



Mary Plage: Oral History Transcription

Name of interviewee(s):

Mary Plage

Reasons why chosen for an oral history:

An established wildlife photographer who began travelling in 1975 with collaborator and husband, Dieter Plage to get pioneering footage and stills for Anglia Television's Survival programmes.

Name of interviewer:

Julie Bruton-Seal

Reasons why interviewer chosen:

Daughter of Des and Jen Bartlett who were good friends and contemporaries of Dieter and Mary Plage

Name of cameraman:

Bob Prince

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1. The early years

JB: Mary, can we start just by you telling us a little bit about your early life and what you did before you met Dieter?

MP: Yes, I was working in a bank when I met Dieter and I had a little interest, just like most people, in wildlife in that I'd enjoyed Hans and Lotte Hass, and Michaela Denis and Armand Denis's programmes on television. They were the first wildlife programmes that I saw and loved them, and imagined that filming in the bush was wearing smart safari suits. Now I've realised later on it was nothing like that at all. But I wasn't



a photographer when I met Dieter, I was just an ordinary town girl really and met him through Des and Jen Bartlett in London. I'd gone to London to see one of their films, Leviathan (1), on the whales and Dieter happened to be in London at the same time. So we met by chance and went on to spend a holiday with him in Sumatra which was about the third time I'd been abroad. I'd been to Spain and Europe but not been actually a long way away, so it was very exciting.

I met him in Singapore in 1975 and he gave me a camera and we took some pictures around Singapore, and then went on to Sumatra where he was busy filming orang-utans for Anglia Television. I spent a two week holiday with him there and then went back to Singapore, where he got my films developed to check out whether I had any potential. So when I actually joined him the following February to go and work in Nepal, I hadn't any experience of photography. I was a secretary so I think he felt it was a good exchange. I would look after the books and type the letters and do the accounts, and he would teach me photography.

So the first year I was with him that was the basis of our friendship/relationship, that we were both seeing whether it worked for each other. He had been married before and didn't want to rush into anything until he was sure I would be enjoying that way of life, which was so completely different to anything I'd experienced. Nepal in 1975 was really going back to the Middle Ages and we went up to Everest base camp trekking and filming the wildlife on Mount Everest. So it was a very rapid introduction to the world of wildlife filming and I loved it, and it was great fun.

JB: So the film in Nepal was the first one you did together?

MP: Yes. Dieter was actually working on two films at once which often happens, a tiger film in India as well as a film of the wildlife on Mount Everest. I was scared, I hadn't been around wild animals. I was frightened of rhinos and frightened of bears, and wondering what I should do if I met a rhino, what should I do if I meet a bear, how do I behave? It took me a month or two to realise that you were very lucky if you got near to the animals, and it wasn't a question of running away from them, it was being skilful enough to get close to film them. So it was a steep learning curve and Dieter taught me still photography. He was already well established as a filmmaker at that time, he was 40, 41, and I did stills and sometimes sound recordings for him. It went on from there.

We went to India, we were filming tigers, and Sri Lanka where we were filming leopards and elephants. That was where he had one of his many close encounters. Several times during his filming career he had potentially dangerous situations. Once was in Zaire with a gorilla which charged. He was working there and filming gorillas, and his colleague had a baby gorilla which had been orphaned and the gorilla charged to snatch it away from Adrian deSchryver, and Dieter filmed the whole thing. I should think his heart was in his mouth when this huge gorilla charged and snatched the baby.

Again in Sri Lanka we were filming a herd of elephants being relocated. They were in tiny patches of forest and coming out and raiding fields at night and farmers' crops. So they needed to be relocated to the park. He had a colleague who was a vet from South Africa visiting and helping us with the filming. As he was tracking the elephants and darting them, they were following one elephant through dense undergrowth, and it turned and charged and ran over Dieter but luckily didn't trample him. So he was unscathed but it was a very close call. We'd been married three years then and we decided it was time that we bought a home of our own because neither of our families had room to look after us if we should have an accident, and need to go home and recuperate. So that was when we bought our first home in England.

JB: Okay, and where did you go to film after that?

