



Masaru Ikeo: Oral history transcription

Name of interviewee(s):

Masaru Ikeo

Reasons why chosen for an oral history:

As a producer and executive producer in the Japanese natural history filmmaking industry, Masaru Ikeo has worked with NHK Media International Corporation for over 35 years, collaborating internationally to produce ground breaking films. He is currently the executive producer for the pioneering 3D & Super HD Centre, NHK Media Technologies (NMT).

Name of interviewer:

Brian Leith

Reasons why interviewer chosen:

Friend and colleague

Name of cameraman:

Date of interview:

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BL: Masaru, first of all, just for the record can you give me your full name, your nationality and your current job title and today's date.

*MI: My name is Masaru Ikeo and my current job is the Executive Producer or Executive Officer for Media International Corporation which is an affiliated company for sales and acquisition for **NHK**.*

BL: What was the other thing, the day's date? This is the Thursday of Jackson Hole. Is this 1st October? I think it might be.





1. The early years

So how did you first become interested in wildlife television?

MI: It may not be clear and also it may be a bit of a long story but actually I was born in the rural area in Japan. It's about 100 kilometres from Osaka which is the second largest city in Japan. But even 100 kilometres from Osaka it is a very rural countryside. Actually the house in which I was born was really isolated, it was one kilometre to the next house and the surroundings were very overgrown fields. I remember very well that there was no water in the house and that the only water supply was from a natural spring just in front of my house. Every day my mother and I took water to my house, I remember it well.

So anyway, such countryside is my birthplace and of course you can maybe imagine that there was a lot of wildlife in the surroundings. For example, Japanese macaques, racoon dogs and wild boar. Of course, I couldn't really see them very closely but always when I was playing in the field, I felt their breath behind me from the depths of the forest.

BL: So you were very aware of wildlife as a boy and were you interested in it? Were you scared of it or were you interested in it?

MI: No, I'm never scared. Wildlife and wild nature is part of my life, part of my daily life, so in that way when I recall why I became a wildlife and natural history producer, it is probably because of the experiences reflected in my childhood.

BL: So did you study zoology at university?

MI: No, not at all.

BL: What did you study?

MI: I actually majored in the Russian language at Tokyo College of Foreign Languages. Somehow I was interested in Dostoyevsky, Tolstoy, and especially Chekhov.

BL: So Russian literature.

MI: Yes, Russian literature at the College where I studied for four years. I became interested in the media world, journalists and producers, and at that time NHK was a very, very prestigious public broadcaster.

BL: So you joined NHK at that stage?

MI: Yes, just after I graduated from college I joined NHK.

BL: As what? What was your first job?

MI: Usually the new people who joined NHK would be assigned to local stations. In my case I was assigned to Kanazawa regional station which faces the Sea of Japan and it's a really local station where only 50 people work, and there we had training on the job.

BL: So you were trained across different jobs in television?

MI: Yes, that's right.

BL: So camera work and sound recording and editing and directing.

MI: Yes, exactly.



BL: When was that, which year did you join NHK?

MI: 1973, many years ago and actually I was trained to handle the **60mm** cameras like the winding and then sound recording, and I was despatched to the local police station to get some news. Of course, at the same time I have to make many different types of short programmes like history, daily life or of course sometimes a nature related subject.

BL: So when did you make your first wildlife programme? What was it about?

MI: Three years after I joined NHK I was assigned to a local station, 1976 I think. I loved to climb mountains because it was a high mountain area in Kanazawa. So doing such a hobby I got acquainted with some naturalists who were observing birds, observing wild animals. Occasionally I had very good and unusual news from one of the naturalists who said the marsh harrier is breeding in the reed beds. So at that time I had no idea how rare they were and of course very few people were aware of the marsh harrier breeding in Japan at that time but the naturalists were very excited. So I had the news from one of the naturalists and I told my boss to make a film. My proposal was approved and I started to film a 15 minute documentary.

BL: So a 15 minute documentary. Now was that just filming the marsh harrier?

MI: Yes.

BL: So there was no sync, it wasn't an interview with your naturalist?

MI: No interview, no presentation, just a documentary.

