



**Robin Hellier: Oral History Transcription**

**Name of interviewee:** Robin Hellier

**Reasons why chosen for an oral history:** Longstanding career within the BBC Natural History unit as an editor, producer and eventually deputy head of the unit

**Name of interviewer:** Brian Leith

**Reasons why interviewer chosen:** Colleague and friend

**Name of cameraman:** Bob Prince

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**1. The Early Years**

*BL: Robin, can you give me your name, nationality, your last job title and today's date, please?*

*RH: Right, okay, easy bit first. Robin Hellier, British, it's 15th June 2007. I'm now officially retired but still working part-time and my full-time job, which finished just over a year ago now, I was Deputy Head of the Natural History Unit.*

*BL: How long did you work for the Natural History Unit?*

*RH: I joined the BBC in 64 and I joined the Unit, I think, in 72.*

*BL: 72. So that's 35 years, that's pretty impressive. As of this moment I'm the oldest serving member in the Unit and I joined in 78, so you've got a good few years on me. Robin, can you remember the very first*



*wildlife film you ever saw, what it was, why it might have made an impression on you?*

RH: I'm not sure about the actual first one, but I do remember seeing on a very old television set, *Look* (1) as a child. To be honest, not being over impressed I don't think. I think it was something I was expected to do, to watch it.

BL: *What age were you at that point?*

RH: Probably early teens I should think. I don't think we had a telly before then.

BL: *But it didn't make much impression on you?*

RH: No. But then I wasn't actually very interested in animals at that stage. What did make more of an impression was Armand and Michaela Denis, I mean same category. I think my parents thought that was good viewing. You have to remember in those days you were invited to sit in front of the box for specific programmes, you didn't have it on all the time as many families do now. It was a very different approach to viewing. Armand and Michaela Denis, I think it was just the escapist nature of it, and adventure and travel, more than the animal interaction which appealed to me. I think that's probably characterised the whole of my career in natural history production. It is that where people and animals meet that fascinates me more than pure animal behaviour.

BL: *In fact, you came to the Unit through a rather different route than many people in the NHU, because you weren't really a naturalist, you didn't study biology at university. Can you explain a little bit about how you came to be involved in wildlife filmmaking in the beginning?*

RH: Yes. I'd decided I wanted a career in filmmaking and I became a general trainee, and did a bit of camerawork, sound and editing. It was the editing that appealed to me most and I started editing, or being an assistant editor on commercials and documentaries for companies in London. Then I decided to get into the BBC and finished up getting a job in Bristol as an assistant editor. At that time you worked on whatever was available and it was news, sport, documentaries and natural history. As I progressed to being an editor my interest was largely in the documentaries. I mean we were very fortunate at that time having people like John Boorman working there, so there was very first rate documentary directors to work with.

But I also served my time on a certain number of natural history productions as well, editing those. I actually got increasingly interested in natural history and I finished up enjoying that as much, if not more than some of the other programmes that I'd been working on.

BL: *Correct me if I'm wrong, this is kind of late 60s into the early 70s?*

RH: Yes, it is.

BL: *What's the first wildlife film you edited or were an assistant editor on?*

RH: It was one of the latter generations of *Look* (1) after they stopped being studio programmes and became full length films. I think that was as an assistant. One of the first things that I edited as an editor was working with Jeffery Boswall on his *Safari* (2) series which on and off went on for quite a few years.

BL: *Because there was the Wildlife Safari to Ethiopia (3) or wherever. What was the destination?*

RH: I think Ethiopia was the first one.

## **2. Working with people and animals**

*BL: Jeffery must have made an impression? He's still around, still making impressions.*

RH: He certainly did. I mean he has a reputation as not being the easiest person to work with. I think I'd endorse that. But actually I didn't find it nearly as difficult as many other people did and I actually found it really quite rewarding. I think if you can overcome some of Jeffery's little idiosyncrasies and not let them annoy you, actually you can have a very strong working relationship. I found a more equal relationship than I think some of my peers did. So I look back on that period as being stimulating and enjoyable, and I learnt a lot from Jeffery.

*BL: I think maybe this isn't a moment to be summing up but I would say perhaps this says more about you than Jeffery, in the sense that you are very good and quite well known to be very good at getting on with people, and I think you always command their respect which must be half the battle in any relationship.*

RH: Yes. I think you have to meet people and I think you just have to be conscious of your own ego and I don't know where my ego sits. I mean maybe I haven't got very much but if I have I can kind of control it, I think, better than I sometimes see other people behaving. I think that's really important. It depends what job you do. Sometimes having a huge ego and letting it run riot is absolutely fine. I mean I think if you're in the public eye that's often a real advantage. I think if you're involved in teamwork, and most filmmaking is teamwork, then you have to be really conscious of how you're dealing with your ego.

*BL: I agree and that's really well put. So you didn't have like a proper job interview to get into the NHU. You kind of slipped in through the side, didn't you, as an editor and then what happened next?*

RH: I did eventually have a job interview but initially I got an opportunity to direct studios. It was because I'd been working on *Animal Magic* (4) editing stories for them, and for some reason they always seemed to be short of studio directors and I'm not quite sure why this opportunity was offered to me. I found myself directing a studio actually having never stepped inside a studio or not to do a job of work anyway. So I had no real understanding of how galleries worked.

*BL: Which series was that?*

RH: It was *Animal Magic* (4) but I can't remember.

*BL: It was one of the Animal Magic (4) programmes?*

RH: Yes, it was, and I became the regular studio director for the series and that in true BBC style started off as a kind of attachment, and then eventually I boarded for a job and got a job, I mean I'd like to think it was an assistant producer but it had a different title then. It was probably called something like production assistant but that's what studio directors were labelled as in the Natural History Unit at that time.

*BL: What was it like working with Johnny Morris? In fact, I worked with you on one of those series; this was towards the very end of Animal Magic (4), wasn't it?*

RH: Yes.

*BL: It kind of ended in the early 80s?*

RH: Yes, it did.

*BL: But what was it like working with Johnny at that stage in his career?*

RH: He was enormously talented. He was in many respects very professional. He was also quite didactic in how he wanted to be perceived and to perform. So provided that what you wanted to achieve meshed with what he wanted to offer it was fine. You could sometimes have periods where it was really quite, quite difficult. In the end, because it was a live transmission, he was actually professional enough always to make sure that the show went ahead, and we never had any kind of serious problems on air. I don't think that's any different to any other kind of performer or presenter who's involved in television recordings.

What I found most interesting about him was actually outside the studio when we were doing the filming film stories.

*BL: Like Keeper Morris at the Zoo (5).*

RH: Right, yes. He had this incredible interaction with animals which I'd heard about previously and I saw it in action time and time again, where he just seemed to have an ability to communicate with animals in a way that most people couldn't. On many occasions it impressed the keepers in the zoos we were working with.

But all this was to deliver to children and it worked phenomenally well for children of that generation. Yet Johnny's actual interaction with the children themselves from my experience wasn't good, wasn't something that he enjoyed. He loved being with animals, he didn't appear to enjoy being with children.

*BL: That's interesting isn't it?*

RH: It's so odd in that the programmes worked as well as they did for children.

*BL: So in your opinion he did have a real connection with animals, some sort of relationship with them that was very unusual?*

RH: Absolutely, yes. I mean he used to say that it came from his background as a farm manager. He'd always worked with animals and applying that to zoo animals was only a very small step on what he'd done previously. That's probably true but I think it's something that was almost unique to him. I mean I've never seen anything like that in other people that I know that work with animals on farms, never quite the same relationship as he had.

*BL: He was also a great storyteller, wasn't he? That's what I remember from the time because by the time I worked with him, I was a very junior AP (Assistant Producer), he was a little bit of a joke and we knew that he was on his way out within a year or two. It was kind of patting him and keeping him happy for the moment. But I was really struck with his ability live on air, once off, to tell a story.*

RH: Yes, absolutely. The first time I ever saw him was again as a child on the screen when he was the Hot Chestnut Man (6) and he used to sit beside a chestnut brazier and tell stories, and as a kid I was just riveted by that. He just had that knack of doing that and again it's interesting. He was doing that through the screen. I'm sure he wouldn't have done it with an audience of children if he didn't enjoy being with them but he loved the storytelling.

*BL: Something else that came up with Johnny was this whole debate about **anthropomorphism**, us kind of ascribing to animals emotions or feelings that we human beings might have. At the time I remember this*

*was, by you and me, it was kind of frowned upon. It was like, "Oh dear, we can't get away with this much longer". What's your perspective on that no, given 20, 25 years of time moving on?*

RH: I think I always supported it or at least I supported it more than most of my peers, other producers in the Unit, and I think that's because of my background and through not being an academic in animal behaviour. Because I could see how effectively it worked with kids and actually it worked with me as well. I think it's something that you go through and I don't think it's something that we should necessarily artificially try to stop. For people who find that's the best way of communicating I think it's a valid source of communication. Other people it won't apply to, people who are delivering or receiving might not like it. But I don't think we should try and stop it completely.

It was a battle that went on then and it's a battle that continues now and I'm sure there will be in the future other Johnny Morrises who come along. I would say if that's the best way that they can communicate and if it works well for some part of the audience, fine. I don't think it's something which should be frowned on too much but it needs to be kept in perspective.

*BL: Animal Magic (4) was also quite zoo based, wasn't it, and I know you're quite a passionate conservationist. You were involved in one of the very first big environment series. What was your take then, what is your take now on zoos in this sense that kids may love them but actually you're denying a wild animal a wild existence? Do you have any sense of a changing perspective on this in your own mind?*

RH: I think there has been but I think at the time when I grew up and then when I was first working zoos, many zoos, were not nearly as well run as they are now. I think there were a lot of exhibits, a lot of animals in zoos which were kept in conditions which weren't supportable, shouldn't have happened. I have not in my adult life spent very much time in zoos other than for work. Until very recently, with a grandchild, I've found myself going back to Bristol Zoo in fact, the first time for years, to actually spend any time really looking around the grounds. I was amazed by the change and as I looked around I thought "There are none of these exhibits here that I really feel ought not to be here".

Now it's a completely different argument to whether those animals ought to be in the wild or not but actually the way in which they're being managed and cared for seemed to me, from my level of knowledge, to be perfectly adequate and acceptable. If there's another generation of kids growing to understand and care for animals and wildlife through their visits to the zoos, then I think zoos are continuing to have a role to play. They obviously need to be managed carefully, monitored in some way. But I'm not an abolitionist at all.

*BL: I'd agree. Now you've mentioned a couple of the big characters in the business that you came across in those earlier days. Are there any others, characters on the scene, whether they were stars, celebrities, presenters, producers, that kind of jumped out at you? People that you remember clearly and thought "Here is somebody that I really respect" or "would like to work with" or whatever?*

RH: My very first contact with someone who was a major personality in natural history filmmaking was Hans Hass, Hans and Lotte Hass, and that was when I got my first job in a small documentary film company in Bond Street. They had the contract for doing the sound for Hans Hass's; I think it was *Diving to Adventure* (7). I knew nothing about filmmaking at that stage and one day I was taken into the dubbing theatre and presented with a bucket of water and a bit of rubber tubing, and up onto the screen came Hans Hass *Diving to Adventure* (7). My job was to blow bubbles through this tube in time with the bubbles coming out of his diving apparatus. It seemed weird and I kind of enjoyed it because my mates were working in factories or whatever they were doing, and here was me doing this odd job in filmmaking.