MP: Well, Sri Lanka was our home for, I think, two and a half or three years and I loved it. It was, I think, my most favourite place of all. We were filming leopards in daylight there which is quite difficult to do, mostly they're nocturnal. We went on from Sri Lanka to America and did a film in Rocky Mountain National Park which was the only time we weren't under canvas. It was so cold in the Rockies that we had to have a travel

trailer as they call them, caravan, to live in for a year. But other than that we always lived in tents and that was how I preferred to live, in the warm in the tents.

JB: Did it take a big adjustment to get used to doing everything on a camp fire and living in a tent?

MP: It's amazing how quickly you do adapt. When I first went out to join Dieter my mother said you'll be back in six months. She knew that I didn't enjoy roughing it and she couldn't believe that I was going to stay, and I don't think she ever really has understood how I enjoyed it as much as I did. But it was wonderful. Most of the places we lived in were quite remote, quite isolated from other people in the parks, and especially places like Indonesia when we were filming the Javan rhino. A wonderful camp on the Anak Krakatau volcano. Nobody else around at all and you would just bathe in the sea or in a lake, and cook a simple meal over the camp fire and work from daylight till dusk really.

So it was a lovely, peaceful life. Once you were in the bush, as you know yourself, the fun part is the filming. It's the getting there, it's all the permissions and carrying all the equipment, shipping it around the world, making sure things don't get lost or broken or stolen. That's the boring, difficult, frustrating part of it. But once you're in camp and you've got your filming permits it's the most wonderful thing in the world, just watching the wildlife. You never ever feel bored, there's always something different. Even if you're not filming it, watching and seeing the behaviour is fascinating and I just loved it.

2. Career Highlights

JB: It's probably hard to choose but what are some of the favourite animals that you've worked with?

MP: I have a soft spot for all the cats, the leopards, the tigers are my favourites. I love the big cats but gorillas too. When we were in Rwanda filming gorillas it was incredible to be just feet away from a big silver back gorilla. The smell, the size of him was fantastic and they're gentle creatures. They were obviously a group that had been habituated to scientists. You couldn't approach a truly wild group that hadn't got used to people being there. But that was a fantastic experience. Watching the big male lying down in the afternoon when they'd been feeding all morning, and the baby gorillas, all his young offspring, climbing all over him and pulling and jumping, and he was so patient with them. It was something I'll never forget seeing, it was wonderful.

But Dieter would try anything he could think of to get a different angle. He learnt to fly. He had a pilot's licence and had his own Cessna 206 for a while which proved difficult because getting permission to fly and film in a lot of countries isn't easy. He dived, he was a qualified diver and loved filming underwater and loved gadgets, everything he could think of. Trying out new equipment to get a different angle, a different approach to things, was something that he loved. He loved equipment, he was a camera freak, and it was his life. He, I think, loved filming more than anything else and just got tremendous satisfaction and pleasure out of it. It was really nice because he was an easy person to be around. He would get absolutely incandescently furious with equipment when it failed but he never would get unpleasant with people. He was gentle and kind and generous to a fault, and it made living with him very nice.

I mean living in camp, as you know, you have to get on with each other. You can't storm off out and go and visit your girlfriends or your family. You've got to be happy to be together or it simply doesn't work. There were very few occasions when either of us felt, I think I can safely say that, that we really wanted to not be there. It was sometimes very wet, sometimes cold, sometimes frustrating because you couldn't get the footage you wanted to and you were working and working for weeks, and just not getting the stuff you needed. Then you'd get tense because *Survival* would have sometimes already sold the film before you'd half finished making it. But on a personal level I think it was the most exciting time of my life.

JB: You had to travel a lot for the bat film, didn't you, because that was done on several different continents?

MP: We travelled most for the bat film (2). We spent 12 months and went to Australia, Guam, America, Thailand, Singapore, and working at night. We would be just two or three months at each location and then working through the night to film. It was probably the film that I was least keen on doing. I wasn't a great bat fan before we started it and ended up being absolutely fascinated by bats. They're amazingly clever and attractive animals when you know more about them. But it was, I think, the beginning of when I stopped sleeping well because having spent a whole year working at night and travelling through different time zones, you were just out of kilter with the day to night sequence of time.