BL: This was on 16mm film and this was purely for a regional television station?

MI: No. Firstly that programme was broadcast locally but somehow it was seen by a producer in Tokyo who thought it was good for a nationwide broadcast.

BL: So they decided to show it nationally.

MI: Yes, and actually that programme was broadcast on a general channel. The slot is called *The Nature Album (1)* which was broadcast on Sunday at 7.15 in the morning.

BL: 7.15 in the morning, that's a difficult slot.

MI: Yes, but that's what this was but it was very popular.

BL: So people in Japan would get up at seven in the morning to watch nature programmes.

MI: Sunday morning, 7.15, it's very popular. Actually I remember the viewing rating was some 15% of households.

BL: That was considered a good audience?

MI: Yes, a very good one.

2. Producing natural history films for NHK

BL: So it's obvious that there already was, and that's, what, 1976?



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MI: Yes.

BL: *There already was a sort of nature output on NHK. When did the nature output start on NHK?*

MI: I'm not sure about that. I think maybe late 60s but at this time that slot called *The Nature Album* (1) was the only slot for nature programmes.

BL: *So there was only one slot at that time?*

MI: Only one slot.

BL: *Were there dedicated producers who worked for Nature Album (1)?*

MI: Yes. Actually I became aware after that to produce *The Nature Album* (1) some five or six people were dedicated to the production.

BL: *So did you then become part of The Nature Album (1) production unit?*

MI: Not yet. I stayed two more years in Kanazawa and during that time I produced other *Nature Album* (1) programmes about the Japanese macaque (2). There is a high mountain area called Hakusan. Hakusan means literally mont blanc (white mountain). In that area it's a very deep snow area and even in winter some three or four metres thickness of snow. The Japanese macaque monkey is surviving in a good group.

BL: *Is there where they're found in the hot springs?*

MI: No.

BL: *That's a different place.*

MI: It's a different place. So one old man who was a volunteer, observing some groups in a remote area in Hakusan, in the foothills of the Hakusan Mountains. I decided to make another 15 minute film.

BL: *So these are the macaques in the middle of winter in this mountain?*

MI: Yes.

BL: *How long was that film?*

MI: It took two years because in the first year the cameraman and I tried to get there in midwinter but it was so cold, no road at all and we had to wrestle with the snow. So it was difficult and we could get only a few shots. So the next year we tried again preparing well.

BL: *So it took you two years to make the film. How long was it in the end? What was the final duration of the film?*

MI: Finally I made 15 minutes, the regular slot, and a half hour documentary separately.

BL: *Both about the macaques?*

MI: Yes, of course.

BL: *Were these well received by the audience?*





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MI: Yes, especially the latter one. The half hour documentary was broadcast as the New Year special.

BL: *Okay, so New Year's Day?*

MI: Yes, New Year's Day. So it was very well accepted.

BL: *So when did you join to become exclusively a wildlife producer? When did that happen?*

MI: I think maybe after 1983 or 84 and after moving to the science division in Tokyo. In the science division there was a small budget for natural history. I think 1983 or 84.

BL: *So you joined as a producer exclusively making wildlife films for the science unit?*

MI: Yes, but not exclusively for natural history but also I was engaged in other science programmes as well, so both.

BL: *The programmes that you worked on at the time were they all shot in Japan or were any of them shot internationally?*

MI: Yes, both. The natural history group were eager to make programmes outside of Japan. So actually they made a series about wildlife in Asia, nature in the Pacific Rim

BL: *So, Masaru, tell us about your first filming trip abroad, outside of Japan, where did you go?*

MI: It was Ethiopia. I remember it took from October 1983 to early March 1984.

BL: *Six months.*

MI: No, four months.

BL: *Okay, and what were you filming?*

MI: Actually at that time I was assigned to make five half hour programmes about nature and people in Ethiopia (3).

BL: *How interesting. So the connection, both nature and people.*

MI: But at that time there was very little information available about Ethiopian wildlife and people because Ethiopia became unstable after the revolution. It was a year before a scientific expedition team was despatched from Kyoto University and we had some information from them.

