

Robin Brown: Oral History Transcription

Name of interviewee(s):

Robin Brown

Reasons why chosen for an oral history:

Robin Brown has been in the business for a long time and knows a lot about the wildlife film industry. He worked on *Nature Watch*, a series for Central Television where he was Executive Producer, which had an important focus on conservation. He then was Creative Director for Oxford Scientific Films. He is one of a few independent filmmakers interviewed for WildFilmHistory.

Name of interviewer:

Julian Pettifer

Reasons why interviewer chosen:

Julian has worked with Robin a lot, particularly on the *Nature Watch* series. He is a television presenter and has also been interviewed himself for WildFilmHistory.

Date of interview:

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Place of interview:

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1. The early years



Int: Robin, first of all give me your full name.

RB: Well, I'm Robin Brown.

Int: Your nationality.

RB: I'm British.

Int: Your current job title or your last job title if you've retired.

RB: I was Executive Producer of natural history at Central Television and later Creative Director at Oxford Scientific Films.

Int: But you are still writing?

RB: I'm still writing a lot, yes.

Int: Today's date if you don't mind.

RB: 29th June 2010.

Int: Now I'm sitting here flanked by a pile of your books and I'm going to use them as some sort of punctuation for this chat. The first one is called Bye bye, Shangri-la (1), and I know because I've read it that it's a story of your early life, your childhood, in Central Africa, in Southern Rhodesia which is now Zimbabwe. Now that must have informed your interest in natural history.

RB: Yes, it did. I was taken out to Central Africa by my father after the war, immediately after the war in 1947. We had the winter of 1946 and my father decided in the winter of 1947 that he couldn't take another one so he would go to Africa, and we had not the vaguest idea where we were going. They bought a Dodge Desert Command car and we drove in the general direction of Southern Rhodesia because he'd heard about it from some pilots he'd met in the RAF. It was the moment when my interest in natural history just woke up. I cannot remember anything about my youth. I was nine. I can't remember a serious thing about my youth before that time.

But when we drove down the wildlife was extraordinary. Every night there were herds and herds of wildlife across the horizon. You went to bed in your tent and you woke up in the morning and they were all still standing there.

Int: Was something growling outside the tent?

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RB: All the time. We went through Voi which was the place where *Man Eaters of Tsavo* (2) was written and which I later went on to make a film for the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) about, called *The Man Eaters of Tsavo* (3). We went down into the Serengeti. The Serengeti hadn't even been promulgated as a wildlife park in those days, and on and on through Uganda, Tanganyika, Northern Rhodesia and finally into Southern Rhodesia.

Int: Then when you got there did the fascination continue? Did you start to study it in any kind of formal way or was it just an ordinary childhood?

RB: Well, it was a pretty ordinary childhood because it was an extraordinary place to be as a child. I mean this predated all the African troubles that have occurred since. So I grew up with a completely benign Shona who would take me out into the bush.

Int: They were the predominant tribe then, weren't they?

RB: Yes, they were. I was chased down country paths by black mambas. I actually collected black mambas for the snake park. With my brother I used to go out and we would throw knives at trees. I know it's not a conservation or natural history angle on this one. We used to sell the snakes to the snake park.

Int: During that time I imagine that wildlife was regarded pretty much as a harvestable resource was it not?

RB: Well, it was and not only that but it was regarded as an intrusion on our all white towns. There were these towns that grew on the bush of Central Africa like golf courses overnight and you didn't have wild animals in there because they really got in the way of it. But when we first got there it was very basic. My father had to cut the path to what they call a porter's house which was a prefabricated house and in the course of doing that he disturbed a snake. The first snake my mother ever saw came up through the loo the first time she sat on it. So it was that kind of place.

Int: Presumably wildlife preserves were regarded as a hunting resource for rich white people weren't they?

