Simon Trevor : Oral History Transcription

Name of interviewee(s):
Simon Trevor

Reasons why chosen for an oral history:

A passionate conservationist and award winning filmmaker, Simon Trevor has worked on African natural history and feature films since 1963. As well as his long Standing collaborations with Survival Anglia and diverse freelance work, he has also set up the African Environmental Film Foundation, a company committed to producing and distributing films for African audiences.

Name of interviewer:
Jean Hartley

Reasons why interviewer chosen:
Colleague and friend

Name of cameraperson:
Sophia Scott

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1. The early years

JH: Simon, can you give us your full name and today's date.

ST: My name is Simon Trevor. It's 7th February 2010.

JH: We're in Nairobi and we're going to talk about Simon's long and interesting life. Simon, you were born in England.

ST: Yes, I was born in England in 1938. Left England when I was eight years old because I was taken out to Africa by my father. He had actually worked in Kenya in 1925 and Mozambique 1928 so he was an old Africa hand.

JH: He was an engineer?

ST: My father was a civil engineer and he worked on the railway, the Kenya Ugandan railway in 1925, and then he worked in Mozambique in 1928 on the longest railway bridge in the world at that time across the

Pungwe River. My mother went out there with a three month old son, my eldest brother, in 28 and there was not even one chemist in the whole country, and 8 of the engineers out of the 12 died from blackwater fever. That was when my mother first learnt about Africa and she loved Africa forever after that. But they went back to England for the war and my father worked on the Mulberry Harbour project which was temporary harbourage for the D Day landings.

But immediately after the war we were all ready to leave to come back to Africa and the night before we were all due to leave on a ship it was completely destroyed by fire. Throughout the war my mother had been hoarding food for this epic journey back to Africa. My father came back to the hotel after being away for an hour and said "we're leaving straightaway, one suitcase each." He'd hired an RAF (Royal Air Force) coastal command bomber and this is what we flew to Africa in. It took seven days, hopping all the way down and because I grew up in the war years I spent most of my time in the turret of the bomber shooting imaginary Germans of course. Anyhow we went to South Africa, all the way to Johannesburg.

Then four years later we left South Africa and went to Rhodesia which is now called Zimbabwe today. On the way in this trip from UK, on this flight down through Africa, I remember very well seeing this man. He was an RAF man stationed in a place called Wadi Haifa and Wadi Haifa is now underneath the waters of the Aswan Dam. He had a leopard cub under his chair so maybe that planted some interest in me for wildlife. I'd grown up on a farm, of course, in England so I knew something about animals.

JH: You went to school in Rhodesia?

ST**:** I went to school in Rhodesia and later to school in South Africa, and again I was living on a farm in Rhodesia.

JH: When you were 15 you got your first camera?

ST**:** Yes, I remember very well. Obviously I was infatuated with wildlife from the beginning for some reason, I don't know why. I never had any other interest other than wildlife right from an early age.

JH: And motorbikes?

ST**:** Yes, I deviated a bit to motorbikes. In fact, I can't really say my school years were that impressive because I never passed a single exam in my whole life. I used to go off and race motorbikes instead of going to school in the morning and things like that. Then eventually one holiday I made a deal with my father that if I built him a water tank for the house in Harare, in Salisbury as it was called then, he would buy me a camera and this was the deal. So I got this 8mm camera.

JH: What make of camera, can you remember?

ST**:** I cannot remember what make it was at all but I do remember somehow finding out that if I filmed my father riding his horse he would buy me more film. The trick was not to film him falling off only other people and then he would have a good laugh and then he'd buy me another film.

JH: Now your father wanted you to go into engineering, didn't he, and you joined a company working on a housing project for the Kariba Dam?

ST**:** Yes, my father and my eldest brother, Robin, were both engineers, civil engineers, and my father was very keen to follow along but it didn't quite work. I was apprenticed to an English company called Richard Costain who were building close to 500 houses for the Kariba Dam project in Zimbabwe, a huge dam that was being built across the Zambezi River. Well, that job didn't work because they wanted to send me back to England for special training to become an engineer and the thought terrified me.

JH: So you went crocodile hunting instead.

ST: Yes, I started doing a bit of crocodile hunting and hunting buffalo for the labour gangs on the dam who were being fed with wild animal meat at that time. Then sometime after that, during the making of the dam in 1957 I think it was, I was employed by the government to man what's called a flood warning station.