But it was fantastic, again a completely different film and I think one that few people have equalled since then, and superb to see a creature that you don't normally see except just like a bird passing by at night. You don't really ever get to see bats properly until we filmed them which was great. People's understanding of bats, how useful they are, instead of being frightened of them to start being interested in them is an important message, I think, that you can convey with wildlife films. Most things aren't out there waiting to hurt to you, they're just trying to live their lives and be left alone in peace.

JB: Did you enjoy being in the Galapagos? I know that must have been quite a challenge to show it in a way that it hadn't been shown before.

MP: Loved it. We spent three years in Galapagos (3) (4) (5). Before we went there we bought a micro light aircraft in America, assembled it, learnt to fly it and then took it apart and shipped it to the Galapagos. So that Dieter could get aerial views of all the islands and volcanoes, to give it a different perspective than had been seen before. We took 100 cases of equipment to the Galapagos and camped out on most of the uninhabited islands because there wasn't fresh water there. So we had to be self-sufficient. We had a little inflatable boat, an engine, our own obviously water supplies, our tents, and we'd have food delivered about once a month.

But the wonderful thing about Galapagos is apart from the fur seals, nothing is frightened of people. The birds, you could just set up your tripod and photograph them. The sea lions were wonderful. Dieter got super underwater footage of them. The tortoises, the woodpecker finches, all the creatures, the marine iguanas. It was so wonderful not to have to spend weeks setting up hides and moving them close and not moving, and being in them before light. Just to be able to take your equipment and quietly walk up to things and take photographs and film. I think it was a wonderful three years of my life and a lovely climate, super, very nice.

JB: And then tell me a little bit about the two films that you did on Wolfgang and his wildlife art (6) (7)?

Mary Plage: We have a mutual friend, Wolfgang Weber who's a wildlife artist, and he used to come and visit us in camp and I think he visited Des and Jen and several of other cameramen, Alan Root, people like that. He used to come out and visit and bring his sketching pad. I always said in my next life I'll marry an artist who's just got a pad and a few pencils to take with him, instead of hundred weights of camera equipment. But Wolfgang was always great to have around because he'd just fit in with what you were doing and was never difficult or a problem. Dieter decided he'd like to make a film of Wolfgang's work, of his wildlife painting, and he's quite a private person and I didn't really think Wolfgang would ever agree to have it done.

But Dieter convinced him and travelled back to many of the countries that he had made films in for *Survival* with Wolfgang, and it says something for his reputation that he could go back to all those countries and was well received. He'd delivered prints when he said he would deliver prints and obeyed the restrictions which were sometimes quite difficult, and had left on good terms with all the people he had worked with before. So was able to make two films with Wolfgang in a relatively short period of time because he knew exactly where he wanted to go, and what he wanted to film. Then they set time lapse sequences of Wolfgang painting to music and I think it works really well. It was a good exercise, I think, and it worked well for Wolfgang.

JB: They were two of my favourite films, I really enjoyed them, and Dieter did some lovely stuff with the paint swirling.

MP: Yes. It was hard to convince *Survival* that they wanted films about an artist, and when they transmitted those two films they got more letters of people who were interested, partly because it pulled in not just people who liked wildlife but people who liked art. They had more letters of compliments over those two films than they have had with virtually anything else which was quite nice. It proved the point that it had been worth doing.

JB: I was interested in your time on Krakatau too, that sounded quite exciting.

MP: It was lovely. We went to film the Javan rhino which had not been filmed in colour, and I think the only film at that time on record had been back in the 50s. Because Ujung Kulon where there were 50 Javan rhinos, I'm not sure of their numbers to date. But at that time there were about 50 Javan rhinos which were in a little haven called Ujung Kulon. Because when Anak Krakatoa, the big volcano, had erupted in 1883, people had left that area because of the volcanic ash and the disruption and had never gone back. So the rhinos were safe there.