But Hans Hass himself was a larger than life personality.

*BL: So you got to meet him?*



RH: Yes. Over the series he popped in and out occasionally and I on occasion had to go round to his apartment in Mayfair or wherever. I found the whole set-up with him, his personality, his beautiful wife, I was in awe of them at that stage and I thought that these are people that I'd love to in some way emulate, or in some way be involved in some capacity in that kind of operation. At the time I had no idea that I would be, 5, 10 years later, whatever it was, and I suddenly found myself working in that environment.

In fact, when I first arrived in BBC Bristol Hans Hass was actually down there and doing a subsequent series of his programmes, and the work that I'd been doing in Bond Street was happening in the BBC premises on Whiteladies Road.

BL: *Did he remember you?*

RH: Yes, I think he did. Yes, we had a couple of conversations about how I felt at the time.

BL: *So what sort of character was he? I can imagine going into his posh Mayfair flat, I can imagine what it must have been like. But what sort of person was he, and his wife?*

RH: At the risk of stereotyping, he was very Germanic. He was a stickler for detail, he had a very clear idea of what he wanted. He didn't mind upsetting people in order to achieve what he wanted. But he was also engaging, he did definitely have a kind of a charisma that many people who get to the top of their field, in natural history in particular, seem to have. Much as we always say when David Attenborough walks into a room he kind of commands an audience without doing anything. Hans Hass could do the same thing.

BL: *And what was Lotte like?*

RH: Very attractive, very bubbly, effervescent kind of nature. I was never quite sure what she contributed to the partnership professionally, other than to be attractive on screen and that obviously worked. I mean it did work for the audience. Hans was the scientist and I don't think Lotte had the same kind of background that he did. But it worked well as a television series and they obviously worked well and it was a personal relationship.

BL: *It sounds a bit like Armand and Michaela doesn't it, also in the same way, that he was a rather dry academic. I can't help think that without Michaela, I mean I remember her clearly when I was about 10 or 12, and thinking, gosh - well I'm not sure I thought in terms of sexy at that age. But I remember thinking she was very attractive and Lotte Hass as well in her swimsuit. I mean it's an interesting dynamic. I wonder if they, the men, would have been so well known if it wasn't for their attractive wives.*

RH: Yes, possibly not and certainly I think there was an element of the audience which was attracted by the attractive wife that then came to learn and acquire a lot of knowledge from the programmes. Possibly otherwise programmes they would have missed.

BL: *I wonder if it helped to appeal to women in the audience as well who without that feminine element might have been a bit turned off by a Germanic, dry character telling facts about some aspect of biology.*

RH: I think that's possibly true. I think you also have to remember that that was a very different era of television and people were prepared to accept programmes made in a different style, at a different pace, and obviously there wasn't the choice. The range of television was if that was what was on at 7.30 in the evening that was it, that was what you watched. You watched that or nothing at all.

### **3. The Changing Industry**

*BL: And that brings on to something that I think you're sort of uniquely able to address and that is editing style because you were a very accomplished editor before you moved into wildlife television as a producer. And just using, say, Hans and Lotte Hass's programmes as an example, how would you briefly characterise the changes in editing style and pace over the 30 years or so that you've been involved in the business?*

RH: I think if I look back at some of the early programmes that I edited I'd be embarrassed by the way in which they were put together. I think that programmes 30 years ago were by and large very, very much simpler than they are now. But I think that the professionals, the editors, actually had much less to work with and so what they were able to achieve was less than you would achieve now. But the starting point was much lower than it would be now.

What has happened is that the acquisition of material, the kind of material that you acquire is much more complex and sophisticated than it was, which gives you an opportunity to put on the screen something which is much more complex and sophisticated. That's a step forward undoubtedly. The problem is that the pictures often dictate the way in which a programme is structured and presented and the story - this is a personal view - often doesn't get the attention that it should have because it doesn't demand it. The audience will still continue to watch the programme even though the story is not as strong as it was.

I think the earlier programmes had to have a strong story because pictures alone very often weren't strong enough to lead the audience through it.

*BL: That's a really fascinating perspective.*

RH: I think that is a quite big change. The other big change that I think is that when I recall struggling putting programmes together, it was a long, protracted process with bits of film and sellotape and so on, or even cement in the early days. You had to think quite carefully how you were going to approach it, and every change you made was a mechanical change which was quite difficult and time consuming. You did throw stories around, you did move sequences around but it was tricky doing it.

Now with non-linear editing you can do it at the drop of a hat. You can change stories completely, change structures completely and that is an advantage that you can do that. It gives you so many more opportunities. But I think the disadvantage is people often don't know when to stop or don't even know quite what the target is, what they're aiming for. It's almost as though the technology has got ahead of people's thinking.

*BL: You've given people too much choice, too much opportunity. That's really interesting. I mean thinking to your first point about images versus story and thinking, say, of our great success this year which we'd say is Planet Earth (8). I mean would you say this is a good example? I mean the images were absolutely breathtaking and the shooting ratio must have been, heaven knows, but it was probably huge. How would you slot that into this sort of trajectory?*

RH: In some ways *Planet Earth* (8) is almost a little bit old fashioned. It didn't rely on some of the aspects of technology which a lot of other programmes rely on, and that is because a lot of time and effort, expertise, went into acquiring the cream of pictures. Every single sequence that was in *Planet Earth* (8) was shot as well or better than it had ever been done before. So you had this accumulation of material which was visually stunning which was storylined, in my view, fairly effectively. But actually didn't demand the strength of pure storytelling that a lot of other programmes have to have in order to succeed.

So in other words, you could sit back and just be absorbed by the pictures and you didn't need a very strong storyline to help carry you through. There's a place for that kind of programme, you wouldn't want every programme made like that, and actually at a lower budget with less time and less effort, less able people

making them, it wouldn't work, people would switch off.

So I enjoyed it. I don't think it's perfection in natural history filmmaking but certain aspects of it is getting very close to it.

*BL: That's interesting. I wonder if this spins off into the feature documentary market as well? The NHU you'd think would have been the place that would have created the great feature documentaries for the cinema, wonderful images. And yet they haven't quite cracked it, have they? I mean Blue (9), the movie spin-off of Blue Planet, didn't really make a dent in the market whereas, say, March of the Penguins (11) was out there, 100 times financially more successful. I mean I don't know what Earth (12), the movie of Planet Earth (8), will do. But I wonder if you see a sort of generality here that maybe the Unit has become a bit too obsessed with pure images rather than storytelling?*

*RH: I think that's possibly true but I also think that the cinema market is so different to TV production. It's a different kind of expertise, not just in the programme making, but in the whole marketing of it as well, the funding and marketing. I don't know because I'm not closely involved but I suspect we don't have quite enough knowledge of all aspects of cinematic production to be successful. I also think that there's not enough examples to be able to know whether there is a shortcoming in the NHU or whether it's just certain programmes or certain films making it and others not. March of the Penguins (11) very successful for a number of reasons.*

As you say, NHU production not as successful in the cinema, still a great achievement but not as successful. If we'd had 10 NHU productions and 10 independents, cinematic productions, would it have been all the 10 NHU ones not doing quite as well, I don't know. It's moving into a new area which we're not familiar with and I'm sure it will be a very steep learning curve. Provided that we can continue to produce them on a regular basis I'm sure they will become more successful.

You have to remember, of course, in the cinema natural history is such a tiny, tiny percentage of the overall market out there that they're a real oddball. I suspect that there's an element of chance in there somewhere as to which ones make it and which ones don't.

*BL: Yes, I'm sure you're right. There's another aspect of this before we move on and that is feature films normally that we watch, like a movie, they have to be emotionally engaging. It's something that just in my career I've noticed a move in this direction. It used to be very biological, factual. The Unit used to be very biological, full of naturalists out of university. Whereas it's all moving towards a slightly more touchy-feely, emotional engagement, isn't it? Do you agree with that and where do you think that's taking us?*

*RH: I totally agree with it and I think it's quite interesting to reflect on how and why it's happened. Part of it I think is the people that are making the programmes within the Natural History Unit, and you mentioned earlier there's a shift in the balance of pure academics to emotional filmmakers who've come from other areas but happen to have an interest or a passion for natural history. I think the influence of those people on the purists is actually very good and as a result you get more emotionally based programmes coming through.*

I think there's something else going on as well though which is to do with the larger BBC. The Natural History Unit has, over the time that I've known it, changed quite a lot from having an enormous degree of independence within the BBC. I mean it might have well have been a little indie making programmes for the BBC and just chucking the programmes at them. Whereas now it's very much a part of the entire BBC production process and natural history filmmaking has become part of factual programme making. And factual programme making is part of the bigger whole of all TV production.

So I think some of the skills, the knowledge, and the experience of other areas of programme making are being drawn in and applied to our programmes. Although there are lots of disadvantages in becoming part of



a bigger whole and losing independence, this is one of the advantages that you get. I think quite a lot of natural history programmes have got stronger as a consequence of outside influences or people within the Unit having been exposed to those influences.

*BL: Can you give us a for instance of that? I mean from what you've just said I've suddenly thought about Big Cat Diary (13). What's the way in which Big Cat Diary (13) may have changed and benefited from this input?*

*RH: Big Cat Diary (13) is quite an interesting example because it's gone on for whatever it is, 11, 12 years now. It started with a very clear brief which was to produce something from the Natural History Unit that was cheap and fast, to balance the high proportion of expensive programmes that were being made and taking a long time to get to the screen. Big Cat Diary (13) came out of that brief. But it started being produced in a very similar way to most other natural history programmes at that time which is kind of understandable because that's where our experience lay.*

*BL: What do you mean by started out being produced in that same way?*

*RH: It started by producing, if you like, from the animal's perspective. Here we are, we're going to go out, we're going to have a number of people making stories about animals. What are the animals, what's the animal behaviour and then how do we graft the people onto it?*

*BL: The presenters?*

*RH: The presenters, yes. That worked reasonably well or, in fact, very well. I mean it was considered to be a success from the outset. But as time went by it needed to be refined and the refinement was in two ways. One was the way that we actually produced it, the kind of people, the kind of equipment that we used. The other was in the storytelling and I can remember right from series one marketing it as an animal soap and, if you like, it was the use of a term without a full understanding.*

As the first few years went by we came to realise that actually you did need to be producing a soap as in any other people based soap. It wasn't until, I think it was probably year 6, 7, or 8, round about there, that we actually took that really seriously and got advice and input from story editors on *Eastenders* (14). We got them to come and look at the series and to take apart what we'd produced the previous year and tell us from their perspective where they thought we'd got it wrong, or where we'd missed opportunities.

From then on we started to look at the way in which a soap, a people based soap, might be structured and planned and produced. We tried to apply that and did apply that to *Big Cat* (13), and there was a subtle, perhaps not a very subtle change that happened after that where the stories followed a kind of a format, not rigidly but you knew that that format was in place and you knew that that was the ideal. When you deviated from it you knew that you were deviating from it and why you were deviating from it.

I think that's one of the reasons why *Big Cat* (13) and the subsequent diaries have actually managed to be as successful as they have. They learnt from other areas of programme making.