JH: This was some way away from the dam, wasn't it?

ST: 65 miles above the dam and the idea was that I would radio the level of the river every morning so that eight hours later they could move out equipment and machinery when the flood came down, and when it went up and down they were able to carry on working to the maximum.

JH: Then you got injured by a bit of wildlife when you were in your camp up there, didn't you? You got bitten by a tiger fish.

ST: No, that came much, much later on. What happened after the dam project and the flood warning, I'd saved enough money by working on the flood warning station so I first of all bought a red sports car, MGA sports car, which didn't do me any good.

JH: Then you bought a Land Rover.

ST: I sold that and was sensible and bought a Land Rover and I then drove to Kenya. Through a stroke of luck of getting a letter from the sister of the game warden, Amboseli, I was employed there later as an assistant game warden.

JH: Before that you did a bit of tour guiding for Overland Company and you took out Peter Bally who was married to Joy Adamson at the time on safari.

ST: That's correct, yes. I did that as my first job in Kenya.

JH: Before you joined the Parks?

ST: Yes, for three months, just before I joined the Parks. I was stationed in Ngorongoro Crater in Tanzania.

JH: You were there when Michael Grzimek was killed?

ST: Yes, I was there when Michael crashed in his aeroplane and was killed. That was where I met Alan Root to begin with and I spent some time accompanying Alan in the Crater prior to Michael being killed. Then I went back to Kenya and started with the National Parks.

JH: You were in Amboseli and Tsavo and Nairobi and Ngong.

ST: Yes. My first year in National Parks was in Amboseli and then I was transferred to Ngong National Reserve to do anti poaching work, and then I was sent to Tsavo when poaching began getting out of hand. In fact, I discovered the first serious rhino poaching on the western border of the Tsavo National Park.

JH: Just before independence you resigned from the Parks Department?

ST: Yes. Just before independence, it would have been 1962, I resigned for two reasons. One, that the political situation prior to independence was not particularly rosy, a lot of doubt as to what was going to happen. Then the other reason was that I suffer from a hearing defect which actually was caused during the Second World War in England by concussion from bombs.

2. Filmmaking with Armand Denis

*JH: Now about this time you also bought an **Arriflex** camera, £450, bought on the never-never.*

ST**:** Yes. My interest in filming had carried on from when I got that little camera from my father and when I worked in the National Parks on a very low salary a great friend was the Arriflex dealer in Kenya. He helped me by allowing me to buy a camera on the never-never, and I think there were four Arriflexes in Kenya at that time.

JH: You very generously lent it to Alan Root to make a film about poaching for the Reader's Digest (1), that was about late 50s, 1959 sort of time?

ST**:** That must have been 1959. Yes, I knew Alan and Joan, of course. Yes, I lent him the camera to make this film, I think it was for a lady called Mrs Drake, if I remember rightly, of the *Reader's Digest.*

JH: That was very kind of you since there were so few cameras around. Then I think you sold some film to Armand Denis?

ST**:** During that time in National Parks using the Arriflex I did do that. I sold a bit of film. I remember particularly one sequence of a giant land snail coming out of its shell (2). I didn't have a macro lens of course but I worked out that if I pulled the standard lens halfway out the socket of the camera it became a macro. So if you didn't move the camera the lens would just balance there in the socket.

JH: Armand Denis was obviously very impressed because he paid you £8 for that.

ST**:** That's right and he used it I believe in a title shot for one of the films but I never explained how I did the shot by pulling the lens out. It worked and that was the main thing. I've often fallen back on that idea. I don't have any compunction about doing that sort of thing even today if it works.

JH: Well, if it works why not. Now Des Bartlett was filming for Armand Denis at the time and didn't he offer you a job? Because you had your own Arriflex he offered a job to go back to Rhodesia,(Zimbabwe), on Operation Noah.

ST**:** What actually happened was Des arranged for me to talk to Armand Denis and I asked him for a job and he said "I get so many people asking for jobs", and then he said "anyhow you've got to have a camera called an Arriflex". I said I've got one of those and he then said "in that case I have to give you a job, don't I?", and that's how I began with Armand Denis. Then Des arranged for me to start filming on Operation Noah in Zimbabwe, (Rhodesia at the time).