RB: Yes. I mean we were at the start of conservation. I've written a book since as you know called *Blood Ivory* (4) which traces the history of conservation and conservation goes back in Africa to before 1947. The Kenyans were starting to worry about the loss of wildlife. Denys Finch Hatton wrote a famous appeal to the House of Lords asking them to be careful about hunting licenses in the Serengeti.

I owned my first hunting rifle, a 22, at 13 and it was taken away from me on Christmas Eve because I woke up at 12 o'clock and loaded it and put a bullet through the ceiling. So my father came marching in and took it away from me and I didn't get it back until my birthday.

Int: This is largely in the spirit of the times though, isn't it, because on the whole people who knew most about wildlife, I'm not saying all of them because obviously there were scientists, but there were a lot of

hunters who knew lots about the wildlife.

RB: Fantastically so. In Kenya, the early days again, the first actual big natural history film I made for Associated Television (ATV) in those old days was called *Animal Wars* (5), filmed with Chris Menges who went on later to do *Killing Fields* (6) and all that. When we went out there all the game wardens had formally been what was called Control Officers. They literally went out and shot elephants and any animals that were causing problems in the African lands.

Int: We're getting ahead of ourselves a bit. Now as a young man your first job I believe, and of course this is very relevant, was in journalism.

RB: Yes, it was.

Int: So what did you do?

RB: I was very lucky actually. I was off to university in South Africa. I passed the exams to go to university in South Africa simply because there wasn't a university in Rhodesia. The Rhodesia Herald started a journalism training course, the first they'd ever had, and there were 600 applicants and I got one of six places. So I went into journalism training for a year and a half, almost a degree course for that time, and came out as a fully fledged journalist. Literally by the time I was 20 I was parliamentary correspondent for Reuters in Central Africa so flying starts.

Int: Also I believe you worked in the early days of television.

RB: I did, I was Controller of Television.

Int: At what age?

RB: 24 but it was a very big fish in a very small pond.

Int: In those early days of television in Rhodesia, when you were 24 years old, did wildlife play any part in the stuff you were broadcasting?

RB: It did to a degree but it was curiosity wildlife like if a motorist ran over a leopard in the high street we reported it. We did no natural history programmes of our own but, of course, there were natural historians passing through all the time. My most famous interview on the programme I did on television was a young punk called David Attenborough who'd come out there to stick his hand down one of his thousands of holes that David has spent his life sticking his hand down.

Int: He was doing Zoo Quest (7)?

RB: He was doing *Zoo Quest*, yes, he was.

Int: What did you make of him? I mean presumably he would be a bit older than you.

RB: He's a bit older than me but he was David. He was completely natural, completely without a single pretension which is how I've always known him. In fact, by that time I was getting into political difficulties on the programme because I was asking nasty questions of Mr Ian Smith. Soon after that I had to leave Rhodesia for that reason, that and the publication of another novel which was rather critical of white supremacy.

Int: So at that time before you left had you any concept at all that wildlife might play a big part in your future career or was it just something you were interested in as an informed journalist?

RB: I was interested in it specially. I've always loved birds, I've always been a birdie, a twitcher actually. So there was that as a latent interest but in terms of natural history journalism or television it wasn't really working at that stage. The point about the David Attenborough legend is that David slipped me his card and said if ever you get thrown out of this place you'd better [get in touch] and four years went by and I was more or less pushed out of the country. By which time David was Controller of BBC2 and I thought this guy's never going to remember me but I came to England and I sent the card in, and I got a call back saying come and see me at the Television Centre which is 50 years old today.

There was David sitting in this huge, big triangular office and he raised his arm and he went 'hi, Robin', same old David Attenborough. The only thing is there was a huge great tear in his shirt under the arm.

2. The beginnings of a career in television

Int: We got you from Central Africa, East Africa, West Africa, we've got you back to England and you've met David Attenborough. What comes next?

RB: Well, in fact I was offered a job on the BBC but I didn't take it because what had happened next was I'd written this novel called *When the Woods became the Trees* (8). Basically what that book says is that if the white population ever was fool enough to fight the black population it was going to lose and Ian Smith took a huge objection to that suggestion. So over I came to England with two babies and £52 sort of thing.