*BL: Give me an example of the format that you talk about and maybe an example of how the input from an Eastenders (14) producer has actually changed the way you tell stories on Big Cat Diary (13)?*

*RH: I think the importance of establishing who your lead characters are and what the lead stories are and making that clear to the audience, and then being clear as a producer of the need for other stories to interweave with it. But making the audience very aware that they are second or third line stories. I also think we learnt a lot about how much information or rather how many characters can actually be absorbed by an audience within a given period of time. So we actually reduced at that point the number of named animals*

and where previously we had been giving the supporting cast of animals names, we deliberately stopped doing that and we gave them a character label rather than an actual name. I think that has made it easier for the audience to follow through the programmes.

It's interesting, as you get a kind of progression some of those supporting characters actually become main characters, in that the story, the natural story develops and you feel you have to kind of promote it. That actually causes problems for us because we then have to go from a character that didn't have a name to suddenly giving it a name. We found that sometimes the best thing was to say "This character is clearly going to become more important, it's more interesting, we're going to give it more time". We told the audience that, therefore we're naming it and that happened on several occasions.

*BL: So this would be like a feature film. You'd have lead billing, what's happened to Joe the lion this week and maybe one other but all the others are like secondary characters in your drama?*

RH: Yes, absolutely and then every so often you draw one out and if it's a full-blown drama you decide who you're going to draw out. If it's natural history based they draw themselves out, something happens and you feel we can't miss that opportunity, we've got to follow that.

*BL: Do you feel, because I do feel, I sense that this has brought back, and I don't think it's a bad thing either, it's brought back anthropomorphism. Kind of anthropomorphism 25 years ago was frowned upon - how can we ever know what an animal feels and we denied it. Now it's kind of coming back. I mean I listen on a lot of wildlife programmes to people, even David Attenborough, saying things where you think, gosh, he is ascribing human emotions and feelings to animals. But this has come back, hasn't it?*

RH: It has definitely, yes. Not quite to the extent that it did previously and I think it's more carefully thought through than it was in the past. Again, it may be that that's one of the reasons why natural history programmes continue to be successful against far greater opposition than there ever was previously. I mean I'm actually constantly pleasantly surprised by the kind of audience figures that you get for some of the popular programmes when you look at what they're up against. And you know the way in which people receive television now, with the way in which they watch television now. The habits have changed and to hold an audience for half an hour in peak time with natural history based I think is quite an achievement.

*BL: And would you say part of the reason the NHU has been so successful in the last few years is because of this more popular, accessible, and even emotional engagement with animals?*

RH: Yes, I think it is. But again, I go back to the fact that I think the Unit has understood that, taken it on board. But actually I think to some extent it's been forced to do it and it has been the external influences from other parts of the BBC that have caused the NHU to feel and behave like that.

*BL: What sort of influences?*

RH: I think the whole commissioning process in the BBC has become more transparent and although there remained lots of difficulties, largely over time for decision making and so on, I think that the people that are producing the ideas are given a very clear idea of why those proposals are being rejected, or how they could be approved if they were changed. So the influence of other people on the programme makers, our programme makers, is becoming stronger and stronger. Sometimes producers don't want to go down that route and they say "Fine, okay, if that's how you want it we don't want to make it like that, we'll move on, we'll do something else".

But very often what the commissioners actually want and their team of people want from an audience perspective is something that we should and could listen to, and we actually make stronger programmes as a consequence.

*BL: What role do you see Discovery Channel playing in this because obviously for the last 5 – 8 years the joint venture has brought a lot of pressure on programme makers to come up with ideas that will get more money if they attract Discovery funding? How has that influenced wildlife filmmaking?*

RH: I think I've probably seen the whole gamut of what's happened and I'm perhaps a little bit out of the loop on the most recent developments. I can recall going from an era where there was no co-production funding of any kind whatsoever, it was all funded internally by the BBC. To having co-producers come on board at a time when they offered money and took what you produced without having any editorial influence whatsoever, absolutely none. They'd buy into an idea and you just delivered the programme and that was it.

Gradually the co-producers became more aware of their own audiences and the needs of their audiences, more demanding on us to deliver to their audiences. In the early stages it was just an inconvenience for BBC producers and then it became really quite editorially difficult because it was evident that the two audiences were growing further apart. So there was this dilemma of how much can you deliver a single programme that will meet the needs of both partners, and for a while it was possible to do that.

Then the divide got greater and we finished up making more and more versions, separate versions. To the point where in the end the cost of making the two versions was so high the income from the co-producer was hardly worth having.

*BL: Can I just stop at a comma there and ask how would you characterise the diversion that took place between what the American markets seemed to want and what the British audience seemed to want?*

RH: I think there was a bigger sector of the British audience which was dedicated to the kind of natural history programmes that we were making and our producers wanted to make. I think the American market didn't appear to have that and so natural history had to be packaged and presented in a very different way. At that time that was a style that just did not appeal to the British commissioners, possibly not the audience, but the audience weren't given the opportunity.

What then happened subsequently was that British taste and appetite grew to emulate the American taste and appetite. I mean a lot of our most recent programmes are more like natural history programmes were a long time ago in the States.

*BL: Sorry, I don't mean to interrupt you but I still don't get a clear sense of what the different styles and appeals are. What it is that British audiences want, what is it that American audiences want that's so different?*

RH: I think American audiences were expecting high drama, much more characterisation of animals, and much more adventurous interaction with people, particularly with the presenters and pure behaviour, fascinating behaviour, on its own was never going to be good enough. British audiences could take that; they could take strong natural history behaviour well presented. They didn't need artificial drama written into the story lining. They didn't need extensive interaction with the presenters and, in fact, probably a British audience would have found that very uncomfortable.

But times change and things move on and the whole business of what eventually became reality television took over British television commissioning, and natural history had to go as far as it felt it was able to whilst retaining its integrity to keep its foothold on the screen amongst that kind of competition.

*BL: You describe it as being growing further and further apart. Is that how you still see it or are they coming back together?*

RH: No, sorry, I think that was the point they grew a long way apart and then they came back together again.

BL: *So we're becoming more like an American audience?*

RH: Yes, absolutely. But I do think by and large we've retained integrity whereas I sense that that's being lost on a lot of, not all, but a lot of American broadcasting.

Now, of course, we've now moved into another phase which is where - I'm not quite sure what has driven this. There's certainly much more natural history broadcasting than there was. The output is far higher. I think there's been a real shift in the States in the demand for natural history broadcasting. The consequences being that there isn't enough co-production funding to fund our production as we had got used to.

The BBC, as a consequence of that, has had to support natural history production from its own income to a far greater extent than it had done previously. This is difficult because it puts us in competition with all the other bits of British broadcasting but it also gives you more editorial freedom. So if you can raise the money you can make what you want to make, what you want for the British audience. I think I'm right in saying that the proportion of the NHU's output which is co-production funded is less than it was before, both in proportion within the programmes and of the total number of programmes.

BL: *And yet at the top end something like Planet Earth (8) or the upcoming Frozen Planet (15) that Alastair's planning, I get the sense that Discovery Channel are prepared now, after many years of not wanting to, they're now prepared to put big, big money behind these because they see they can be successful.*

RH: I think the very top end is almost the exception to everything we've been saying. The top end I think for both markets will continue to be made, will continue to be very expensive, will continue to be very successful. I think that's very different to most of the rest of the output. If there is a risk I think it's in the middle ground. I think it's that area of programming where you really need co-production funding. It's quite difficult to do it without that, that's most at jeopardy.

Further down when you get to the cheaper output you again, you can, if you have to, you can do it without co-production funding. That central ground, I think, is the bit that we've always felt the audience enjoys, we want to produce it for the audience. It's very difficult to cut costs on it and its becoming increasingly difficult to maintain it at the volume and the quality.

BL: *Are you talking about series like the Natural World (16)?*

RH: Yes, very specifically I think it's that kind of output. Those rather glossy, well produced, 50 minute programmes, either in a strand or a little mini series. I think they're getting increasingly difficult. Certainly when I was there it was getting harder and harder, and we were having to find increasingly innovative ways of reducing costs in order to keep the quality up. The last thing you want to do is to drop the standards or the quality of those programmes.

BL: *I'm going to dip back. I love the way we went off on a few little forays into side issues and I hope we do it again but I'm just going to come back to the thrust of the central interview. Did you ever in your filmmaking experience visit an area where you met circumstances or people which were worrying, shocking, even dangerous, or some sort of fundamental misunderstanding over what you were doing?*



RH: I think because in my latter years I was responsible for safety in the Unit and signing off the trips that were being done for things like *Planet Earth* (8), I became very aware of the risks that people were exposed to and how you managed those risks. I think that put into perspective the things that I'd done during my time as a producer when we weren't managed so heavily.

But I think that probably because of the requirement for the kind of imagery that you need now, there's a potential for people to put themselves more at risk than in the past. But circumstances change and I think a lot of it is driven by politics and the kind of places that are dangerous now for natural history filmmakers to work were probably very benign in my time.

I can remember one little episode which was to do with the cold war. I was doing a very simple shoot in Poland, in the Alveatia Forest. It was European bison, it was the last stronghold of the European bison and I couldn't see any problem there at all except that it was operating in a Communist country and it was very difficult to get facilities. In fact, there were only four of us and I booked a vehicle and I finished up with a 30 seater coach. It was the only thing I could get which was interesting going down little forest tracks.

But I'd come to the end of the shoot and we'd got all the stuff with the bison and we were about to go, and I realised that I was in this massive great forest, a huge forest that went on for 100s of miles. I hadn't really shown what it was like and I managed to get permission to go up a fire tower which took me up above the forest. You could look out and it was just wall to wall trees for miles in every direction. So we did the thing you'd obviously do which was to shoot with the light and I got my shots and I came down again. Go to the bottom of the tower and I was arrested.

What had happened was that I'd been pointing towards Russia. I don't know how many miles away Russia was but it was just trees, that's all you could see in any direction. That was the kind of thing I was completely unaware of at that time and the politics of those kinds of situations. The way you could get into trouble over very simple things were easy pitfalls. Now I think those kinds of scenarios all round the world, everyone knows what the dangers are and everyone knows how to mitigate against those dangers and you don't fall into those little traps.

So it was a different kind of problems that you were up against when I was making films.

*BL: Going back to your point about health and safety and the risks now. Do you ever feel that there's a fundamental dishonesty at the heart of this, that the BBC now requires us all to sign our names and say we have assessed the risk. Which kind of implies that if something goes wrong we made a mistake. Yet the pressure from the people on high for the more dramatic images, the most amazing photographs is greater than ever. Do you ever get a feeling that actually it's a little explosion waiting to happen, that people will be under pressure to go to some extreme to get a shot?. Somebody will one day die as a result or get into some serious trouble; deep sea diving or mountaineering or whatever it is, and in the end who really was to blame for this? Do you think there's a little sort of problem waiting there to happen?*

RH: No, I don't really. I do think that the filmmakers expose themselves to risk and I do think, and I've always feared it, that when I was there that there's always the possibility that someone's going to get seriously hurt or killed. It could happen on any trip. But I think that the good thing about it is that people are forced to consider, to think through very carefully, the situation they're getting into and to try and predict what the risks are, and then to mitigate against those risks as best you can.

So, yes, there is enormous pressure to produce better and better pictures. But I think that the risk management process actually largely stops people from stepping into unknown danger. It does put individuals on location under enormous pressure to stick within what they've agreed to do. But having said that, I think that producers are also strong minded, intelligent people, by and large, and they have to take on the decision making on the location, because you can only do a certain amount in advance, back at home. Once you're there, circumstances often change and you have to decide.