We went to try and find the Javan rhino, and spent six months going up and down Little River, the Cigenter River, and eventually I remember the first time I photographed it, going up the river. There'd been a heavy storm the night before and several small branches and large branches had fallen across the river. So we had a little inflatable boat with an electric engine, so it was almost silent. We went up the river then we heard the rhino munching on leaves so we knew we were getting close. I got my first 12 photos of a Javan rhino that morning and had to wait about three months before I knew they were okay. I kept going over in my mind the exposure, the shutter speed, was it right, would they be okay because I thought I might never have another chance to get a photo.

Then to finish the film, once Dieter had filmed the rhinos, he wanted a small eruption of the volcano. Colin Willock back at base had said don't waste your time waiting for the volcano, you've got the film. It was when Wolfgang had come to visit with his wife, Pinne, and he took them off to see the volcano. We were actually camped on one of the islands which had been part of the original rim but was now three separate islands. He took them to the new Anak Krakatau and I stayed in camp, and while they were there the volcano erupted so he got his footage. It was all a bit hairy. They had to leave with their boat in the middle of the night because of the eruption. But he was really excited because he then got the footage which finished the film for him, and he was often quite lucky with that sort of thing, it just did work.

JB: Well that's amazing. It must have been scary for you. You were probably really worried about him.

MP: I didn't know anything had happened. We'd had a new boat and they came back and I said what have you done to the boat, it's all ragged and torn. That was when they told me that they'd barely escape with their lives so I thought I'd better mind my ps and qs. So I was far enough away not to have seen or heard it but I missed the actual eruption which was a shame. So that was another of his near misses. He'd been walking on the top of the volcano 24 hours before it erupted and was just lucky that it blew up a day later.

JB: Tell me how Dieter got started in wildlife filming.

MP: Well I discovered after we were married when I went to visit his family, that they had all these little films that he'd taken as a child. His father had bought him, not **Super 8** because it wasn't time for Super 8, but a similar little camera. He had all the films of family holidays and the Christmas dinner arriving on the table. His poor mother, it must have been cold by the time they got to eat it with all these dishes arriving miraculously on the table. But it was obvious to me then that he'd always loved photography from the time he'd been a little boy. He saw Professor Grzimek's film, *No Place for Wild Animals* (8) and *Serengeti shall*

not die (9), and I think that's what focused him on wildlife in particular, and he was just single-minded. He went to South Africa in '58 because it was one of the few places that a German could go in Africa after the war, and worked in a camera store and spent all his money on film, and tried to make films himself, lived on a shoestring. Made some films for a very eccentric American who I won't name.

But by 1968 he'd worked for Professor Grzimek and he passed Dieter onto *Survival* or talked to them. I think they were buying films from Professor Grzimek and he made contact that way. So he got his first contract with *Survival* in 1968 and it was just the making of Dieter. He really appreciated working for Aubrey Buxton, Lord Buxton, and with Colin Willock and Mike Hay, and never, ever took that relationship for granted. He was freelance but they always had a good relationship. He worked in Africa for 17 years but 10 years for *Survival*. I, of course, wasn't there with him then but he did his gorilla film (10). He did the Danakil (11) film which is my favourite film, I think.

Many of them probably couldn't be repeated again because the environment's gone, the people have gone. Even places we filmed in have changed, Sri Lanka's hugely different. But Dieter was born to be a cameraman, it was the big love of his life. Filming wildlife was the thing he was happy doing, and he really dedicated his whole life to it but he did enjoy other things when he was back in Europe. He liked to watch ghastly wrestling matches, Big Daddy, and he was interested in politics. He would stop up and watch a General Election in England. He'd stay up all night to watch the results of the General Election. He was very interested in politics. But he would never indulge any hobby to the extent that it got in the way of his filming.

I remember when we were in Sri Lanka we were offered the use of a honeymoon suite at Bentota Beach Hotel for a long weekend, which was a fabulous beach with palm trees and aquamarine sea. I was pleading with him to go, let's just go, let's do it and, no, he wanted to stay in Wilpattu National Park and film the leopards because we might miss a special shot. He wouldn't have been able to live with himself if he'd taken a few days off and missed the shot that would have made the film. He was that dedicated, whereas I think I could have been persuaded.