BL: *So they went on an expedition to Ethiopia and when they came back you decided to make a film of their work?*

MI: That's right, but even so there was very little information but anyway, I decided to send two 4WD vehicles there.

BL: *What are those? I don't know what those are.*

MI: Four wheel drive vehicles because we heard from the expedition team that there is no way to transport outside Addis Ababa. So we asked Nissan if we could borrow 4WD.

BL: *They lent you the vehicles and you went and you used them for filming for those four months. What was the most exciting part of the filming?*



MI: There are many but one thing which I was most surprised by was that it was extremely difficult to get close to the wildlife, to wild animals. I had no idea why the wildlife is so reserved and sensitive but I heard from some people that it was because of the game reserve. There was a game reserve and many European people shot the animals.

BL: Even in the game reserves?

MI: Yes. So that's why the wild animals were very, very afraid of man.

BL: So how did you manage to get close to the animals?

MI: We drove our 4WD very slowly but it was very difficult. We could get some good shots of giraffe and some other animals especially in the southern part of Ethiopia, the Omo River, which is very close to the border with Kenya. Amongst the experiences in Ethiopia the most impressive thing for me was to film about the indigenous people (3), the people called Sidama who live in the border of Kenya. I had only one photograph which was taken by a photographer in the US. Just depending on this photograph we tried to search where they live and finally we found them, and we started shooting. But somehow, especially during the shooting, the men started to dance with spears, ritual dancing but during the dancing a man took a spear to us. So we were very afraid and we felt something was wrong.

To communicate with them we had two interpreters who translated from English to Ethiopian, Ethiopian to local language.

BL: Did you speak English then?

MI: Yes, a little. So maybe there were some communication gaps. During the dancing we felt something was wrong, something seriously dangerous, so we rushed to get out.

BL: But they didn't attack you?

MI: No, never.

BL: You said that the series was about man and nature. What was the most interesting kind of connection between man and nature that you filmed? Was there a relationship there?

MI: The Gelada baboon and the people in the high area, the Simian Mountain area. It's very impressive, the highland, and of course the Gelada baboon, as you know, as a troupe they move and graze on grass in the fields but at the same time part of those fields are wheat fields for the local people. So sometimes the Gelada baboon comes to the wheat field to feed. A very small child was sleeping just in front of the wheat field overnight, very cold, with a blanket. So in the very early night if he became aware that the Gelada troupe was coming towards him he would shout, making a sound to scare them away.

BL: So it's a very difficult life for those people. You know what's funny, Masaru, is that I'm executive producer of a series now called Human Planet (4). We've just filmed the same story in the Simian Mountains with the people and the Gelada baboons and it's amazing. It's exactly the same still and these kids are not allowed to kill the baboons because it's a national park, it's inside the park. It's amazing.

MI: I feel a lot of sympathy.

BL: So did you film this relationship with the people and the baboons?

MI: Yes.

3. Developing international relationships

BL: That's wonderful. Just to move the story forward a little bit, you started working in the science unit and did NHK ever develop a specific wildlife unit just for wildlife production?

MI: Yes. My senior producers tried to establish a unit just dedicated to wildlife natural history, even if it is a very small group but somehow it didn't happen.

BL: Ultimately you did become the leader of wildlife production with NHK. How did that come to happen?

MI: It's a bit of a complicated situation in NHK. I was assigned as an executive producer for the science unit especially in natural history wildlife, and at the same time there was another department where some wildlife and natural history programmes were produced. After I became the executive producer for natural history and wildlife I tried to get these people together to make a long-term plan for projects. So that even if some wildlife production people are there and some are here, I could serve as an executive producer for wildlife and I could control our people towards one direction.

BL: So you ended up gathering a team together.

MI: Yes, right.

BL: I've known you for many years and you have pioneered the contact between Japan and Britain and Europe and America. When did you first get involved in a relationship with wildlife producers outside Japan?

MI: It's a good question. Just after I became an executive producer for wildlife - it was 1990, just after I was assigned to the natural history unit. I was contacted by Barry Clarke.

BL: Barry Clarke here in the United States?

MI: Yes, Barry Clarke contacted me, 'why didn't NHK send your delegates to the first Jackson Hole Wildlife Film Festival?'