My view, as a manager when I was doing it, rather than as a producer, was unless someone had done something really irresponsible, I would support them if they've made a decision which was nothing to do with the safety risk assessment that had been signed off beforehand. As long as I felt that they'd continued with that process and they considered what the outcome might be of their action, whatever they were going to undertake. Again from my experience, very few people that I'm aware of took unnecessary risks. One or two individuals, just by their nature, would and you had to be very careful with them. But, by and large, people were responsible and I believe more responsible now than they were in the past. I also think that the support for them did kind of protect them from the need to step into an area of unacceptable risk

So I think it is a danger, but I think it's relatively well managed and I hope I've got that right, because you're never there on location with all those people and you don't know exactly what goes on. But you do have the conversations afterwards and I think most people have this balance between being driven to produce the best possible programme and to deliver, and knowing that they're not immortal. Things can easily go wrong and they actually want to come home in one piece. They want to come home with the goods if they possibly can rather than come home empty-handed but they certainly want to come home.

#### **4. Memorable achievements and collaborations**

*BL: Of the wildlife films that you've worked on, which ones stand out for you, if you had to name one in a 10 line CV - the programme that you made that you're most proud of and the one that perhaps left you with a most uneasy feeling. Looking to those extremes, which would you choose?*

RH: I'm not sure it would be a single programme, but the category of programmes that I'd look to, would be the large scale outside broadcast, the live outside broadcasts. Again, I think this is because I'm not a naturalist and, as a programme maker, it was an area of programme making that appealed to me, I got immersed into it. We managed to get into some very remote overseas locations and produce live programmes, almost against all the odds. At the time they were produced I think it was quite an achievement and they were fairly successful.

They were a type of programme, a genre, of their time. You couldn't make that kind of programme now or if you did it would have to be far more sophisticated.

*BL: Give us one or two titles.*

RH: *Reefwatch* (17), *Africawatch* (18). There was a whole series of Watches both at home and abroad which gradually became more sophisticated in what they tried to achieve. *Reef Watch* (17) I suspect is probably the biggest achievement, partly because of the technology involved. I think I gained a reputation as a producer of being well organised and under control which was kind of important. But I do remember on that particular job on *Reef Watch* (17) going off to the Red Sea, and as I left to undertake this series of live programmes we hadn't got one single underwater camera ready to go. None of them was the engineering actually finished on. So that was a bit unnerving for me.

*BL: But didn't you also pioneer that helmet for Martha Holmes which enabled her, theoretically, to talk and to be seen to be talking live? There were all sorts of teething troubles with that, weren't there?*

RH: We decided that if we were going to go underwater the only virtue of going live underwater, because we knew we couldn't emulate the range and the quality of pictures that you get recorded. We had to be able to have our presenters down there and be able to see and hear them performing. So we looked through all the equipment that was available and most of it gave you very good broadcast sound, but without actually being able to see the lips of the person. If you can only see eyes it doesn't add up to very much. You do

need to see the mouth as well.

Then we came across this one new piece of technology which was being used in the North Sea professionally and professional divers hated it. They hated the performance of it and it was effectively an inverted goldfish bowl stuck on your head which gave you a little bubble of air. We were able to get a microphone in it and the quality of sound was very good. The visuals were pretty good, there was a distortion, but it did give you that sense of really being there with your presenters.

The main difficulty I had was to get a presenter who could perform in it, because it was an unusual brief. You had to have someone who was a television presenter, who was a marine biologist, because they had to go down there and do it live and who was an expert diver, and actually I failed. I mean we couldn't find anyone who had all those three things and, in the end, we decided that we had to go for someone who was an expert diver. We had to be able to bring them back again and they had to be a marine biologist, because they had to know what they were talking about.

We finished up with Martha Holmes who'd never done any television in her life, and in fact her only experience of underwater broadcasting, before she went live in the Red Sea, was in the Bristol University swimming pool, where we threw a few tools down to the bottom of the pool and told her to go down and talk about them. That was her only experience and somehow we managed to get away with that.

So in a way that was a little bit of pioneering television so that is something that I'm quite proud to have achieved.

*BL: Did you ever have any problems with this helmet that Martha had to wear?*

RH: Unfortunately it was prone to leaking, it wasn't perfect. I mean it was perfect for our application but in its design there was some weakness and it would leak. It did have a purging device on it so that you could get the water out but it was incredibly noisy and not very reliable. Martha and Mike deGruy, the other presenter, got used to dealing with this. But, of course, when we went into live programmes as opposed to just doing pre-recorded dives, you had to be there for a fixed period of time. It was actually quite fortunate that when the leaks were at their worst it was when we were doing the live transmissions for Discovery in the States. Very fortunately they have commercial breaks and we actually got Martha back to the surface, emptied the water out and got her back down again in time to do the next segment of the programme.

She finished up on one of those where the water was really right up above her chin and it was quite remarkable that she stayed there, and we were really very concerned. I was directing and on the point of bringing her out because it was getting to that stage where it could be dangerous. It wasn't a deep dive but it did take a moment from the point where you said abort to get her out to the surface and to get the top off. You could pop the bubble off underwater in extreme circumstances but there was always a risk as it came off and it blew off with the air pressure, that you could actually damage your face as it came off.

But we all held our nerve, Martha especially, and we got through without having to come off air.

*BL: One of the few circumstances where you're thankful for a long commercial break.*

RH: Yes, absolutely.

*BL: Were you involved, Robin, in any of the other early Watches? I remember Fox Watch (19), Badger Watch (20). Were you involved in them?*

RH: Only in a peripheral way, I didn't actually produce those. I went on to some of the, again, more people based programmes that we did subsequently like *Nightshift* (21) and *Beachwatch* (22). So we moved

it from being pure, live natural history observation into a more kind of magazine feel, a live magazine with animals involved within it, rather than animals being the core of it.

The other big one that we thought was really very successful was *Africawatch* (18), which took us into a very remote place. The best part of that project for me as a producer was the **recce**, because we had to go to all these waterholes all over Africa to find the right location. Actually in the end we chose not a waterhole, but a marshy area, which gave us the most reliable wildlife, through a series of live broadcasts, whatever the conditions and whatever the time of day.

*BL: Which one was that? Which location?*

RH: It was in Kenya, in the Masai Mara, Musiari marsh and because it always retained water it always retained I suppose a spectrum of animals and then, of course, the predators that went with them, they were always in the area. So even if you didn't have the great wildebeest migration which comes through there fairly regularly, even if you didn't have that you still had a very good cast of animal characters to fall back on.

*BL: It's interesting, isn't it, that those live Watch programmes which were indeed very pioneering at the time, and this is like sort of late 80s, early 90s wasn't it?*

RH: Yes, it was.

*BL: That those programmes have dried out. I'd have thought that there'd be a lot of mileage and the co-production interest around the world might lead to a revival of those. Because such interest in international programming and the world getting smaller, etc. What are the practical issues related to that?*

RH: I think if you look back at one of those programmes, a bit like I was saying about early edited programmes, they'd actually look very primitive. They are extremely expensive to produce because just getting the hardware onto location and the people that you need to run a live show is very expensive. That's fine for a broadcaster, for a commissioner, if they're using that programme to draw an audience as, in their words, they would say it gives us a sense of occasion. I think those programmes did do that at that time.

We've moved on since then now and the majority of broadcasters from an expensive programme are looking for an ongoing return from it. So if you make a natural history film it has a kind of shelf life and you can keep on getting income from it to recoup your investment over a long period of time. A live programme, by its very nature, doesn't have a shelf life and unless you're repeating it the following day or the following week that's it. So there's no return on it.

So we just found it increasingly difficult to get co-producers to invest. The BBC was still prepared to invest, but not enough to support the whole project. Some of my greatest disappointments really in my career have been the big live projects that we planned and got to quite an advanced stage of preparing to put on the screen. In the end failed because we simply couldn't raise sufficient income. One was the Great Barrier Reef, which was all set up and ready to go, and I think that would have been an absolutely stunning programme. There were lots of very good stories down there apart from all the strong natural history visuals.

Another one was in the Antarctic, which we were pretty close to getting off the ground, but in the end we just couldn't get enough money together and they were both aborted.

*BL: Of the people you've worked with, that you've come across, if you had to pick out one or two that have stuck with you that you would consider to be mentors, people who have imparted the greatest amount of wisdom or knowledge about wildlife filmmaking, who would you pick out?*



RH: Well I suppose the first has to be Jeffery Boswall, just because at that stage of my career he was the first professional producer that I had a working relationship with. So I was starting from a base knowledge of zero and Jeffery to me, at that time, was this great adventurer who went off to exciting parts of the world that I'd never been to, and I wanted to emulate that. I learnt a lot about how he operated and worked to make it possible, which I think then subsequently was very useful to me. I mean, as I acquired experience, I discarded a lot of his working methods because they simply didn't work for me. But at the time, when I was learning from him, I found it absolutely invaluable.

Subsequent to that it's much harder to say, because I've been surrounded by this whole group of programme makers and you work as a community. I can't think of a single individual who stands out, who's offered me something very different to all the others that I've been working with.

*BL: If you look at television today and you think about presenters, programmes themselves in the wildlife genre, which are the ones that satisfy you the most? I mean there are hundreds of them out there at the moment, you can't possibly watch them all. Which ones, which presenters, which programmes or producers for that matter would you make an appointment to say I can't miss that, I've got to see this one in a given month or year?*

RH: I think I'm naturally drawn to the more immediate programmes, the programmes which happened to be made on a fast turnaround but it's not because they're made on a fast turnaround. It's the result that you get from that that appeals to me and there's a little genre, which are the *Diaries*, which I really enjoy. I think I would try and make a date to see any new *Diary* and obviously like anything else, some of it is more successful than others. But I enjoy them because I feel I'm drawn into a kind of experience. I think that again goes back to I don't have this deep need to acquire knowledge of animal behaviour. It doesn't appeal to me as much as that interface between people and animals.

*BL: So you're talking about things like Orangutan Diary (23) or Elephant Diary (24) or indeed Big Cat (13) that you worked on yourself?*

RH: Yes, absolutely and they, of course, have moved on as well into the expedition approach as well where animals are even less important. There might be a nominal animal that you're after but it's the fact that you're on an expedition which is interesting.

*BL: And do you think this somehow explains the NHU's really kind of renaissance? I mean I remember 5 or 10 years ago there was a real concern about the dwindling interest, or potential dwindling interest in wildlife films. The BBC now is hugely, kind of wide range of programmes involving many presenters, people. I remember, we both remember the time when talking heads was the kiss of death to a wildlife film. But do you think this actually explains why the BBC in particular has succeeded as well as it has?*

RH: Well, I think the Natural History Unit has evolved a lot in the recent past. I think what had happened is it established itself as having a unique ability to produce quality natural history programmes, and that went on for years and years and there was no one else that could touch it. I mean there were obviously little independent producers who were making programmes for the Unit very effectively. But all the quality in natural history came out of the NHU.

