and I think I know him a little bit myself and I think we both agree that he's quite an enigmatic character, and I'm not sure anyone who knows him would say they know him well. What are your impressions of working with David in the field? Do you have any funny stories or sad stories or surprising moments in your relationship with David where you thought, gosh, that's a side of him I never really expected?*

MC: I haven't worked a huge amount with David. I worked on the *Life of Mammals* (33) and so I must have done six or eight trips when I was filming David but I am so pleased I had that time with him. I was really struck by how easy he was to be with. He fits in, he's very used to being with a crew of people, and he's very relaxed with people. I suppose he must have an ego but he doesn't give the impression that he has this huge ego. He just mixes in and he recounts extraordinary stories not in any sort of way bragging but just recounting stories of running television before we were born, before I was born anyway, and it's just totally fascinating what he's been through. He's a one-off and my respect for him was just enormous having worked with him in the field.

But I remember one particular moment actually which was a very moving moment and it was in the Tai Forest where I'm doing the chimpanzee film (34). I was there with Mark Linfield and David and Andrew Yarmer who was the sound recordist and Sue Storey who was the PC, there was a whole group of us. We'd got David to the Tai Forest for about four days and he's got a painful knee and it's quite tough Tai but he was a complete trooper and still up for anything that we suggested. I remember after four days of filming with him it was tiring, he was tired but never complained. We sat round in this grotty forest hut in the middle of Tai drinking our red wine

The producer, Mark Linfield, said well, thank you, David, for your hard work and your efforts, and he said well, no, I want to thank you guys because incredibly you still want me on television, you still want to see me presenting these programmes. That was a very poignant moment I thought that completely put it on his head because you did wonder at one point how long David would continue to be able to present these big programmes, and whether the public appetite would continue. We now know that, of course, it just seems to be undiminished. But it was like that tiny, tiny chink of vulnerability, like I'm 70 and you still want me to do this, you still think that you want me to present these programmes and you still think that people want to watch me on television. It was just a tiny, tiny chink.

Int: *And he's now 83.*

MC: And he's now 83 and he's off to the North Pole and the South Pole for *Frozen Planet* (35) and still narrating these landmark series because there's no other David. No one else can do it apart from David.

Int: *In your experiences of filmmaking in Amboseli or in the Tai Forest, disappointing, surprising, revealing, something that made you laugh, something that perhaps made you cry, something that really took you aback, knocked you sideways either positively or negatively in the field of filming?*

MC: This really is about the responsibility we have as a filmmaker to deliver pictures. I can remember my most upsetting and disappointing moment in missing something that I really wanted to capture which is something that, again, is not particularly public knowledge. That's one of the things about being a filmmaker on your own, if you make a mistake there's no one else there to see you make it. Probably the most disappointing moment I ever had was filming Echo giving birth at night. This is something that still hasn't been done again and it'll be a long time before anyone does it probably because it's so difficult.

But Cynthia and I set out in the second Echo film (36) to film Echo giving birth. We knew when she was mated, we knew roughly when she was going to give birth and so we thought okay, well we'll give it a go, see if we can film Echo having her calf at night. So we filmed her for three weeks and it was an extraordinary experience actually following them at night. We'd followed them by day for years and it came to following

them at night. At 6.45 when we normally drove off we continued to follow them and it was like why are they still following us? It was extraordinary. You could just tell that they were, you normally go at this point why are you?

Anyway we followed them for three weeks and Echo went into labour, and there's quite a funny story associated with that because we had a 24 hour follow on her. We were following her at night and then Soila and Norah and the girls were following her during the day in case she gave birth during the day. 99% of elephant births are at night but there was a chance. Anyway she went into labour about 4.00 in the afternoon when normally we'd be asleep but, in fact, we'd got up and we went swimming and I had a radio with me the whole time so they could always contact me.

I can remember swimming up and down the swimming pool at the lodge and getting to the end and there was this screaming on the walkie-talkie shouting my name and it was Soila. I picked up the radio and said what is it, and she said Echo's in labour and, of course, the shit hit the fan and we just had to go back to the camp. We had to get in the car and we had to go out, and ironically Joyce Poole and her brother, Bob Poole, and Chris Webber were all their with Echo. They happened to be there making a film about Joyce and they were there with Echo. So I had the prospect not only of missing the birth but also having *National Geographic* film it, so this was a huge panic. Anyway luckily we got there in time. To their credit they basically said this is your show, we're off. That was the first panic.

We followed Echo. Echo went into labour literally just after the sunset. There's a phase during which you can film on film then when it's dark enough you have to go onto **infrared**, and we had this elaborate set-up with a generator on the roof with an **infrared** light, everything was set up. But she went into labour literally just after sunset so I was filming her silhouetted against the afterglow, and it was the worst possible time that she could have done this because it was the switchover period. Literally as it got dark I was filming her against the afterglow and then it suddenly got too dark for me to film on film, so I had to switch to the **infrared**. As I switched to the **infrared** I switched the lens from the film camera onto the **infrared** camera, and she started running so it was pandemonium trying to keep up with her.

We stopped and she gave birth right in front of me but my lens wouldn't focus. I couldn't focus this lens. I was just completely frantic and I was zooming in and out like that, and then suddenly I noticed a point at which it was in focus. So I shot everything at that shot size but I'd miss the actual moment where she gave birth. By the time I actually got myself sorted out all the elephants were around Echo and the baby was on the ground underneath, and I was in this complete panic having missed the birth.

It turned out that what had happened was that the adaptor on the **infrared** camera had come loose, it had unscrewed. So when I put the lens on the **infrared** camera the lens wasn't collimated which means that when you zoom it goes out of focus, it doesn't hold the focus throughout the length of the zoom. That's why it hit one focus point halfway through the zoom and that's the only place I could film. But I was totally distraught at having missed after three weeks of all night follows, I was completely distraught at missing Echo giving birth. We covered that up in the film.

Int: *I think you did. I'm trying to remember the sequence.*

MC: Well, what we did in the end was we have her silhouetted against the sky with the lump appearing and her tail up, and then cut to wide shot of elephants calling and then it comes back to the **infrared** shot of the group of them and they part and reveal the baby on the ground. So we never actually see her give birth. So I think that was probably my most disappointing and upsetting moment of filming the elephants.

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Glossary

Aaton: film equipment manufacturer based in France

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

Arriflex: Range of cameras from world wide manufacturer of film cameras and related equipment

Bolex: Swiss motion picture camera manufacturers

Infrared: A form of electromagnetic radiation that is created by when objects radiate heat. It has a wavelength slightly longer than the colour red in the visible light spectrum.

Macro photography: A dedicated lens system designed to magnify a subject by a minimum 1:1 object to image ratio

Micro photography: The photography of microscopic objects

Microscopy: Technical method for using microscopes to view microscopic samples or images

Oestrus: a regularly occurring period of sexual receptivity in most female mammals.

Pneumostome: A breathing pore on the external body of an air breathing land slug or snail

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