BL: Of course, Barry was organising the first Jackson Hole and that was for 1991, wasn't it?

MI: 1991?

BL: I think so. I think the first one was 91, I think the second one was 93. So you came first to 93, was it?

MI: My first to Jackson Hole was a symposium. It was 1990 I think. Before Barry there was another encounter. After I became an executive producer at that time NHK had a very close relationship with TV Ontario in Toronto, Canada.

BL: Jim Murray?

MI: No. Do you know Wally Longul?

BL: I know of him.

MI: Wally Longul was the executive producer for science and natural history as well. Somehow NHK and TVOntario have a very close relationship. Actually TVOntario and NHK made a big NHK special series before. Someone introduced Wally to me and we co-produced natural history programmes. At that time TVOntario had their own slot for natural history, half an hour, and in 1990 we started a 45 minute natural history programme in prime time. So we discussed the sharing of materials of the wildlife programmes between TVOntario and us.

BL: That's a very early co-production.

MI: A very early co-production. We co-produced some 20 programmes a year and some programmes were shot by a producer and cameraman in Toronto, and we got materials to make our own version. So there was such an exchange.

BL: So we filmed some material and they filmed some, and you would make programmes between you.

MI: Yes.

BL: Did they show programmes with Japanese footage as well?

MI: Yes.

BL: Then you made contact or Barry Clarke made contact with you.

MI: Yes.

4. High Definition

BL: Now at that stage, and this is nearly 20 years ago, Barry and I imagine you because NHK was always very advanced in high definition. Is that what it was about?

MI: Yes, that's right. I was very surprised when I attended the first Jackson symposium where maybe 50 people attended and the subject was high definition. I was very surprised. Even as a producer, I had very little idea about high definition.

BL: So you'd never worked on high definition yourself?

MI: No, not at all.

*BL: It had always been **super16** or **16mm**?*

MI: No, **Betacam**. Of course, I had some knowledge and ideas about HD but I was very surprised Barry Clarke picked up on the subject of high definition. At that time the very famous underwater photographer Al Giddings was there and asked me which lens I used for underwater housing. I couldn't answer because I had no idea but anyway that Jackson's symposium was very dedicated to advanced technology such as HD.

So after coming back to Tokyo after Jackson Hole I thought we have to make high definition programmes for our natural history slot because high definition is really suitable for natural history.

BL: Let me just ask this question. Presumably all the high definition cameras that existed at that time must have been Sony, Panasonic?

MI: Yes, it was Sony.

BL: But you had not used them up to that time?

MI: No.

BL: So you pioneered the use of HD in Japan after that?

MI: Not necessarily as some HD programmes were produced for drama and sports events but not for

documentary, none of them were used. So I decided to make one or two HD programmes a year but the equipment was huge. Tape was one inch tape and of course the camera and the recorder were separated, and the recorder itself weighed about 25 kilograms.

BL: So it was cumbersome, very difficult in the field.

MI: Very difficult in the field but even so I decided to make underwater high definition programmes in 1991.

BL: With Al Giddings was it?

MI: Not with Al Giddings but we had our own underwater cameramen and we sent the crew to Monterey Bay - Jade Cove. It's beautiful.

BL: I remember seeing some of that early high definition footage and it was fantastic.

MI: Yes, fantastic because at the time it was a one inch chip so it was larger than now. The image was very clear and the latitude was much greater than now. So the image that was taken at that period underwater was beautiful.

BL: In fact, you were pushing HD for many years but it took a long time, didn't it, because the western filmmakers were very reluctant to give up on film.

MI: That's right.

BL: Why do you think they were so reluctant? Why do you think the western wildlife cameramen and producers were so slow to take up HD?

MI: I was wondering why the overseas filmmakers didn't use video cameras because HD camera recording is very easy to shoot and you can record a lot more compared to the 16mm film, only 3 - 5 minutes in a 500ft magazine. The resolution is competitive to film. But one reason I think was the difference of the image between film and video. Many western people like to see the film tested in a way.

BL: Yes, rich colours.

MI: Rich colours but it is very difficult to describe what is the real difference but film test colour is more preferable for western filmmakers. On the other hand the Japanese prefer much clearer, a real image.