Whenever the NHU wanted to make anything which was around the periphery of those pure programmes, the BBC was reluctant to allow them to do it. When they were allowed to do it, very often they weren't very successful. So that was actually limiting the ambitions of the Unit and kind of constricting it to a certain type of output. Then there was a kind of change which came about through this feeding in of talent and experience from elsewhere into the Unit, to enable them to produce those peripheral programmes more effectively. I think that's where the Unit has grown, both in size and volume and in its ambition as well. I think it's done that very successfully and it's done it mainly through drawing on the talent from elsewhere. But also enabling the people within the Unit to learn from that, to acquire those skills and then to apply them

themselves. I think that's been a sort of partly evolution, just evolution, and partly strategy and I think it's been very successful. I think it's effectively guaranteed the future success of the NHU within the currently existing BBC.

## **5. Presenters**

*BL: Would you say that it is the fact that the people, the presenters, the scientists, the experts that we're seeing out in Borneo or wherever it is, that they are enhancing our emotional engagement with the animals? Is that part of it?*

RH: I think that is part of it and I think also television reaches more people now in a kind of active and interactive rather than just a passive way. So I think those people that we work with, that we draw into the programs, are themselves better able to deliver for an audience than they were in the past. I suspect in the past there were an awful lot of researchers and scientists that we worked with full of information. But the moment that you tried to put them on the screen they were simply incapable of doing it because they didn't have the experience, they didn't have the understanding. Now just the nature of communication is such that far more people are able to deliver something which is of interest to other people.

*BL: I'd like you to pick out a presenter on television at the moment that you really rate and tells us why you rate him or her.*

RH: I think I've got two people that I've worked with a lot that I have a lot of respect for and they're very different, although they work together. One is Jonathan Scott and one is Simon King. They've evolved very differently but they've both had quite a sustained relationship with natural history broadcasting.

Jonathan Scott is just absolutely passionate about African wildlife in particular, any wildlife, but in particular African wildlife. He has a real desire and an ability to communicate that to people, whether it's one-to-one, whether it's in groups or whether it's through the screen. A series of producers have seen that ability and found different ways of using it and applying it. One of the things that, I think, for a long time held Jonathan back in his ability to be as effective as he could was, ironically, what was helping him to have the knowledge and the understanding, and that was the fact that he lived in East Africa. So for many years he had an inadequate understanding of the demands and the requirements of television. He had all the knowledge, all the passion, all the enthusiasm, but he didn't quite know how to conduct himself in order to be as effective as possible on the screen.

I know I wasn't particularly successful for a long time in helping to marshal him. But it did eventually happen and I think, like all presenters, some people like certain presenters, some people like other presenters. I think he has a following of people who really enjoy the fact that he's enjoying himself and enjoying communicating with other people.

Simon I've also got a lot of time for. He's a very different kind of talent. He is in some way, well he is, a much more professional broadcaster, programme maker in the real sense of the word, because he's one of the most diverse talents I know really. He can actually make a programme on his own. It wouldn't be the best programme you could make but he could actually do it, because he can do everything from writing it, shooting it, producing it, appearing it, to writing the music. He has all those talents. In a way that gives him a little bit of a problem because he sometimes finds it a bit difficult to give enough space to the other people that are around him.

But he also is passionately keen to help people to understand what's going on and he believes he understands the nature of television well enough to be able to do that. A lot of the time he's right and sometimes he doesn't get it quite right. I like his style of presentation. I think he went through a period when he was trying to emulate other people, consciously or unconsciously, I don't know. But, I think now, in the

last year or two, he's suddenly become his own person again and I think he's communicating very effectively. It certainly works for me as a viewer.

## **6. Favourite wildlife films**

*BL: I'd like to ask you another one of these kind of This is Your Life (25) type questions, and that is, looking back over all the films that you have seen in the last 30, 35 years. Like Desert Island Discs (26), if you had to take one video with you with the appropriate machine to watch it on and if you had to leave one behind, a favourite and your least favourite wildlife films. What roughly, you don't have to choose any one film, but what sort of films have you loved the most and hated the most?*

*RH: If I had to take a film away with me, I'd find that enormously difficult, and I think I'll come up with perhaps a slightly surprising answer. I think I might take away with me one of John Downer's films.*

*BL: Like, for instance?*

*RH: A Supersense (27) or if I could have the series of Supersense (27), one of those series. I've actually been quite a critic of John Downer's productions - an admirer and a critic. I think sometimes his programmes lack an element of control in the overall production but I'm absolutely fascinated by the way in which he does use imagery. It appeals to me very much and I always look at his programmes and I'm trying to follow the story and what's going, and I know that I'm missing a huge amount of what's in there. I think they're one of the very small category of natural history programmes that can be viewed over and over again, and you'll see more in it each time. For that reason, that's why I'd choose one of those to take with me.*

*BL: Why would you be critical of John?*

*RH: The thing that fascinates me there, the technology and the way he's built his imagery, I think is also, not exactly his downfall, is the weakness. It's almost too much for any one person to do, to produce a programme which has got that degree of technical sophistication and complexity in the production process, to be across all of that, driving the whole thing and delivering the finished product, I think is beyond any one individual. As a consequence of that, I think that the productions probably don't achieve their full potential. They could actually be better but that's a small criticism really, because they're up there, but they could be up there. They just don't quite make the very top tier.*

*BL: And least favourite?*

*RH: Quirkily, I'll take one of my own.*

*BL: Talk about characteristic modesty.*

*RH: I hope it's an interesting little story. A long time ago, long before I took over running Wildlife on One (28), I was asked to make a programme for Wildlife on One (28). Now, Wildlife on One (28) is a very strong, animal behaviour based series. Occasionally it goes off in different directions but broadly that's the core of it. So it was a programme, a series, a strand. I'd never made a programme before and had no real desire to make a programme for it. I could make Natural Worlds (16) because Natural World (16) sometimes appealed to me more than the brief of Wildlife on One (28).*

But they asked me to make a programme about it and I said "Yes, okay, fine". But the catch was this has to be the first programme which is made for Wildlife on One (28) which is made on tape, you're not allowed to use film. At the time when I was asked to do this tape was pretty near in its infancy and certainly was not the tool to use for a Wildlife on One (28) at all. I think I'd been asked to do it and I think afterwards I realised it

was a bit of a poisoned chalice, because everyone except me recognised that it was impossible, and it was proving that it was impossible. I thought that it might be possible. So I set off to make this film.

*BL: Can I just clarify something? I assume tape, high definition, is tape but presumably this is so long ago that this really was the infancy of tape. What year was it?*

RH: Yes, it was. It must have been - I honestly can't remember.

*BL: Well come on, Robin, roughly, early 80s?*

RH: No, later than that. It would have been late 80s, I think. The programme I made was called *Jewel in the Sun* (29) and it certainly wasn't a jewel of any kind. It was made in the Gambia and I just ran into every possible problem that you would have at that time, with trying to produce in a hot climate, hot, remote climate, on tape, when you should have been using film, which was the obvious thing to use. I used up all my budget, all my time, just trying to break through all these kind of technical, practical problems that we had. I think if I was editor of *Wildlife on One* (28), which I was subsequently, and someone had delivered that film to me, I'd have just said "Untransmittable" and I'd have written it off.

But it did get transmitted and I hope most people were out that night. I don't know this, but it could be the only *Wildlife on One* (28) that's never had a repeat, I don't know. But one of the things I did as editor of *Wildlife on One* (28) was constantly make sure that certain programmes weren't repeated too often because they go up to 10, 20, 30 repeats sometimes. I think *Jewel in Sun* (29) probably is in pristine condition in the vault somewhere.

*BL: What was the outstanding problem you had? You said solving practical issues. What was the outstanding problem you had with it?*

RH: I think probably the two: power and humidity were the two main ones and I suppose portability would be the next. A power supply, huge batteries, no battery life, humidity, working in a little bit of jungle - virtually impossible in those days. I mean it just didn't work and just needing to get around. The size of the camera, the weight of the camera, tripods, it didn't work. I also had no blame whatsoever attached to the cameraman. The cameraman was Jeremy Humphries, a very accomplished cameraman, but not really a natural history cameraman but good, at the time, on tape. He was shooting documentaries on tape, so he was one of the few people who could do it. None of the conventional natural history cameramen could do it.

So I then finished up with a team, the two of us out there, neither of us really with the depth of natural history knowledge that we should have, in order to be able to make a film for *Wildlife on One* (28).

Another bit of bad luck or bad judgement, I don't know, but my naturalist fixer out there who I'd selected, came highly recommended, possibly from someone who didn't like me for some reason, proved to be an incurable alcoholic. So although he was a bird expert, I could never get him up before about 11 o'clock in the morning so we missed every morning, didn't have his input at all. So it was a catalogue of disasters but I think you're allowed to have one of those in a career, aren't you?

*BL: Yes, that the equivalent of Desert Island Discs (26), someone choosing their own music although usually that's ego rather than modesty.*

*I'm just going onto the last few official questions here. In fact, picking up on this point about tape, have you been surprised to see, not necessarily the speed, but the amazing leaps forward that tape have made? I mean I can remember as recently as maybe five years ago, people in wildlife filmmaking saying it will never replace film, and yet tape has virtually destroyed film. It is now on its way out in a big way. Has this surprised you?*



RH: No, I think it was inevitable. The only thing I didn't know, none of us knew, was the speed at which it would happen. I think it was always going to happen. From my understanding of it, the way the whole electronics industry works is its research is driven by consumer demand. The difficulty for natural history has always been having a big enough demand for the particular requirements of natural history filmmaking, to get the research and development done to get product available for us to be able to work in the way in which we want to.

So we've finished up now in a period of compromise where cameras and equipment are better suited to natural history filmmaking. They're not ideal and they're not as good as film, and so it is a compromise. I think it's a credit to *Planet Earth* (8). We know *Planet Earth* (8) was a big production, lots of resources and cash available to it, but actually they did get themselves into all kinds of situations and come out with high quality HD material which every one of those people producing, given the choice, would have shot on film. They came back with the results, as I say, they had the time and the money to be able to do it. But they overcame all manner of problems in order to be able to do that.

A lot of that learning has been passed on to other people to make it possible for other people now to do it with smaller budgets and less time.

*BL: Can you see the time when natural history would be shot on hard disc, in effect tapeless altogether, as probably all news and news gathering will go? Do you think it'll conform to that same route?*

RH: Yes, undoubtedly. I mean the only thing holding that up at the moment is the capacity and the reliability of it, and at the moment hard disc recording is well suited to short interviews and so on in favourable conditions. It's not suited yet to long shoots in remote places. It will happen and, again, it's just a question of how soon.

## **7. The future of the wildlife filmmaking industry**

*BL: Can I ask you to put on or look into a crystal ball and think not so much technically, like tape, but more kind of stylistically, editorially, the direction you see wildlife filmmaking going? I don't think anyone would have predicted it would be where it is today even 10 years ago, let alone 20 or 30 years ago. But what would you predict to be editorially, stylistically, the most significant moves that are likely to take place in wildlife filmmaking in, say, another 10 or 15 years?*

RH: I wonder whether, in some ways, we're seeing ourselves go round through a complete cycle. When I started in natural history filmmaking, a lot of the people who were producing the material were not professionals. They happened to be wealthy, adventurous types who travelled the world and had the means to be able to bring back material with them. They didn't always have the ability to turn that material into programmes, they needed some help for that, but they were the people who acquired it. So they were just ordinary people, not professionals, going out into the wilderness, getting themselves into the situations where they could capture the material, the content, and bring it back.