But he liked to tell funny stories. He used regularly tell the story about when he met the Queen. He was very proud that one of his earlier films had a royal premiere and the Queen and Prince Philip were there. It was a buffet and he was invited by Aubrey Buxton, well instructed, to sit next to the Queen, and he was so nervous that he put everything on his plate, the desert and the main course and the starter, because he was so panicky about sitting next to the Queen. But he used to tell this story about himself and laugh with everyone because he did have a sense of humour and could see the funny side of it. But it was important to him that other people liked his films and he was appreciated.

JB: What do you think was the film that he was most proud of having made?

MP: That's a tough one. I think early on he was very proud, rightly so, of his gorilla film and latterly I think the bat film was a huge challenge because you were working at night with lights, and it was difficult. It really was different. Most of the other things had been done before whereas that hadn't. People would always say what was your favourite film and we'd say the next one. It was just like that, you wanted to go on and do more. He wanted badly to film the orang-utans which is why we went back to Sumatra where he died because he felt their environment was, and is, under huge pressure. That they were having a very hard time surviving, and he was deeply committed to making another film to show the plight of the orang-utans.

So he cared really more about the wildlife than himself. That was a difficult place to work. I didn't want to go back to Sumatra. Indonesia's hard, the climate's hard, it's very humid and wet. The orang-utans were up in the trees and there's a huge amount of corruption. So you're paying bribes and it's difficult to get filming. We waited two years to get our permission to go back to Sumatra, even though we'd worked there twice before. But he was tremendously committed to the wildlife, so I think probably the orang-utans were his big soft spot.

3. Working Methods

JB: How did you go from the initial idea for a new film to actually developing it, and the day-to-day process of actually making it?

MP: Often we'd be working on one film and come across a situation where you could see the potential for another. I would take, say, when we were working on the tiger (12) film in India and Nepal, and while we were in India we realised that there was the potential to work on a leopard (13) film. So we would have to convince the people in London that it was a good idea. Things were a lot easier then than they became later. You could call Colin Willock and Mike Hay and say we want to make a leopard film.

For example, Billy Arjan Singh had a semi-tame leopard at Tiger Haven where we were filming tigers. Part of the film could be about her life and we had at the same time met people from Sri Lanka, and could see that the parks there offered the potential to film the wild part of a leopard film. So we'd start off talking to Mike Hay and really just drafting a rough outline, and then we'd go on a recce and work out the basic film. It was quite relaxed. I mean they trusted Dieter's judgement on most things. Obviously if someone else was working on a similar project, one of the other cameramen, they'd say, no, we don't want two leopard films or two this or two that. But mostly it would work quite well. Quite often he'd fit in a half hour programme about an additional subject when we were filming our main programme.

But, for example, with the leopard film, when we were working in the parks in Sri Lanka we were quite restricted in that we were only allowed to go on the roads around the park, tracks not really roads. We weren't allowed to do anything the tourists weren't allowed to do. We couldn't go off the track, we couldn't double back. We were only allowed to work as a tourist would be able to work. At first we didn't know how we could possibly get the footage we wanted and we had a Range Rover. We had a hatch cut into the top of it and Dieter had his tripod set up, so that his head was out of the top of the car with the camera, and I would be driving around the park. We got to learn where the leopards would be. They often would go to the same place, the same branch in the same tree or the same place beside the waterhole. You'd learn the landscape and see them and then it would be my job to, in this instance, drive Dieter to the right angle, to the right place, for him to film and spot the leopards.

I used to have a deal with him at one point. We would have to go back to Colombo in Sri Lanka, the main city, for supplies and to send off our film about once every six weeks. I used to say to him if I spot more leopards than you do in a month, you have to take me to the nightclub and dance because he hated doing that, and I used to like to have some fun when we were in town. So we had this sort of competition who saw the most leopards.

Once I was driving him up to a leopard and bear approached at the same time. I tried to get close and frightened the bear, and the air was blue. I was just trying my hardest to get him in a good position but I got told off for that one. But it was nice. I would be taking stills out of the window and Dieter would be filming from the top. But, of course, the film came first and if I had to move to get into a position to take stills, then I couldn't, I would have to wait until he'd finished filming. The film was definitely number one.