BL: Yes, it's interesting, isn't it?

MI: So maybe such a preference towards the image might be an influence.

BL: I think you're right and I guess also combined with the heaviness of the cameras. Also there was no digital editing at that time so editing actually on the old tape was quite difficult. The editing was quite an arduous process, wasn't it?

MI: Yes.

BL: So when do you feel that HD finally succeeded in overcoming film and taking over as the main format as it is now today?

MI: As a pioneer of HD I did promote it so that's why I tried to get a super 16mm originated film converted to high definition. For example, many productions were shot in super 16mm and super 16mm is suitable for transferring to the HD format. So when I co-produced with the former Survival Anglia, I asked the producer to take your super 16mm **negative** to Tokyo to transfer to HD tape. I persuaded them and they agreed, and

so the producer took the film to Tokyo and we transferred the film to HD. It's superb.

BL: It looked good. It looked very good, didn't it? It was excellent quality.

MI: Yes. So, doing such an attempt was in order to persuade them to use HD cameras. But I think it took maybe seven, eight, or nine years for filmmakers to have an HD camera. Maybe it took nine years I think.

BL: Well, it's interesting, it did take a long time. While we're talking about this technological advance, I just want to ask you a related question today about technology. At this festival now here in 2009 there's a lot of talk about 3D. Now do you feel you had farsightedness with your understanding of HD and its potential for wildlife filmmaking? Do you feel today that 3D is going to be the future of this or do you think perhaps it's more of a passing fad, a passing fashion?

MI: It's very difficult to answer but I don't think everything is to be shot in 3D, I don't think so.

BL: But for example in another 5 or 10 years, do you think people will have 3D televisions at home and they will watch nature documentaries?

MI: I think so. The penetration of the 3D TV is not clear but maybe the majority of people will come to see 3D films about nature at home.

BL: On this subject, I'm wondering what you think about IMAX because IMAX also came out about this same time, about 20 years ago, and people said this is the future and for many years people here, the star filmmakers, were going off to film IMAX gorillas and IMAX elephants. Now IMAX, if you like, it seems to be going beyond its peak. In Bristol there was an IMAX cinema which has now closed down.

MI: Yes, the same in Japan.

BL: Now this is an interesting thing, isn't it? HD has taken off and become normal but IMAX seems to have gone and I can't see that it will be coming back. Do you think 3D could do the same? It could become fashionable but then maybe disappear again?

MI: I don't think 3D will disappear because the different thing from the IMAX case is that for 3D electronic manufacturers are involved, like Panasonic, Sony and Phillips. Such big companies are heavily involved. So if they continue to be involved in 3D penetration, 3D promotion, I think 3D will survive. Of course, I'm not sure whether you may be able to see 24 hour 3D television. I'm sure there are some cable or satellite channels which will be dedicated to 3D transmission.

BL: So it will be here to stay but it would never replace 2D television altogether, it would just be for special programmes.

MI: Yes, that's right.

BL: It's interesting. So are you working on 3D projects now yourself for NHK and MICO?

MI: Yes. Actually we are about to complete our first 45 minute 3D documentary which is about the deep sea abyss (5). Last year, 2008, there was a symposium in Jackson Hole which was about the collaboration between science and the nature producer and the public venues such as museums and aquariums and so on. At that time we found very good 3D materials which were shot by Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution.

BL: For scientific purposes?

MI: Yes, it was shot for scientific purposes in association with the scientific research. They accredited

very nicely the deep sea sequences, some 300 hours. Of course there is no story at all but some very good shots, extraordinary, unbelievable shots. So we discussed with the institute to grant us use to make a documentary from the film.

BL: Now this was all shot in colour?

MI: In colour, of course.

BL: On HD 3D.

MI: Yes, HD 3D. We did this deal with them and from the beginning of this year we started to edit and almost complete it. From 24 October 2009 that film will be released in Japanese 3D theatres, in some 50 3D theatres.