Since then we've gone through a phase of that's virtually disappeared and it's gone into the hands of professionals. The technical standards went up, the requirements went up, and people devoted their lives to acquiring the skills and the experience to be able to bring back the material themselves. Now we're entering another phase, where the ability to get out with equipment is available to everybody and broadcasting, not just through the linear channels, is opening up to everybody. And people are realising that they can acquire material, they can show material, they can see other people's material. So there's less reliance on the professional filmmaker to get an impression of what's going on.

So clearly they're different production standards and values, but that is out there. I just wonder whether that's going to grow and develop, and a far greater proportion of what gets crafted into mainline programmes will actually come from people who are offering it to us. I think we've seen that starting to happen, well, we have seen it starting to happen in news, where quite a lot of news stories are built around material from people who happen to be in the right place at the right time or the wrong place at the wrong time.

*BL: With their mobile phones or whatever.*

RH: Absolutely, yes, and I just sense that we could start to get that happening in natural history filmmaking in the future. Not necessarily to take over completely but to become quite a big source of material and input. I think the younger audience in particular seems to enjoy and relish that kind of interaction - producing material, presenting it to other people and seeing other people's material. So I think it'll be second nature to them to receive content in that way.

*BL: Do you think in that same way that wildlife filmmaking, which even now is in the hands of tiny, privileged, well connected groups with a lot of financial backing, that it'll kind of blow open in a big way? And that people from other countries and other continents will be able to contribute things in a much more spontaneous way, a sort of democratisation, to use a horrible word, of the whole genre. So that we see things from Central Africa or Borneo shot by locals in a very spontaneous way that opens our eyes to things that are happening now, today.*

RH: I certainly think that could happen. I think it probably needs initiative from this end. What I think is happening is a halfway house to that, in that I think there are large areas of the world where there are communities within them, that are actually getting the ability, the experience, the funding to be able to produce, where in the past they couldn't. So we would go off on our forays to far flung places and bring the stuff back with us, now I think the ability is out there to deliver for us. If we choose to pick off more of that I think we can.

That in turn will move on, so instead of us wanting to acquire from those people who've got these skills and experience to deliver for us, they will be offering more. So I think a greater proportion of our content will come from those growing communities of filmmakers, or people who are passionate about wildlife and the environment, in those places. Again, because I think the way that we look on things is much broader than it used to be, it's not as narrow based, I think probably the audience will find that far more acceptable in the future. The younger audience will find that far more acceptable.

*BL: If a young recruit came to you tomorrow, somebody straight out of maybe even school. An A level graduate aged 18 or 20 came to you now, today, and said I want to get into wildlife television, what do I do next, how do I do it? What would you say to them?*

RH: I think I'd try to offer them practical advice and encouragement of where to go and what to do. But, more importantly, I'd want them to examine themselves to find out whether it really was what they wanted to do, and that they had the dedication and the determination to carry it through. Because I think the very nature of natural history filmmaking is glamorous and we all know it's not quite as glamorous as it might appear to be from outside. But I think, when you're young and impressionable, it certainly is very glamorous and compared with what a lot of futures might be for young people it's one that would appeal to them.

So I'd want them to be very aware of how incredibly difficult it is to succeed and that's not just through personal talents and skills but it's through the intense competition that there is for any opportunity. But the opportunities are there and there always will be opportunities, and some people are going to be able to get those opportunities and make the best of them. So I would just encourage people to be really sure that it's what they want to do, and I think that they can demonstrate that to us and to themselves by what they're doing. I don't think you have to be producing films. I think you have to be out there and getting your feet dirty and acquiring knowledge. You have to be exposing yourself to difficult situations.

If you're doing all that and you still really want to do it then I would then start pointing people to where they might be able to get some experience.

*BL: What are the core skills you need to succeed in this business?*

RH: I think dedication and determination are absolute paramount, because you're almost always up against something which is trying to, conspiring to, prevent you from getting the result that you're after. Maybe it's just my experience, I don't know, but natural history location work just seems to be a constant series of obstacles that you're having to knock down in order to get to where you want to be. Unless you're really, really determined and dedicated I don't think you'll do it, I think you'll give up.

I also think, and there are a lot of examples that disprove this, I think you need to be quite a good planner and quite organised. My own feeling is that if you're not you're likely to come off the rails. Having said that, I do know individuals who are definitely not organised and don't plan well who do still come back with the results. They've usually got a team of people around them that are helping them. But I think that is something I'd be looking for in someone if I was going to offer them an opportunity.

## **8. Environmental Filmmaking**

*BL: There are random questions I'd like to ask you. First, there's one little section that I feel in particular I think you should address, and that is to do with environmental programme making. The role of the environment in wildlife filmmaking. We both worked together on Nature (30) which is the first environment series or was it? I mean there was a sense at the time we thought we were in at the start but it actually went back further. What's your perspective on environmental filmmaking and when it started and where it's going now?*

RH: I think there have always been, for as long as there has been natural history broadcasting almost, an environmental approach to some programmes that were made. I would apply it to *Web of Life* (31). If you don't remember, *Web of Life* (31) which was a series from the 80s, I think.

*BL: I think it's earlier than that.*

RH: 70s is it?

*BL: I think it's before my time so it must probably mid 70s.*

RH: Right; and that certainly took a kind of environmental approach to the locations that they were filming in. I think probably what we're talking about though really is the more journalistic approach to investigating issues to do with the environment. They have been harder to get onto the screen and were traditionally very hard for the NHU to get involved in.

*BL: Because there was a lot of resistance to Nature (30) wasn't there?*

RH: Absolutely, yes.

*BL: And what was the nature of that resistance?*

RH: I think it was we didn't have the expertise to be able to produce that kind of series, and even if we did, why are we doing it because there's no one else that can make natural history films, and they wanted us

to make natural history films. So there was a small group of people who wanted to make something to do with the environment but the BBC was conspiring against that. I think it was a tough battle. I mean I wasn't involved in the actual battle but to get that commissioned I think was really quite an achievement.

Having had it commissioned, there was then a kind of an internal, political compromise that had to go on in order to keep it on air. That was that, because it was being produced by the Natural History Unit, it had to look as though it came from the Natural History Unit. It had to contain elements within it that couldn't have been made anywhere else in the BBC. But that was actually for whoever was editing the series, story editing the series, was quite difficult because it stopped you from necessarily always going for what you felt to be the strongest stories that should be in there.

*BL: So the pressure on you, when you did become editor, were to keep the wildlife content up but yet what was unique to Nature (30) was not the wildlife content but the journalistic content.*

RH: Yes, absolutely.

*BL: And how did you steer your way through it?*

RH: Then from the senior BBC's review the bit that I could endorse was that if you get into the really heavy stories, did we have a team that was strong enough and had the depth of journalistic experience, right the way through from presenters through to researchers that could actually deliver those stories. Or were we going to finish up not doing them very well and tarnishing the BBC's reputation. So we couldn't allow that to happen either.

I think we steered quite a good course through it in the end. I think we took some softer environmental stories and quite a few people learnt quite a lot from doing those, and then we fed in a few slightly harder ones as well. At the same time we were drip feeding glossy, pure, natural history stories into it. It was a compromise but because it was a magazine show, a magazine show is a ragbag, is a mix, in that you can to some extent stir the mix however you like. The view was that the audience at that time will stay with a series they like, even if there are items within it they don't like. I don't think that applies now, I don't think you could do it in the same way. But at that time I think it did work quite well.

What happened then, of course, is that having had a magazine series that ran quite successfully for a number of series, there was an ambition within the Unit to move beyond that and to do more one-off or series of documentaries on environmental issues. That really just took us through the same argument again. In fact, it was even stronger, the resistance, to that because it was going to take more and more of our top talent, time, budgets to produce something which didn't really truly reflect the Natural History Unit. I think probably on that one we lost. I don't think we got nearly as many of those one-off documentaries through as we could have done. I believe, and then again I wasn't behind it all, the strength of the proposals that were coming through were good enough, strong enough to get on the screen. It was the fact they were coming from the Natural History Unit that prevented them from getting into production.

*BL: I mean looking back, would you agree with me that the amazing thing was, this is mid to late 80s, that no one else was proposing these stories. I mean Nature (30) really was the first to cover things like the hamburger connection, acid rain. All sorts of big, environmental issues, which news and current affairs were simply not coming up with.*

RH: I think that's true and I think if there was any legacy from *Nature (30)*, I think that programmes like *Panorama (32)* and so on, the current affairs strains, actually did start to pick up some of those stories subsequently. I've never done an investigation into it and I suspect there were very few, if any, beforehand and I suspect that there were more subsequently. So the fact that we'd had our series on the screen for those years actually did have a good effect on news and current affairs.



We may be taking too much credit for that, I don't know. I mean it maybe just that there was an increasing interest and awareness generally, in the public at large, at that time which increased the appetite for it, and other producers elsewhere just saw that and went with it.

*BL: There's a big debate, isn't there, that you hear sometimes where people say, well, wildlife films haven't made any contribution to protecting the environment or even an awareness of environmental issues, making a difference as it were. Where do you stand on this? Do you think we have made a difference or do you think in effect you've just been carried along on a tidal wave of greater interest and awareness, just like everyone else?*

*RH: I think it's been enormously valuable, that's not to say it couldn't have been more valuable, I think it has been valuable. I think it's a little bit like the analogy with the anthropomorphic children's programmes. If you can do that and you can bring children through, get them interested, and that's a subject for the rest of their life they're interested, it's been worth it. I think the same applies to natural history. If most natural history is a little bit detached from the real world but it's giving people a real interest in those places and those species and the vulnerability of it, and they have to go elsewhere to follow up, I think it's still doing a very valuable job.*

I think the argument really is could the NHU go further? Could it have gone further sooner into these other areas? Could it have done the job which we're giving to other people or allowing other people to do, rather than doing ourselves? Sorry, I didn't express that very well, but I think the NHU could have pressed harder, could possibly have done more. That doesn't mean to say that what it's done hasn't been valuable, I think it's been enormously valuable.

*BL: What should the Unit be doing now in the environment with climate change in particular? The environment has shot up the agenda, everyone is aware of it, news and current affairs are doing it. Do you think that wildlife filmmakers should be getting into this as part of this, the whole gamut of media coverage of the environment? Or do you think now that it's become a big, open, political issue we can kind of step back and get back to the things that interest us, just pure wildlife, blue chip films? Or do you think we have a role, we have something to contribute to the whole environmental debate?*

*RH: I think there's definitely something to contribute. I think because of the perception of the NHU, I think you have to be very careful that you're not to seem to be following trends. You need to be out there in front. So I don't think we should fall into the trap of emulating what's going on elsewhere. What I think will happen, and probably is happening, I'm just not close enough to it at the moment, is that there is a new generation of programme makers coming through. These are young people who have a completely different approach to the previous generation.*

So I suspect the kind of rather more purist natural history filmmakers are reducing in number. The proportion of those is getting smaller and the interests, the concerns of the new programme makers, the inexperienced ones who are starting to come through with ideas, will be more expansive and we will see a bigger proportion of natural history programmes addressing those issues. That's what I think will probably happen, but I'm seeing that from outside, rather than from within. I'm not actually involved in the day-to-day editorial process any longer.