That was nominated for a Pulitzer prize and it attracted the attention of a very famous man called Bob Heller who was the Controller of Documentaries at ATV and a legend. That's where Chris Menges and various people along those lines came from. Heller said to me you're from Africa, there's a couple of great stories in Africa, would you like to go back and direct one for me. I said, well, there's a fantastic story in East Africa where they're having an animal war. He said good title, go and make that as a film.

Now between you and I, Julian, I'd never even seen a clapper board by that stage. I was sort of an administrator in television and a good journalist but when I was faced with all this equipment the cameraman stood there and his assistant held the clapper board up and waited for me and, of course, I didn't know what to say. You are supposed to say 'mark it' but I was that ignorant. Anyway *Animal Wars* (5) was a great story and did very well as a documentary.

Int: Tell me a bit about Animal Wars (5) because this was not the kind of wildlife film that we were used to.

RB: No, it really wasn't. We shot lions and we saw slaughtered elephants and slaughtered rhino and we got into poacher camps where people were hanging up great lengths of meat. We talked to guys who were at their wits' end, people like Miles Turner.

Int: So who were the contestants in these animal wars?

RB: Well, it was essentially the Kenyatta government had decided to reward its freedom fighters with almost an open licence to kill anything that they wanted, and they had actually been granted what was called 'found licences'. In other words they were allowed to go out in to the bush and find ivory. Now this I've written about in *Blood Ivory* (4). Of course, what happened is that they arranged for there to be a lot of found ivory at that time. So this was our film and we went right through Tanganyika, Uganda, looked into the whole thing and back it came.

Int: You see at the time I think I'm right in saying that most natural history films, or indeed all natural history films, were what we now would call blue chip. They'd created this magical picture of a perfect world in which there were all these wonderful creatures out there in these fantastic landscapes and that's how it was. So that was the picture that the general public had of the natural world, correct?

RB: Absolutely. The very first precursor to the Wildscreen Film Festival I went to, I got into a huge argument with Aubrey Buxton from *Survival* (9) because we'd just started doing *Nature Watch* (10). Buxton had watched *Nature Watch* and taken an immediate intense dislike to it and at that conference he said the reason I hate this programme is because you seem to think people are as important as the wildlife. I said that's it, you've discovered the trick of *Nature Watch* in one. Nowadays all natural history films are knee deep in people. In fact, I as the person who really I do believe could claim to have invented the genre, I think now there are far too many people in natural history films.

3. Influences

Int: Now can you remember anything about the first wildlife film series you saw: how they struck you, whether they impressed you, what influence they had upon you?

RB: Yes, I can really and again, I know one's going back, but I seriously do think that the early wildlife films that we saw were masterpieces of innocence. There was a film I saw, Niko Tinbergen's film on birds and bird behaviour (11). I can't even remember the title of it now but it was immaculate. But there was Niko

Tinbergen, a perfectly straight Swedish or something scientist, not making any attempt to be popularist or anything of that kind, just telling you about this amazing behaviour.

Do you remember Peter Scott and Gerry Durrell, sitting in a table, driving a pangolin up and down as if it was a motorised mole actually. I mean it was just different and they were just innocent.

Int: It had a childlike interest which they would convey to the audience.

RB: That's exactly it, yes. I went on later to make *Interest the Boy in Nature* (12) which was the Peter Scott biography piece and I suggested this to Peter by which time he'd made how many films, hundreds and he said, yes, those were the days that I enjoyed most.

Int: What about Armand and Michaela, people like that, did you see any of those?

RB: Yes, I did and I thought they were very good. I remember there was one particular one where Armand revealed that a giraffe runs without its feet touching the ground. He said, 'look, there it is, it's doing' and across went this weird black and white image but you could just about detect no feet were on the ground.

Int: So when you did start to make wildlife films yourself you were doing much more issue films rather than films which said this is all about lions or this is all about insects or something like that?