5. The Japanese audience

BL: Now you mentioned a moment ago that there was no story there and I'm just wondering if we could talk for a few moments about the differences between filmmaking in Japan and, say, in Europe or North America because there is a difference. You have been again a pioneer of co-production internationally with Japan. How would you characterise the differences between the programmes that a Japanese audience like and programmes that, say, an American or a European or a British audience like, and do you think those differences are beginning to go away or are their differences getting greater? What's your opinion?

MI: Yes, it's again a difficult question but, yes, really there is a difference in the preferences of viewers for wildlife programmes. In general the Japanese audience tends to watch wildlife programmes if it is stated in the programme that all the sequences were shot in the field and not in a zoo. No shots in zoos and no shots in captivity.

BL: Entirely in the wilderness.

MI: In that way, they are very naïve and so if they found that it was shot in captivity or shot in a zoo we would have many complaints, even if the story is very beautiful and you can see the whole story developing.

BL: So they're quite purist, they want the story to be real.

MI: Yes. So in that way, the Japanese way of telling a story of wildlife is as if it is happening in front of you rather than to create a story.

BL: So real reality rather than story. So are you saying that the story, a constructed story, is not as important? You just want to have a reflection of reality so as if it was happening now.

MI: Yes.

BL: That's interesting. So carefully constructed stories are not so important for a Japanese viewer?

MI: Not necessarily but if the film is not for TV but for the cinema maybe it is different.

BL: What do you make of the new, say, theatrical release films like, for example, did you see Crimson Wing (6) here a few days ago?

MI: Yes.

BL: I mean this is a very beautiful film. Now will this work for a Japanese audience do you think?

MI: I don't think so.

BL: *No, that's interesting. Why not?*

MI: Probably in the case of *Crimson Wing* (6), yes, it's a beautiful film and the colour's beautiful and the flock of birds but 80 minutes it's a bit too long.

BL: *Yes, it is a long film.*

MI: Probably the filmmaker was trying to create a story because in a way it's a very monotone background but I don't think it was successful.

BL: *That's interesting. So a bit slow, a bit too long.*

MI: Too long especially in the last 10 minutes. The script is somewhat confusing.

BL: *Well, there are several different endings, aren't there? It's quite a complex ending, isn't it? That's very interesting. Can you think of other theatrical released films that you've seen in the last year or two that you think would work well for television in Japan?*

MI: Yes, absolutely; *Earth* (7) and also *Deep Blue* (9) of course. I was really surprised that *Deep Blue* (9) was so well accepted in Japan so far. For example, *Wataridori (Winged Migration)* (11) was just a topic of the nature documentary but had very few viewers, very few box office.

BL: *For Deep Blue (9) ? For which one?*

MI: For *Wataridori (Winged Migration)* (11).

BL: *I'm not sure I know this film. Migration? What's it called, Winged Migration (11)?*

MI: *Winged Migration* (11).

BL: *So that didn't work so well in Japan but Earth (7) is very popular and Deep Blue (9).*

MI: Yes *Deep Blue* (9) was very successful and *Earth* (7) was more successful. Actually *Earth* (7) got some -- I have to calculate.

BL: *Okay, if you want to calculate. I mean the actual figures don't matter but if you said it was very successful.*

MI: Very successful, yes, but other nature films such as *The Fox and The Child*.

BL: *I'm not sure I know this one but tell me why do you think Earth (7) in particular worked so well in Japan when, say, Winged Migration (11) or, let's say, Crimson Wing(6) might not work so well. What is it that's so successful in Japan in something like Earth (7)?*

MI: I think one reason was that both *Earth* (7) and *Deep Blue* (9) had epic scenery and an epic journey. For both cases the TV series (8) (10) was broadcast first and then cinema, so usually in that case cinema people don't like to distribute after a TV series but in both cases it was sort of different and especially for *Earth* (7) in which case I myself was involved in co-production with Alistair (Fothergill). We broadcast the nature programmes through the year and we repeated again and again. After that *Earth* the movie came but even so, audiences still wanted to see it. Maybe the screening sites were influential because, for example, we produced three Satoyama series (12). The third one was released in a theatre and I saw the screening in the theatre. So it looked quite different from the TV monitor.

BL: *Much better.*

MI: Much, much better, it was as if you were in the screen. *Earth* includes such wonderful epic sequences so people may come into the screen.