## **9. Reflections on a career at the BBC Natural History Unit**

*BL: In the course of your career you started out as a craft editor and then you moved up a notch in the sense that you became more of a programme maker, and then a programme editor overseeing the making of series, and then finally you moved into management. In effect very much at arm's length from the nuts and bolts of making films but much more day-to-day involved in managing people. What sort of philosophy or attitude did you bring to management at the NHU in wildlife filmmaking? How would you characterise*

*what you tried to do in terms of managing what was the biggest filmmaking production unit in the world?*

RH: It hadn't been an ambition of mine to do it, so it wasn't something that I was striving to achieve. I think what happened was that through my production career, because I wasn't a driven, passionate naturalist, I tended to make programmes that involved bringing groups of people together and getting the best I could out of those groups of people. So you pooled skills and led those teams, and delivered something which, in the end, was definitely a joint effort. I kind of moved my way through the system doing that, from having my own programmes, to having eventually strands like *Wildlife on One* (28).

As you do that you get a little bit more remote from the day-to-day programme making and more aware of the individuals, the personalities of the individuals, the potential of those individuals and you start to steer people. You have more authority, I suppose, to steer people and develop people and I got quite interested in that. When I was offered the chance to move away from production into a management role which was largely managing people, I thought about it and decided it was actually something I wanted to do. Most of my peers were surprised. I mean, they said they were surprised by my decision, because they were driven to produce. I was no longer driven to produce. I hadn't got an ambition to get specific topics onto the screen but I actually could see that I could help other people to do that.

So I decided that the thing to do was to try to work with this community of people, try to draw out the strengths of everyone that you could. But try to help those who had either inexperience or problems with attitude or whatever, all the little personality problems that we all have. Try to deal with those and get the best out of the whole community. Actually it was a challenge and I did enjoy it and I just think I'm fortunate in a way that I can sometimes see what people have got to offer, and I can see what's holding them back from being able to do it and help them to overcome that.

I feel that I can often get into a group of people that are having a problem working as a team and unravel what the cause of the problem is and help to put them back together again and overcome it and move forward. I think we all use what intuitively comes to us readily and fairly easily, and that seems to be something that I can naturally do reasonably well.

*BL: I think the impression you gave everyone who worked with you was that you had somehow reduced your ego and this was inspiring to others. But also I think you brought a rationality to the whole process, which was very helpful in solving problems. That's not a question by the way.*

RH: Well, I think the other thing that goes with this is a sense of fairness. I have got a great belief in being fair and being seen to be fair and people responding to that. I think that for any aspect of managing people, if you can deliver that, if you can get that across, you've won half the battles already. If you can acquire a reputation for being fair, people will come to you, you don't always have to tease it out of them, they will come and offer things and it makes it much easier just to go ahead, move forward.

*BL: You've spent an entire career in effect in the BBC in Bristol, in the Natural History Unit mainly. Any regrets?*

RH: Yes. A regret that that's what I've done. The whole of my professional life has been devoted to one organisation operating largely out of one base. I've enjoyed it enormously and in some ways I wouldn't change it. But you can't have everything and there are certain things. I've never lived abroad. I've obviously spent a lot of time abroad but it's never the same as living abroad and I would have liked to have lived in another country for a number of years, just to get the sense of what it's like, and I missed that opportunity.

*BL: Where would you want to be then?*

RH: Well I know my wife, Ellen, would have loved us to go and live in Norway. I thought that was impractical and there were certain aspects of living in Norway that appealed to me greatly but I couldn't see it

working practically for a family, educating kids and so on. We weren't going to move there permanently, so I wrote that off.

Possibly, one real regret I have is at one point I was offered a job in TV New Zealand and I turned that down. I think I turned it down because of the nature of the work. I'm not really that ambitious but maybe I just felt that I was going to achieve more back here. With hindsight I probably should have gone off and done that and I could have come back and done something different here subsequently, so that's a little bit of a regret.

Overall, I'm pretty happy with what I've done and I wouldn't change very much.

*BL: This is a little random one really. But something that one is aware of in the BBC is that, and I've worked in and out, in various places, as a producer outside you have to handle the big wide world. You have to make commissions, you have to handle money, you have to know a lot of ins and outs of where the money goes and what to do, and how to manage people. But on the inside you're kind of insulated from it, at least if you're a lowly producer. How do you think attitudes to money have evolved within the BBC and where are they now in terms of wildlife filming?*

RH: Again radical change, there has been radical change. I suppose because I was at a rather different level, I was very unaware of anything to do with finance during the early years of my time in the BBC. I mean as an editor you would have a schedule with a number of weeks. If for some reason you overran, you simply went into an office and said this is overrunning, it's going to need another one or two weeks, and someone rewrote the schedule. There was never a question of, well, where's the money going to come from, that wasn't an issue at all.

Even when I started shooting for *Animal Magic (4)*, when I was doing the studio and doing film inserts as well, I had to get five stories a week. I went on the road with a film crew and had to come back with five stories at the end of the week. It wasn't because it was only five days of money, it was because that was the schedule and in order to meet the live transmission. So finances didn't dictate what went on in the BBC and I don't know, at that time, how on earth it operated as a corporation.

There was an awareness that crept in after that for me, which was above and below the line costs. The below the line costs were all the things which were regular outgoings which you couldn't do anything about at all. The above line costs were the things which were actually pound notes that you had to pay out. The above the line costs were a tiny proportion of programme budgets and it was a totally unreal world.

Having said that, I'll go back to John Downer for a moment, because towards the end of that era John Downer and his skills and his experience and his unique approach to wildlife filmmaking is, in my view, entirely due to, well, obviously his own talent and ambition. But also the BBC allowing him to develop that and it was done because it was all below the line. So all the BBC resources, whatever he wanted, was available to him.

*BL: What sorts of things do you mean?*

RH: Developing special pieces of equipment, using engineering and videotape editing skills, access to studios for blue screening when it was in its infancy. All those things he didn't have to pay for and at the end, as long as he produced what was considered to be an experimental film, that was all the BBC wanted. Well it's great in a way, I mean it is great and we're now seeing from John and have seen a different type of natural history production which, had the BBC not been there, wouldn't have been achievable. We wouldn't have had John Downer type programmes happening. So there was an advantage to it.

But it felt like you were almost working within a little kind of family business, where the head of the family was looking after everything and you all did your own little jobs. Now that's changed. Now I think working at the BBC, you feel like you're working in a giant corporation, and different people at different levels are looking in

a very minute way at every aspect of what you do. The good that's come out of that is, I think, we really do now have a really clear understanding of the cost of programme making, every aspect of the cost of programme making. I think producers are aware of that and certainly in a way in which they weren't 10 years ago, possibly even five years ago. Producers acknowledge the need to match their ambition to their budgets, so that's a big change and I think it's inevitable and unavoidable and probably right, as well.

The difference between an independent production and a production within the BBC is that any independent is obviously operating with a small number of people, and those people have to have a wider number of skills than people in the BBC. In the BBC you can develop your own skills in a much more narrow way to a higher level. You've got to be a bit more of a generalist if you're going to survive in an indie. So I think independent producers do actually have a better grasp of money than BBC producers, even now I think that is true. But the BBC producers have caught up very quickly.

### **10. Forming the modern Natural History Unit**

*BL: Picking up on this financial side. Do you think this means greater financial awareness on the part of producers, are wildlife films being made more economically, more efficiently now?*

RH: Yes, I do think they are. I think the problem is that the opportunities for producers are so much greater. You have so much technical sophistication at your fingertips to be able to play with, to enhance your production, that the challenge is how far do you go with that and what investment is worth it for the return on the screen? I think that's the difficulty that people face now. But I think they are aware of the costs. I think it's almost editorial rather than financial is the issue.

*BL: I'm looking quizzical simply because I remember, as you will, when Avid editing came in to take over from Steenbeck, and we were told this would revolutionise editing because non-linear means you can edit things in half the time. We all thought that the six week Natural World (16) film edit time would drop to three weeks, and I remember having discussions and even people attempting to do it. Of course what happened, as you know, the opportunities meant that people took greater time and greater care. I mean, I wonder if it's that they're being made more efficiently because in effect Avid edit times are now the same as they were on Steenbeck but the product is better.*

RH: I think the ambition is greater, I think that's the problem. If you set out to make the same programme and you were doing it on a Steenbeck then you were going to do it on an Avid, presuming you had the skills on the Avid. You'd achieve it faster on the Avid. The problem is because the method is different, the way you arrive at the result is a different route. You go in a straight line with film to get there; largely it's a straight line. As soon as you're on the Avid there isn't a straight line to get there because you throw it around all over the place, and you investigate all kinds of things. Eventually you might come out with the same product, it's taken you a lot longer. The chances are you'll actually come out with something much better. So it's taken you longer but it's better.

If you've only achieved the same and it's taken the same time, then you haven't gained anything. But if your product's got better, then you have achieved something.

*BL: Avid is actually no cheaper than a Steenbeck.*

RH: No.

*BL: I mean in effect it's not that we're making the programmes more efficiently, in fact we're probably spending more money, it's just that we're making better films? Is that what it is?*



RH: Yes, that's what I believe to be the case. I think the thing that people hate about the BBC is the thing that it needs to do if it's trying to drive down cost, and that is to reduce the amount of time that people have. Because there is a way in which you can achieve a result within whatever time you're given. If you've traditionally had six weeks and suddenly you've got four. You can make a programme in four weeks, it just won't be as good. So you have to decide how good you want it to be, match that to the money you've got, and then insist that people keep to it.

The problem is, in my experience, as soon as you start trying to do that you cannot change the ambition of the producer. So the producer will keel over and he will take his editor over with him because they'll work day and night to get six weeks work into four. That I think is the real issue: how do you get producers to, if you like, under produce their projects to make them for a price and make them to a certain standard, not the standard that they wish to achieve.

*BL: Do you think that perhaps what's happened here is that, although it's good in a sense the producers are exposed to the real value of money and have to think about it, at the same time it creates a lot of anxiety? Have we kind of taken the fun out of filmmaking by making it a business enterprise where you have to account for your paperclips every day? Is there a danger that we've taken the creativity out of it to some extent?*

RH: I think it's almost inevitable that that's going to happen. I mean I can remember going through a phase where it was a clear strategy of protecting producers from anything other than crafting and delivering their programme, through all the phases of production. Everyone else was taking the heat, whether that was production managers, production co-ordinators, exec editors. The producer was inviolate, you couldn't touch the producer. You just had to let them get on with the job because they were the people who were delivering the programme; everyone else was just enabling them to deliver it.

Then there was a clear change of strategy, because that was putting too much pressure on everyone else, it simply wasn't working, the two were constantly clashing. So it was decided that producers should be given the same financial responsibility, managerial responsibilities, so that they weren't simply a programme maker crafting content, they did a proper producer's job. A lot of people found that very difficult and it took a while to get from one to the other, and it wasn't entirely the fault of the individuals. It was actually, I think, us, the organisation, which were very slow in getting to that stage. You shouldn't have producers who are protected like that because they should have learnt from the time when they were junior researchers that television production involves all these things. It involves management, it involves finance and it involves getting a programme onto the screen, telling a story.