RB: Yes, absolutely. I mean I did do some very focused, you could almost call them blue chip natural history films but in between that I was doing four straight documentaries a year. I made a film about Edward Kennedy, Enoch Powell, Oswald Moseley just before he died. So I was doing some very heavy hot shot politics at that time but in between that we started to do some natural history, and I got particularly interested in the whole dolphin/whale passion that was going on in the 60s and 70s. I made five wildlife films specifically for ATV on those subjects. We did a programme called *The Lure of the Dolphin* (13) which became another book and we worked a lot with killer whales on language experiments.

But you're right in the sense that you are seeing the theme. The truth is I've never been patient enough for pure natural history, for blue chip.

Int: When you started making these marvelous films about whales and dolphins was this an area which was then becoming technically possible? Was it because the technology had improved that much, I mean the diving technology, the camera technology, the underwater technology? Was that one of the reasons why you were able to do it?

RB: Yes. We had decent underwater cameras but they didn't have very good visibility.

Int: They were very cumbersome too, weren't they?

RB: Yes, they were very cumbersome and I think that's where a lot of the tricks that maybe we're not all so proud of started. If you were going to film dolphins in a river you had to get dolphins into a bit of clear river before you could even see the things. I made a programme on pink river dolphins in the Amazon (14) for National Geographic and we didn't see a single underwater shot of the dolphins simply because you cannot film. Even today there is no way you can actually film pink dolphins in the Amazon. Every pink dolphin you'll ever see on film has been filmed in either a lagoon or a river mouth or somewhere where the visibility is a bit better.

Int: You see, this is something which I don't think any of us are very proud of but the fact that for a long time the natural history industry if you want to call it that, the film industry, didn't 'fess up to the fact that a lot of these things were actually filmed under controlled conditions or somewhat controlled conditions.

RB: Well, yes. Alan Root came out with the most famous comment on this whole subject.

Int: Who is a famous cameraman we should say.

RB: Alan's comment when the morality, the annual morality debate came up at Wildscreen on the subject of ethics, was that ethics is a county next to Sussex. I don't think I know of anybody who actually seriously damaged any animal in the course of making a film. I really put my hand on my heart and say that but we did do certain things that if you're a purist you would find unacceptable. I could quote dozens of stories: it's people at the BBC dropping flying monkeys down pipes so as they'd come out at the right moment. A certain famous American cameraman who put piranhas into a 45 gallon drum and then a chicken in after it, in the desperate hope that we would get a piranha feeding frenzy because the company had written to him and said you must have a feeding frenzy with piranhas if you're doing a film about the Amazon.

As it happened I later when I was doing a film for Oxford Scientific got the first genuine feeding frenzy. The cameraman was in the water holding the camera underwater while these things were going off and I said 'out, out'. He said, no, it's the first one we've ever seen, we must stay in and I said, well, you're going to lose your legs. It stripped the birds, they were little, white gannets coming down out of their nests in seconds. It was like it was supposed to be.

4. Reflections

Int: Can you remember, and I'm sure we all can, moments of huge good fortune and huge ill fortune? I mean I think I told you that I intended to write a book about natural history and call it 'You should have been here yesterday' because that was always happening: oh, if you'd been here yesterday there were thousands of them. So moments of ill fortune, moments of really good fortune when something wonderful happened.

RB: Well, the one that I really distinctly remember was I made *In the Company of Whales* (15) for the Discovery Channel. It was their first, original, commissioned documentary and that's only about 20 years old but it was the very first film they ever made, before that they bought them in. We were doing *Company of Whales* and because Discovery was new in the business I had a virtually unlimited budget and I was told to take as long as I liked and cut the film that I got into as many programmes as I wanted, the one time in my

life that I've had this magic commission.