BL: *So they're very engaged with the story.*

MI: Very, very engaged. Such an experience which you never have in your home.

BL: *So you see a bright future for theatric wildlife films?*

MI: Yes.

BL: *Do you see the Disney Nature films working very well in Japan?*

MI: I'm not sure. I think it depends on the subject or the content.

BL: *It's very interesting and interesting as well the differences, even between America and Europe, the films that work well or don't work well. Did you see the Meerkats (13) theatric?*

MI: Yes.

BL: *What did you think of that?*

MI: I think it was more than average but not excellent.

BL: *This has been released in Japan already?*

MI: Yes, it has been released but it didn't get much box office success. The success of that film is because of the editing I think.

6. The future for Japanese natural history filmmaking

BL: *Yes, that's interesting. So looking to the future now, what do you feel are the most exciting possibilities for co-production? Whether it's for television or theatric release, do you see projects, more co-production happening between Japan and other countries? Do you think there are great opportunities there?*

MI: I think so. Yes, I think we should do more co-production with international companies, stations or producers because the viewer isn't satisfied with the usual content, the usual wildlife documentary, so we need some special ones. To make a special one we need a lot of funding and in some cases 3D and TV combined. Such a different scheme would be necessary to get audience satisfaction.

BL: *So you might create a series, for example, in HD for television and in 3D HD for theatric release?*

MI: Yes.

BL: *That's very exciting and you see this potential for collaboration increasing. So your requirements for Japan are getting closer with America or Europe, you can co-partner easier?*

MI: If, as a producer, I could get a very good subject or a good subject which may appeal to both the European and the Japanese audience, and if we could really work together, we should do more. So actually just this morning I discussed with Neil Nightingale and Amanda Hill to co-produce something in 3D. Even if it is at the first step of the 3D content as a test case and in that case we discuss 3D, we can't lose money by 3D. So we have to obscure the other window for TV or DVD so such a different source of funding should be



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available.

BL: So you would get different products that would support 3D?

MI: Yes.

BL: Fine and would that be for theatric release?

MI: Yes, for theatric release.

BL: That's very exciting. Now another question I'm interested in is that over the last 20 years that you've been coming here and to Wildscreen, the fate of the financial security of wildlife filmmaking has gone through cycles. We've just gone through a big economic crisis. For the future, in Japanese terms, do you see good potential for investment now? Is there good money in Japan to invest in these films or is it going through a difficult time?

MI: We are now in a very difficult situation and I don't think this will recover to the same level as before because there are many forms of media, not just TV, but cable, internet, VOD (Video On Demand) and games, Nintendo DS, iPod, iPhone, You Tube. So it's very difficult to raise money.

BL: So the money's getting sort of dispersed across many more --

MI: Dispersed to many diverse medias.

BL: So to get the money together for a big, let's say, HD television project is now quite difficult.

MI: Quite difficult. So in that sense we need to co-produce internally or internationally. So I think it is important.

BL: Do you see other Asian broadcasters - Korea, China - coming up as collaborators in projects like this because China must be a huge market right next door to you but so far there's very little wildlife coming from China? What is that about?

MI: Yes, it's very difficult. Really, I have not had collaborations with Chinese producers for wildlife. I know that there are some good producers there and I've met some producers who are dedicated to wildlife films, and have co-produced with National Geographic. But somehow the collaboration between Japan and China hasn't happened. But on the other hand Korea has producers and stations, so I think it is very important to get more Chinese and Korean producers to be involved in wildlife.

BL: So the greater chances of collaboration.

MI: Yes, and there are many wildlife subjects in China which have never been seen before.

BL: Yes, absolutely.

MI: So I think I have many opportunities to film there in the future.

BL: Apart from China, what do you think are the unknown areas that wildlife television will be exploring in terms of places or creatures or stories? What do you think we've not done that we should be now doing more of?

MI: I think there are many areas. There is a place in a high plateau area in Tibet, I don't know the English name, but the Kunlun Mountain Range and the border in Russia and North Korea and China. The tigers there are almost extinct and I worry about this, it is very urgent that we record them.