We did several articles, including one on Sri Lanka, for *National Geographic Magazine* which were a combination of my stills and Dieter's. He did take some. I took my stills for publicity for *Survival* and for their library. So they were happy that I was there clicking away. It gave me my own thing to do. It was my life which was separate but complementary to Dieter's. We'd go out together, we'd be working together, maybe in hides next to each other or in the car together or on the boat together. But I would be doing one thing and he'd be doing his filming. So it was nice to have a role of my own that was complementary but separate.

JB: Yes. So you weren't just supporting him in what he was doing.

MP: No, exactly. It did sort itself out. If we were packing to go on a trip, I would deal with all the paperwork. I would deal with all the clothes. I would deal with all the supplies, organising them and buying them and packing them, and he would deal with the equipment. So it did divide itself quite happily into two spheres and the boring bits we shared and the fun we shared too. So that was nice. Yes, that's pretty much how it worked out.

MP: We didn't appear in our films very much because *Survival* really preferred their cameramen to be behind the camera not in front of it. I think they were frightened that we'd get ideas above our station. But they did make one film about Dieter and I appeared in some sections of it, and it really came about because while we were filming in Sri Lanka and places like this, Dieter had bought a Super 8 camera. I mean we didn't have enough cameras, he needed another one. But he wanted to send home little films for his parents, little short films of us in camp. So that his parents, who were really too old to come out and visit, could see what we were doing and get a feel of how we were living. I used to hate doing these little things. There was enough to do in the day without Super 8 of me cooking and me washing.

One of them Dieter filmed me washing a bed sheet in the river and a big wild elephant came closer and closer and closer, and walked right by. So, of course, this was fantastic and this was actually used in the film because *Survival* eventually used all these little Super 8 films to make a film about us on location. I think it was called *A Breed Apart* (14). But even now I hate these little happy cameras that you film people doing things. I don't mind doing stills, I don't mind one shot but I don't liked being filmed and I hated doing these.

JB: So you're much happier behind a camera than in front of it.

MP: Much happier, yes.

4. Collaboration

JB: Making wildlife films can be quite lonely because it would just be the two of you off somewhere on your own. Did you ever collaborate with another team?

MP: Well, we always had an assistant, almost always had a male assistant with us. Dieter was very happy and felt it was necessary to train the young people up to be cameramen. He had Lee Lyon who sadly died, Mike Price, Ashish Chandola, Alain Compost. He had often an assistant in the field and it was good company. We'd come back to London and occasionally meet up with our camera friends, like Des and Jen Bartlett. Although *Survival* tried hard not to have two teams in London at the same time, we would sometimes manage to be there and, of course, it would be wonderful to swap notes and talk and see other people who were doing the same job. I think we enjoyed particularly Des and Jen because I'd known them since I was about 18 and Dieter had known them a long time as well. They were really old friends.

He did work a little bit with Simon Trevor but just in Tsavo. We visited Simon Trevor and filmed. It was while we were filming with Wolfgang and I was driver again. We had this old Land Rover that we'd borrowed, really old Land Rover, gone out in Tsavo to film lions. Simon Trevor said to us, be a bit careful about these Tsavo lions, they might look like big dozy old boys but they can move. So they were in the back of the Land Rover. Dieter had his camera on a tripod, Wolfgang was sketching, and we came across a pair of big male lions and a female. The two were disputing who was going to be her mate. I had to turn the engine off for Dieter to film because it would have been vibrating otherwise. This lion was getting quite angry and quite cross, and this old Land Rover, you'd have to turn the key about three times to get it to start, and I kept thinking of what Simon had said to me. I thought if I have to move fast I'm never going to get this thing to go. The lion will be in the back with them before I move off. So there were often tense moments like this.

In fact, they got some nice footage and the lion didn't try and jump in but it was tricky at times.



JB: You and Dieter went and helped my parents, Jen and Des at the Skeleton Coast. I remember you shot quite a bit of the footage of them in the field.