We eventually produced a two hour production but the key sequence in the film was a cameraman called Tony Miller being attacked by a sperm whale. Now Tony was in the water, the New Zealand cameraman who shall be nameless refused to get in because this massive whale, the size of a bus, came up after a 45 minute dive where it had been eating giant squid a mile down, came up to the surface, turned round like a bus. I said 'in, in'. Tony jumped in, the New Zealand cameraman not on your nelly, and straight at him came this sperm whale. We got this shot of the sperm whale coming straight through, hitting the camera, Tony losing sight of the camera and me losing sight of Tony. I really thought the guy is a goner.

Now that was the good news, the sequence made the film. The bad news was that we went to New Zealand, to Kaikoura, to film sperm whales with a crew of 23 because New Zealand Television thought we were hotshots from England and they sent their entire natural history unit to work with us. We sat in a tin roofed hotel for ten days while it rained absolutely solidly. My schedule was two weeks and on that film you couldn't hang around in New Zealand, you had to be in Australia the next day.

So there I sat getting more and more gloomy, and there was finally this young research person from New Zealand Television who looked in one morning and looked at me and she said 'come on, dude, party up'.

Int: Do you remember any times, Robin, when making wildlife films, largely because people didn't understand what you were doing or they disapproved of what you were doing or they didn't want you to do it, that you had real trouble? Do you remember this ever happening?

RB: Well, there are lots of fairly small incidents in which you were involved in one of the funniest, of course. Do you remember when you dressed up as a cow?

Int: Yes.

RB: Well, for anybody who's listening to this it was a *Nature Watch* programme on rescuing California condors (16). The woman who was running the programme in California was a bit po faced about the whole idea of us being there and us looking at her condors because she didn't want them imprinted. Too long a story to go into.

Int: She didn't want them to become habituated to humans.

RB: Exactly, yes. So she insisted that you and she dressed up as Friesland cattle. The best shot I've ever had in the whole of the *Nature Watch* series is you and her coming out, and you sitting down and asking her an absolutely dead serious question and her giving you an unbelievably serious answer on imprinting. I don't think we even used it but just the thought of these two cows sitting there having this conversation was completely priceless.

5. Nature Watch

Int: Actually I think we'd better talk a little bit about Nature Watch (9) because you and I worked on that over a very long time. I was just looking at the first book on it. The first book we published was 1982 (17) and the last one was something like 1994 (18).

RB: Well, we made 68 programmes in the *Nature Watch* series (10).

Int: I think you should just first explain what the principle of Nature Watch was and it was a very simple principle and it was a principle that we worked out at a New Year's Eve party in 1980 I think.

RB: Yes, it was literally. I came to a party with my late wife and she looked across the room and she said, good lord, is that Julian Pettifer, I thought he was dead, wasn't he killed in Vietnam? I said, well, evidently not because he's standing on the other side but I have had an idea, I haven't seen him much on the BBC recently, why don't we talk to him about doing this programme which in those days we'd called *The Naturalists*. But when we submitted it to the Americans they said a naturalist is a naked bather so we couldn't call it that. But that was how it began, yes.

Int: Our idea very simply was that you would present natural history through the eyes of the enthusiasts.

RB: Yes. Buxton got it right. We had spotted that people studying natural history are very often more entertaining and more eccentric than the animals themselves, and I would say that that was true in about a third of the programmes we made.

Int: Do you remember the first one, Robin, because when I thought about bad, unlucky moments?

RB: Well, I'm not sure that we can actually reveal, Julian that the first *Nature Watch* programme was thrown away. It was the only programme of 68 that we made that we did throw away but it was so bad, and I will not tell you why, maybe a learning curve, but we threw it away. But we were rescued by the fact that the second programme we made was with Konrad Lorenz and we knew from the moment we went to see Konrad Lorenz that the format worked.

6. Mauritius

Int: Of all the films that you've made and we've made together which do you think has given you the most satisfaction or pleasure or is that an impossible question?