*BL: Yes, it's fascinating. Just as an aside on that, having worked in and out and freelance and ITV, whatever, I think there is a perception that producers in the Unit even today are kind of living in cloud cuckoo land. They really don't know and there are some extreme examples which I'm sure we're all aware of. Do you see that as being something that'll slowly come back and that there'll be a more equal understanding and responsibility in and out of the Beeb? Or do you think the BBC, because of its public service element and funding, etc, history, that it will always be a bit protective?*

RH: I think it's almost like breeding it out to be honest. I think there are some people who get so entrenched, and provided that they're talented enough, are able to buck the trend. I don't believe there are any younger filmmakers coming through who will be able to behave as some of the more established ones do. You can argue about how tough you should be on some of those more established ones, and different people will take different views on it. But inevitably they will eventually work their way through the system but the problem won't be perpetuated. I think that the new programme makers are more rounded than that.

*BL: Who do you think has been the best Head of the Natural History Unit in your career and why?*

RH: I find that hard to pull out an individual. Can I talk about a couple of people?

BL: Yes.

RH: Chris Parsons who I actually didn't know very well, despite the fact I worked for him, in his unit, for a long time. I was always doing completely separate things which weren't probably the thing that he had to devote most attention to. But I do think he actually developed the Unit at a stage, brought it out of that gentleman era that I was talking about, that rather amateur era, into the first phase of true, professional wildlife filmmaking. I think he achieved that.

The second person I'd point to is Alastair Fothergill because Alastair arrived at a time when the Unit was extraordinarily vulnerable, to the point when it could have wound up or merged or something. But certainly lost its identity. It was going through a particularly bad phase for a number of reasons.

BL: *This is about, what, 1990, 91?*

RH: Yes, early 90s. I think there are relatively few people who could have rescued the Unit from that situation. I think his success was a combination of personal attributes.

BL: *Being?*

RH: Great leadership and determination and a clear vision of what he wanted to achieve, a very clear vision of what he wanted to achieve, and an ability to analyse what was necessary, in order to get it. I think the other thing that helped him to achieve it was he had the wholehearted support of the people that were working in the department. Very, very few exceptions to that, and he had the support of BBC management as well. He was incredibly inexperienced in management but he managed to turn the Unit around in a relatively short space of time.

BL: *Just to put everyone in the picture. At that time he was only in his mid 30s.*

RH: Yes, I think he was 32, from memory, when he took over. Very young to take over a department like that, particularly a department in crisis. Having said that, Alastair I think would also acknowledge this himself, he was the right man for the time. That particular problem with the Unit as it was at that time, Alastair and his attributes were perfect to solve it and he did magnificently. The way that he operates, the kind of person he is, he maybe, he hasn't been tested, he may be a less effective leader in the current circumstances. So if he was to take over now he might not be quite as successful, because he wouldn't necessarily be able to apply his personal attributes in the same way that he could then. I think things have changed.

BL: *He was very strong, wasn't he, very decisive?*

RH: Yes, absolutely.

BL: *I mean things have become much more collegiate, haven't they?*

RH: Very much so, yes. It's changed a lot. Also I think interestingly I came along on the scene after Alastair had gone, effectively, from that role. I came along because there was a recognition at that time that the Unit had grown to the point where it was virtually impossible for one person to run it. It needed a division of the jobs, the tasks that had to be undertaken and Alastair wouldn't have been as good at that, he was very good at running the entire thing. So for a certain size Unit he was absolutely spot on.

*BL: When Greg Dyke came in he's remembered for having basically said "Cut the crap". He saw the BBC as a big bureaucracy, he wanted to cut all the nonsense and he succeeded up to a point. However, spinning forward five years, there's an awful lot of crap around, isn't there? What is your perspective? I mean you were senior BBC management. As relevant as you can make this to the NHU, do you think the BBC is in danger of creaking under the weight of bureaucracy again?*

RH: Yes, I think there is an element of that. It's really difficult with big corporations, how autocratic can they be. In a way, the more autocratic they are, the more efficient they are, but that comes at a high cost. The more you devolve, the more you run the risk of becoming more inefficient, you're not always more inefficient, but you do run the risk and you lose control. That's the dilemma that these big organisations have.

I think we probably, perhaps, get the wrong impression from within the Natural History Unit and I think the Natural History Unit, by its very nature, has grown into an entity which can run itself effectively. It doesn't need much by way of external influences on it in order for it to be successful. So I think there's a danger that we within it might see that as a model for the BBC as a whole. I suspect that across the rest of the BBC there are areas of production where the NHU model, ideal model, wouldn't work and it actually needs to be more of a corporate approach to it.

So that's a bit of a fudge of an answer but I do think the NHU is different to lots of the rest of the BBC. If it was floated off as an indie of some kind it would operate perfectly well and it would be very successful. I'm not suggesting it should happen but it would. Loads of other bits of BBC production you float them off and they kind of disappear very quickly.

*BL: It's an interesting answer. Really in a way my final question would be, we spent time in the BBC imbued with the public service remit of the BBC: fairness and balance and a duty to provide information, etc. Do you think, given the changes we're seeing in the BBC and the sorts of programmes, and specifically wildlife programmes, do you see any danger that the BBC might be heading off in a direction that is less geared towards the public good? Or do you see it maintaining those values of providing a service to the nation and who knows, maybe even to the world in terms of what it does?*

RH: Well, let's start from within the NHU. One thing that hasn't changed is there's a kind of integrity which people come with or sign up to, and very few people step outside that. Sometimes if they do it's inadvertent, rather than deliberate. I think that's something that's really important to the perception of the NHU outside the NHU, whether that's within the BBC or the audience at large. I do think that the NHU has perhaps been a little bit slower than some areas in exposing itself to the audience in every way that's practical now, given all the different means of communication. But it's kind of catching up and from what I've seen recently it's doing it really well, and I think that's really important.

*BL: What do you mean by exposing itself?*

RH: Allowing people to have access to what's going on, feeling that they're involved in what's going on.

*BL: Involved in questioning and openness?*

RH: Yes, absolutely and I think the internet has been a huge asset to the NHU because a lot of people can't be entirely satisfied with what they get from a broadcast programme. We have a huge amount of information which is available to people, which can then flow backwards and forwards, and I think that's starting to happen now within a lot of productions. It's helping to offer information to the public and to inform producers from the audience. The audience feedback is really important and I sense that in the recent past it's being listened to, whereas go back a bit further and producers by and large weren't particularly interested in audience feedback. They knew what they wanted to make and they made it as best they possibly could

and they delivered it and that was the end of it.

Now, I think there's a genuine desire to interact with the audience and I think you're dead if you don't actually. But the Unit is doing it and so that's really important.

*BL: So the BBC has become in your view more responsive to what the public think they want?*

RH: Yes, I think that's happened. I think there's probably still a large sector of the audience that don't actually do that yet and don't realise that if they did they can exert some influence, I mean they have a powerful voice. But where it is happening hopefully it's growing. Now that is really important, I think, for the future of the BBC because unless it does that, unless it becomes more responsive to the audience, then I think it will get picked off. It will be very vulnerable, just because of the way in which it's funded. I think it's doing reasonably well at the moment. I get the impression it's doing reasonably but I don't know for sure.

*BL: I do have a final, final question and that is, I want to spin the clock forward 25 years and we live in a world of environmental collapse. Climate change has wiped out 100 million people in Bangladesh. It's moved the goalposts in Africa to an extent that the national parks are irrelevant, wildlife has been decimated, pollution is much worse than it is now. Somebody writes a history of the BBC Natural History Unit and not only the BBC Natural History Unit, but wildlife filmmaking in general. Did it do enough to prevent this from happening? It was the only area of filmmaking involved directly in telling us what's out there - natural resources, wildlife, the environment. Okay, I'll put forward the devil's advocate. It did very, very little to alert us to the dangers that were to come. Now is that true or false?*

RH: I think that's true, but I think we were talking earlier on about how broad the brief for the NHU should be, and whether the value of the NHU is in drawing people into the subjects at the first level and then other people take them on from there and the NHUs job isn't to do that. Or the NHU's prevented from doing that, whichever it is, that is happening elsewhere. That doesn't negate the value of what the NHU's doing. Could it have done more? Could it have tried harder? Well, I suppose you can argue that, yes, you should have pushed harder to get different ideas through, to produce things in a different way, to get different talent in. Yes, you could have done that.

Would that actually have helped the NHU to prosper? I don't know. If the NHU as a consequence of doing that lost audience, lost its viewership, lost money, lost income, in the end you haven't actually gained anything. It's a really tough one to answer. It's tough to know whether the current strategy is right or not but I don't think I would line up with those who say "It's wrong". That's a little bit of a cop-out as well.

*BL: No, I don't think it is. I think I'd agree with you for it's worth. It's not a simple answer and you can't be bringing the news as well as interpreting it and acting on it. You can only fulfil one function and maybe that biography in 25 years will judge that it was the dissemination of an understanding of nature and our need to love and protect it that generated the awareness of environmental issues.*

RH: Yes, true.

*BL: I don't know either.*

RH: I mean if you get more *Panoramas* (32) on environmental issues like we were saying and if the people making them had been partly inspired by what they've seen in the NHU, in its narrow approach to environmental production. If that's caused them to commission programmes, that's great, it's a big achievement, but we don't see that. We don't see that as a result of what we've done. You never tie the two together.



*BL: I agree. I think there's a tendency to blame us, when in fact doing things about the environment is to do with politicians and what we buy in the shops, etc. I mean it's a huge thing that now impinges on every aspect of our lives. So to blame us for something is, I think, a misinterpretation in many ways.*

RH: The awareness, the level of awareness now, from the highest level of politics through to the grassroots, is far greater than it's ever been and I'm not quite sure what stimulated that and the NHU must have had its little bit to play. But there's been other big factors causing that as well. So it's quite difficult to say what the brief of the NHU ought to be. I think the brief has always been seen as within the context of broadcasting, rather than a broader political or social brief. Once you get into that area then I think it's a little bit dangerous.

*BL: But it is funny looking back, back to Wildscreen in the mid 80s, 84, 86, when we worked on Nature (30) together. The festival had no interest in environmental programmes. There was no category for environmental programmes. In fact the general opinion of Wildscreen delegates was that there was no place for environmental programmes in any of our output. We were kind of stared at working on Nature because we had 'talking heads' and yet time's spun on, the whole raison d'etre, the mission statement for Wildscreen is protection of the environment. Which is, I think, a very interesting type of revolution, isn't it?*

RH: Yes, it is.

*BL: Thank you Robin, that was really interesting.*

#### **People, films and organizations mentioned**

Alastair Fothergill  
Armand Denis  
Chris Parsons  
David Attenborough  
Greg Dyke  
Hans Hass  
Jeffery Boswall  
Jeremy Humphries  
John Boorman  
John Downer  
Johnny Morris  
Jonathan Scott  
Lotte Hass  
Martha Holmes  
Michaela Denis  
Mike deGruy



# WILDFILMHISTORY

100 YEARS OF WILDLIFE FILMMAKING

Simon King

BBC

Bristol University

Bristol Zoo Gardens

Discovery Channel

ITV

Natural History Unit (NHU)

TV New Zealand

Wildscreen

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[www.wildfilmhistory.org](http://www.wildfilmhistory.org)





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100 YEARS OF WILDLIFE FILMMAKING

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31. *Web of Life* (BBC, 1973)
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## Glossary

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

**Recce:** an assessment of an intended filming location to ascertain it's suitability and any potential logistical problems

**HD:** High Definition

**Indie** – Independent company

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