MP: That was lovely, yes, in the sand dunes. It was poetic footage, it was beautiful, and it was lovely to be with them and see the desert elephants, and travel and camp in the bush with Des and Jen. I'd forgotten that we did that, it was lovely, yes. Everyone has their own way of working. Des used to insist on packing the Land Rover. You couldn't help him get ready to go because he knew exactly where he wanted each box, and you just had to wait and let him get on and do it. But it was fun and nice to help them and take some stills and film, and be with them for a brief period of time.

I think the thing I disliked about it was the lack of water. We had on that camping expedition to take our daily wash in about a cupful of water and that was hard for me. I hate being dirty, I do like to wash. When we got back to Des and Jen's little cabin at the end of the camping trip we were all really dusty and dirty and grim. They ran a bath tub full of water, well half full of water, but water was scarce everywhere in the desert and so we all had to share the bath. I went first, I was lucky and they gently said, well, you go first Mary, Dieter can have second bath and then Jen will have third, and Des gets the dirty water at the end. I went and had my bath and it was really hot, and Dieter was fiddling around doing something and I had to say come on Dieter, come and get your bath. He always said nothing human could get into my hot bathwater, he knew I loved it really hot and he was hanging back. I said, don't forget Des and Jen have also got to get through that water before it gets cold, and we used to tease him about this mercilessly afterwards. He just hadn't thought about the fact that other people were coming on behind.

So I love camping but I like to have some water nearby to have a wash with.

JB: Did you get to have much input on the editing and the finishing of your films when you were back in England?

MP: Well, I think *Survival* always liked to get the film almost finished before you got there so you couldn't interfere with it too much. We did obviously on the films with Wolfgang, we actually did that ourselves. We did the editing, we wrote the commentaries, and I thoroughly enjoyed that because I was involved with, not the editing, but the writing. I loved doing that but most of the films we made were for the large part decided by people like Leslie Parry, who did the editing, and Colin Willock who wrote the script for them. They'd obviously want technical information from us and the scientists we worked with. But most of the time they were probably wisely in charge of it all.

You were always searching for that one special shot that they've left out and sometimes when you see it it's not actually so special after all. But it was great fun doing the films ourselves, it was wonderful to have that freedom on the two films, to actually put in and then you realise how difficult it is to create the tension, to keep it flowing. It's not an easy job to do. But I envy people like Alan Root who made their films from scratch all the way along, it would have been fun to have done it.

JB: I supposed if you'd done that though you would have had less time actually in the field filming?

MP: That's the price you pay, isn't it? Everything comes at a price and we were really only back here for probably six weeks of the year. We were in the field most of the time and that was the fun bit anyway. We're lucky in that we could film from start to finish, see a project through and not just be filming bits of it which is what is happening more and more, I think, now. They don't have the luxury of time that we had. We'd spend probably a year making a one hour film and I'm quite sure camera teams would very much like the luxury of that nowadays. They probably don't have it anymore. So we did film when it was relatively easy. The films were sold in America and if they had an American sale that was great, it was all paid for, in the early days at any rate. But it got increasingly difficult financially, I think, to make ends meet.



JB: And that gave you a real opportunity to get to know your subject in depth?

MP: You would spend a year watching and filming and understanding the animals, and that was so precious to be able to do that. You'd always feel at the end of the film you were just about ready to start. You knew what it was doing, you knew when it was doing it and how, and I always felt like that. We'd just finish and I'd think now we should be starting, now we understand the tiger or the leopard or the elephant and their behaviour, and it would be nice to have had even longer. But lucky to have that much time. Even some of the scientists you realised didn't necessarily have the time in the field that we did, they couldn't always spend months and months on end just being in the field.

But we did depend on scientists for a lot of our information and that was very valuable. Well, also people like (Dr) Friedemann Koester who had been in the Galapagos Islands, the director of the national park in Galapagos and he had done some filming. Subsequently joined us to be our assistant in Indonesia and went on to make films. So he was already a scientist but wanted to leave that and come on and be a wildlife cameraman, and then realised how difficult it was telling stories. You might have the technical knowledge and the information but telling it as a story is another aspect of wildlife filming, as you know yourself. It's just not enough to film it, you've got to have a thread, you've got to have a feel for telling a story.