RB: Well, I was thinking about that this morning. It's almost the same question as does natural history filmmaking and television programmes make a difference, and there is one area where it's a clear and instant message that we helped save a totally unique species, and that was the series of programmes we did with

Carl Jones on Mauritius (19). It also had the funniest interview that I've ever filmed which was you interviewing a pair of boots sticking out of a cliff face if you remember. The naturalist in that programme was a man called Carl Jones. Carl was trying to rescue the eggs from the last pair of Mauritian kestrels still in existence and he said the only way I can do this is by going up this cliff, climbing into this hole, getting the eggs from the nest and putting them in a flask. He was a Welshman if you remember and he looked at you and he said 'I hope I don't drop 'em'.

So there we were with Carl in the cliff, you standing on a ladder underneath him and these two great, big hobnail boots sticking up. You were doing this perfectly straight interview with a pair of hobnail boots. So what with cow suits and hobnail boots you've been in some situations.

Int: I think you should explain that as a result of Carl Jones's work in Mauritius he not only saved the Mauritius falcon but also the pink pigeon and the parakeet.

RB: The Round Island boa.

Int: And the echo parakeet.

RB: Echo parakeet as well. He then extended his activities because saving the Mauritian kestrel he actually established this extraordinary reputation for conservation on the island of Mauritius. They later took the Black River Gorge and turned it into a wildlife park from a hunting reserve. They then gave him an island. He preserved the Round Island boa on that island and when I last saw him he was doing loads and loads of work with whales.

Int: I agree with you because I think this is a very good example of how natural history filming, if you do it properly and if you do it responsibly can have an enormous beneficial effect because the island government of Mauritius were thrilled that their work was being given international fame and prominence and, therefore, they continued to back it.

RB: You remember they made tiny little tokens of the birds and gave them away to all the passengers on Mauritian airlines after this. Before that they were completely in the hunting camp, they were hunting deer. The reason the Mauritian kestrel was so threatened is because of green monkeys which had been released from the boats that came to Mauritius. So it was open war converted to full conservation.

Int: Yes, that was a win win.

RB: It was.

7. Konrad Lorenz

Int: We must talk about Konrad Lorenz. I think certainly the most enjoyable films we made together on that series was with that famous, incredibly distinguished, the founder of ethology did they call him?

RB: Yes, he wrote the ethology word and the principle and he won a Nobel Prize for doing so remember, again with Niko Tinbergen.

Int: But he was so modest about it because he said how do spend my time, watching animals.

RB: Exactly, yes. I think, as I've already said, *Nature Watch* was made by the first Konrad Lorenz programme. Independent Television (ITV) you remember in those days had not really been transmitting any popular natural history. Survival Anglia Limited was making *Survival* (10) out of Anglia Television but that was a kind of prestigious, high rated programme that went out at 9 o'clock at night. *Nature Watch* went out at 7.00 if you remember and got immediate huge ratings. I think our first rating was 13 million.

Int: Do you know at one time we had the highest rating factual programme on ITV?

RB: Yes, I know, it did go. Yes, that's why we ended up making 68 which was probably too many but still. Those first programmes were wonderful and Konrad was particularly wonderful. Konrad has always been my idol ever since because here was a man with unique scientific ability.

Konrad was one of the best writers I ever met and don't forget he was writing in German but the stuff translated into beautiful books: *King Solomon's Ring* (20), *Man meets Dog* (21), *Year of the Greylag Goose* (22). But at the same time he was this completely unpretentious guy, he was another David Attenborough. Again you will remember this: when we arrived at Altenberg on the Danube and went into his house, we went upstairs to this huge room and there was an electric train set running round his huge, big desk. He looked at me and he looked at you and he look at the train set and he said don't please show that on the film because there's enough people who think I'm an old damned fool already. I think it was you that said to him it's definitely going in after that remark.

Then there was all sorts of other things: he discovered the imprinting that we've been talking about and these wonderful pictures of him swimming around in the Austrian lakes with little gaggles of baby geese following him around.

Int: Of course, as he grew older sitting for hours in front of that huge aquarium.