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BL: So you think there are opportunities there for filming these rare creatures while they still exist in the wild?

MI: Yes, I think it's very important, especially as the worrying bit is that they are almost extinct - only 40 individuals. The other region is maybe the Yunnan area in the East of the Himalayas, an unknown species may be there.

BL: It's a tropical bit of subtropical China.

MI: Yes, and of course the giant panda is important.

BL: That's interesting. So you see a lot of focus at the moment within Asia itself?

MI: Yes.

BL: Do you think we do enough, all of us, in terms of environmental filmmaking? Do you think we should be doing more?

MI: Yes, I think so. So far, in a way, it was okay to make very good, very high quality wildlife documentaries about wild species while we had that. But now, just by making such documentaries we have become much more conscious about how we should contribute to wildlife protection or conservation.

BL: Are the Japanese audience happy to watch a conservation film or like a British or American audience do they often just want escapism? They want beauty. Sometimes it's very hard, as you know, to make a documentary about a difficult subject. Is the Japanese audience the same?

MI: The same.

BL: Just the same.

MI: Yes, the same. In terms of ratings it's very difficult.

BL: It's a very different sort of programme. I remember some years ago, in fact I think it was six or eight years ago here, there was a very exciting project that you were involved with, with a live HD transmission from Antarctica which must have been a high point in your career for your work.

MI: Yes.

BL: What do you look back on as being the most exciting project that you are most proud of that you have been involved in?

MI: It's probably the 12 one hour series called *Miracle Planet* (14) which was produced from 1984 - 1986 and the broadcast transmitted in 1987 through the year. It is about the history of the earth starting some 4.6 billion years ago to the present time, and we covered every catastrophic event that happened in the history of the earth. I produced two episodes. One is about the evolution of the atmosphere, especially about how carbon dioxide decreased to the current level because just as the earth was created most of the atmosphere was carbon dioxide, maybe 90% or more. So telling the story of how this level of some 300ppm (parts per notation) carbon dioxide is important in order to maintain this modest climate.

BL: So this is 25 years ago? It sounds like this was anticipating awareness of climate change.

MI: Yes. So at that time it was observed that the carbon dioxide was increasing steadily and I remember that if this increase continues for the next 20, 30, 40 years the sea level will rise in some regions by 4 - 5 metres. So I warned.



BL: *You must have been one of the first programme makers to tackle this subject.*

MI: We co-produced that series with PBS and some other 10 international broadcasters, and if we could get enough money, budget and stuff to recreate that 12 one hour series.

BL: *That's very interesting. Were you aware when you made those programmes of James Lovelock and his **Gaia** theory?*

MI: Yes, James Lovelock is one of the sources of that and the other institute, I don't remember but really warned about climate change. So, yes, I recall that was very important.

BL: *So that's a very important series and you must have been very pleased with the Antarctic high definition (14)? You were having a conversation as I recall live in the evening with your colleagues in South Pole.*

MI: Yes, amazing.

[End of file]

People, places and organisations mentioned

Al Giddings

Alastair Fothergill

Amanda

Anton Checkov

Barry Clarke

Fyodor Dostoyevsky

James Lovelock

Jim Murray

Leo Tolstoy

Neil Nightingale

Wally Longul

Disney Nature

IMAX Corporation

Jackson Hole Film Festival

National Geographic Society

Japan Broadcasting Corporation (NHK)

Nintendo Corporation

Panasonic Corporation

Public Broadcasting Station (PBS)

Sony Corporation

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Survival Anglia (ITV network)
Tokyo College of Foreign Languages
TV Ontario
Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution.
You Tube LLC

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Glossary

16mm: Film gauge introduced by Eastman Kodak

3D: Motion film that is processed to include the illusion of depth perception

60mm: Film gauge with perforations on either side and 1.37 aspect ratio

Betacam: family of professional videotape products developed by Sony from 1982 onwards

Gaia theory: Ecological hypothesis that suggests the Earth and the surrounding atmosphere functions as a self regulating singular organism

Negative: Developed, but unprocessed and inverted film

Super 16: Singular perforated film gauge, allowing room for an expanded picture area and wider aspect ratio of 1.66

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