JB: I think that's probably about all. Thank you for telling us and sharing all those memories with us.

MP: Well, it was a fun part of my life that I wouldn't have missed for anything.

JB: I know Colin and Joan Willock used to come out and visit you so that Colin could get the idea behind a film before he wrote the script. Could you tell us a little bit about that and how it worked?

MP: Colin and Joan often came out to visit us on location, partly to get the atmosphere because he'd be writing the commentary, and quite often we would go on to do a reconnaissance for something that Dieter was convinced would make another story and wanted to show to Colin. Unfortunately when we were in Indonesia and they came to visit, we couldn't persuade Colin to go to Komodo Island. We wanted to make a Komodo dragon film but we would have had to hire a boat from a fisherman and get him to drop us there and pick us up again. Colin said it was too risky, he didn't want to do that. There was a risk that we might not get picked up and they'd miss their flight back home. But what he really wanted to do was to go to Bali instead. So we ended up going to Bali for a few days and Dieter never got to make his Komodo dragon film.

In fact, I saw one on television just a couple of weeks ago and thought that might have been ours if we'd been able to persuade Colin to go to Komodo. Poor Colin, every time he came out to visit, or poor Joan and Colin, they'd have a crisis. Once Joan burnt her arm on the fuselage of a little fishing boat that we were travelling in, badly burnt her arm. Another time Colin trod on a sea urchin and was carried off by the locals, and Joan thought she'd never see him again. We always seemed to have a drama whenever they were with us, however hard we tried to make them comfortable and feel at home. Of course, they weren't at home and they were very brave and put up with all the bites and insects, and uncomfortable beds and campsites that we thrust upon them in their travels.

But he usually ended up writing pretty good commentary. We'd have one or two fights over things but that's par for the course. Colin and Joan were very good friends. We had our first home near them and whenever we came back we'd go and have a barbeque and talk about films. Colin used to say, oh Dieter gets up first thing in the morning and he says, ah, but Colin what about roll 73, frame 54, and he'd go, oh, for God's sake Dieter. Really get angry with him but in the nicest possible way. They were very good friends, they were great, and Colin was sad, devastated when Dieter died and I have been equally upset that Colin has died just recently.

So it was just a working relationship and I think it's natural that you have your ups and downs.

JB: Yes, you're bound to but it's nice that you could be such good friends as well.

MP: Yes, that was fun.

JB: Survival used to be almost like a family in those old days I always felt.

MP: Yes. Aubrey and Colin and Mike, and if you had those three on side you could do just about anything, or if you had two of them on side. It just became bigger and more complicated when they all left, and not better I don't think. It was nice to work with that little group of people who understood you and trust you, and go along with you to a large extent. You certainly look back at it and think how lucky we were to be filming in those days. Everything was easier. There was more wildlife, there were less rules and red tape, and the financing was just easier, wasn't it, less complicated. So I think we did have some of the best times in the early days.

JB: I'm sure Dieter would have enjoyed some of the new equipment, like the little tiny video cameras and things.

MP: The possibility to miniaturise everything would have opened up a lot of new avenues. He did have a little tiny camera on a tortoise once and another little camera he fitted to a toy glider to film birds and this sort of thing. But you were limited in how small it could be in those days, whereas nowadays it would be a lot smaller. You could do amazing things and he'd be up to all sorts of antics if he had half a chance.

JB: Thank you very much indeed.

People, films and organisations mentioned

Adrian deSchryver
Alan Root
Alain Compost
Armand Denis
Ashish Chandola
Aubrey Buxton
Billy Arjan Singh
Colin Willock
Des Bartlett
Dieter Plage
Friedemann Koester
Jen Bartlett
Joan Willock
Hans Hass
Lee Lyon
Leslie Parry
Lotte Hass



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Michaela Denis

Mike Hay

Mike Price

Pinne Weber

Professor Bernhard Grzimek

Simon Trevor

Wolfgang Weber

Tiger Haven

National Geographic Magazine

Anglia Television

Survival Anglia

Glossary

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