RB: Yes. The sequence I remember most from that is us filming in front of I think a 50,000 gallon tank and he had just written *On Aggression* (23) which was the book that defined aggressive behaviour in animals, and he based it on the movements of these tropical fish in this great big tank. I had the camera running, you were sitting there waiting and there was Konrad sitting in his chair and we heard these snores coming from the chair. Konrad Lorenz, famous Nobel Prize winner, sitting in his big, fat chair fast asleep. The trouble is he wasn't. He did it for about three times and then turned round and grinned at us.

Int: Yes, he was a great joker. Mind you, he was an old man then so if he had gone to sleep he would have

been quite within his rights.

RB: Yes, that is true.

8. Sharks and whales

Int: Robin, the fact I am by this pile of your books, there's one here called Megalodon (24). Now does that have any connection with your interest in natural history?

RB: Yes, it does. Megalodon Carcharodon was a giant shark that the American navy caught on a trawl that they were doing off Hawaii and it was 48 feet long. It was the very first giant shark. Admittedly it was probably a krill feeder rather than a great big eater, in other words it was more like a whale shark than a blue tooth. But I by then had started to get very interested in sharks and we did about four shark films. Do you remember the famous Eugenie Clark?

Int: Indeed.

RB: Eugenie Clark was by then the world expert on sharks from a university in America and we decided to do a programme for *Nature Watch* on great white sharks (10), and we took her to Ras Mohammed in Egypt. There she was, 60 years of age, she had a birthday party on our dive boat, and there she told two stories which I remember totally amazed me. First of all was that she was the first and probably the only person to swim through the gills of a whale shark, and secondly she produced this picture which was of her in a shark cage surrounded by three full size great whites but she'd forgotten to shut the lid of the cage. So you could see up above was a baby, just nine foot, a great white trying to get in.

So that was the start of the shark things and I sat down and wrote that book. I have to say that that book did very well, that's the American edition you're looking at, but it is the most ridiculous book I've ever written because in fact the plot is that the shark eats the front of a submarine and you take it on from there.

Int: Talking of sharks, I think that the films you and I did about sharks and other people did about sharks helped to restore the reputation of the shark or create the reputation of the shark of not being this horrible, man eating monster but being a fantastic and beautiful and terribly important creature. Now look what's happened to them.

RB: I spend three months a year in Cape Town and I go fishing. One boat I went on which was a commercial boat they caught 40 sharks, small sharks, which they chopped the fins off, threw the sharks back in the sea, took the fins into Cape Town where a Boeing 707 comes in ever morning and leaves loaded with shark fins and tuna. It's just ridiculous. We cannot go on fishing like we are for very much longer. It's like in my earliest, earliest days you could shoot virtually anything. I mean the early licences for hunting were ridiculous. I mentioned that Denys Finch Hatton tried to get a law to stop shooting in the Serengeti. It was based on a party of tourists in an open truck that he saw going along firing at a herd of rhinoceros from the truck, just literally pumping off shots as they went by.



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100 YEARS OF WILDLIFE FILMMAKING

Int: Do you think though that if we went out and made a film about the horror of the shark hunting industry and the ludicrous nature of the market and the disgraceful nature of the market for shark fin, do you think a film like that could work, could change hearts? Could it work in a country like China?

RB: Well, I think it could. I know they're still hunting minke whales out of Japan for so called scientific purposes. They're also eating dolphins, there's no doubt about that but I am convinced that the Japanese do not need to eat dolphins.

Int: They don't need to hunt minke whales.

RB: No, and I think those sort of films have got to be continued to be made. If there is any responsibility that any part of the present television industry has, feels, its that they've got to find money to fund those sort of big films.

Int: Well I was about to say to you, if I was to say to you, Robin, you've got unlimited money, you've got the best crew you can get, you've got unlimited time, go and make me a natural history film, what would you do, what would you want to do?

RB: I'd like to revisit the whale situation. I think the whale situation is hovering slightly on the edge of becoming dangerous because of complacency. They've started I understand to worry about humpbacks off Canada where they get caught up in Canadian fishing nets, and various little bits and pieces I've heard about various whales I don't like the sound of.

Int: Of course, the Japanese lobby with the International Whaling Commission is notoriously, well, if I say corrupt I shall probably sued or something but, yes, I think I'm going to say corrupt.

RB: Yes, and if you think about it, what we've done is to conserve the big whales, the kind of public whales, the whales swimming in the big ocean and we've got the so called Indian Ocean Sanctuary but I don't think that hardly any of the pro whaling countries have actually changed their official position. Is Norway now hunting? Are the Faroes still doing pilot whales?

Int: There is still what they call subsistence whaling or something like that. It's where there are communities who claim that they can only survive and that it's so much part of their culture that if they stop whaling they can't survive. There are small communities of Inuit I believe and I think in the Faroes as well, I don't know where else, who are permitted, yes, but it's the small end of the wedge.

RB: It is and the whales represent such a huge part of life on earth. Global warming in my considered opinion will become a real danger, not when it starts killing off people but when it starts killing off krill because krill is the top of the food chain. Whales eat the krill and so on and so on and so forth.

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9. The future of wildlife film

Int: How do you see the natural history film industry developing in the future? Is it going to change very radically? Is it still as important? Well, you've already said some ways in which you think it's important and what it should be doing and could be doing but any general thoughts on that?

RB: Well, people talk a lot nowadays about we've lost blue chip natural history which to be honest with you we have and much cheaper formats have come in. There is no question, I'm not going to get into things like dumbing down or anything like that. It costs half the price to make the popular natural history films you see on television today as it did when you and I were making them, now that's just economic reality.

What I think we're in as well is a kind of cusp technology period. It's almost like this transition time from radio to television. The kind of films we made are films of the past. The natural history that we will see in the future will be made on an entirely different technology. We're beginning to see the bits of that technology. The last Wildscreen Film Festival I went to they made as a demonstration a one hour natural history documentary which was perfectly acceptable for transmission in the hour of the lecture. They recorded the music, they recorded the commentary, they edited the film and it all came out like 10 minutes after the lecture had finished. That was an eye opener to me because a lot of the shots that they used in the film came from sources on international satellite television or that kind of different technology which we would just never have thought of.

I think the BBC, for example, could now go on making excellent natural history films simply by reprocessing the footage that they already own, most of which I took, and literally using new technology to recycle it, to reprint it, to morph it into perfect action sequences. One of my tiny ambitions is to take all the lion hunts that there have ever been and come out with the perfect lion hunt. Now again there may be a certain morality question in that but if we're talking about what people are going to be watching in the future I think that's what's going to be and it's going to be fantastic, those sequences are going to be incredible.

10. Admiration

Int: Is there anyone who you've worked with, people behind the scenes who probably their names are not particularly well known or anything like that, but the background people you've worked with making natural history films who you think would make a fantastic subject for this archive?

RB: Well, I think there's a guy called Julian Pettifer out there but he's just got an MBE so he's probably too famous.

Int: No, an OBE.

RB: Beyond that I'm reminded of that famous comment in a film called *The Right Stuff* (25) where one of the

astronauts is being interviewed by the press and he believes that the best pilot there ever was, was a guy called Chuck Yeager. So he starts to tell this boring story of how great a pilot was Chuck Yeager and you can see the press getting bored, and he looks back and he grins and he says 'you want to know the best pilot I've ever seen, you're looking at him'. Now there is a temptation to go down that road but there is a Chuck Yeager in the natural history world that I remember and will never forget and I think should be put into that context, and that's a guy called Chris Parsons.

Chris Parsons steered, again in a very nice, quiet, almost unknown to the general public kind of way, all the great programmes that we remember: *Life on Earth* (26), those wonderful series that followed that and it was Chris quietly chugging away at the BBC. I'm not a BBC man, I was raised on ITV and hard documentary but if ever there was a natural history filmmaker it was Chris Parsons.

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