JH: By which time the water had come up quite a lot and there was a big rescue operation for all the animals.

ST**:** That's right.

JH: After Lake Kariba you came back to Kenya and you did some expeditions I think for Armand Denis into the Congo to film chimpanzees?

ST**:** After Kariba I came back to Kenya and worked with Armand Denis, and during the two years that I was with him I did a safari to the Congo to film chimpanzees with a somewhat eccentric professor from the Netherlands. We got some amazing film. We took a stuffed leopard from the Amsterdam Museum into the Congo. It was quite difficult in those days to get a stuffed leopard through the customs. Then we put this leopard on a little hidden miniature railway line and when the chimpanzees came along we pulled it out. We were sitting in a hide and we pulled out the leopard which had a windscreen wiper in its head so that you could make the leopard's head turn. Every chimpanzee fled, then as they became bolder, I filmed the chimpanzees attacking the leopard so that was quite interesting.

JH: Then you also went and did a bit of filming in Botswana with the bushmen?

ST: I then went to Botswana to the Kalahari Desert and spent five weeks out in the desert with the District Commissioner who was studying the bushmen and was a world authority on the bushmen, and filming them. That was a most remarkable experience.

JH: I can imagine. Now your father was in Botswana at this time I think and you lost him.

ST: Well, when I was in the Congo word finally reached me that my father had been killed by bees, wild African bees, which attacked him in a boat and he had to jump in the water with two clients. He had some clients on the Chobe River in Botswana. Then he had to get back in the boat, because they were drifting down to some big rapids. He had to drive the boat to the bank and during that time he got badly stung, a thousand times on his head.

JH: Then you made a half hour film for Armand Denis called The Lioness (3) which was one of his On Safari (2) series I think.

ST: My first film that I filmed and edited we called *The Lioness* (3) and it was about a day in the life of the lioness with her three cubs in Amboseli, and it got very high ratings. It actually I think probably this taught me that there was a real niche for a film where you go into details of these animals and build them up as a character. You don't call them Daisy the Lioness or something, you don't have to do that, but the audience should identify with that animal as something particular, as an individual. Then you make the audience follow that animal and they start rooting for it. It becomes an individual in their minds.

JH: It becomes an individual character, exactly. This was nearing the end of Armand Denis's time and you then went freelance, didn't you, when his contract with the BBC was not extended? You started to go freelance then.

ST: Yes. I wouldn't exactly say it was the end of Armand Denis's time, what I mean is film time, contract time. He had to close up and so I went freelance. One of my first freelance jobs which I did was to take out and position a *Life* magazine photographer who was shooting a series of articles and pictures.

JH: This was John Dominis?

ST: John Dominis, *The Big Cats of Africa* (4). Unfortunately it was not a happy situation for me because it transpired that he had in fact shot the leopard sequences in Botswana using a tame leopard.

JH: History repeats itself, it just happened in the last Wildlife Photographer of the Year Competition. The winner was disqualified for using a tame animal.

ST: Well, Dominis won the Photographer of the Year award for the big cat series but the South African newspapers revealed how he had used a tame leopard and tame baboons, and also had drugged a springbok so the leopard would kill it.

3. Going freelance

JH: But then you also worked on a couple of features at this time. I think the first one was The Last Safari (4)? You were the third unit cameraman on that. This was Henry Hathaway's film starring Stewart Grainger.

ST: Yes, that's right, that was my first feature film. Obviously when one starts out you take any job to keep going, especially in those days when the outlets for wildlife film was very, very limited indeed. In fact, Armand Denis was one of the only outlets and then his outlet dried up, and in the meantime Survival Anglia

had started out. So I went on this feature directed by Henry Hathaway and I learnt a bit about what is was like working for big American directors.

JH: Which you didn't enjoy very much. But in that film I think you filmed hippos underwater in Mzima using a coffin that has been used by many other people since then.

ST**:** I did, that's right. Yes, I designed an underwater filming tank and we built it in Nairobi. It was primitive, rather like a coffin held up by drums and when it arrived at Mzima Springs, which was pretty remote then, the transport people had cut it in half because it didn't fit on the lorry. So we had two pieces of useless equipment there and so we then had to get welders down from Nairobi. A big job in those days, a huge thing, but we finally we got some shots. Not brilliant shots compared to what people have got these days, nothing like that but we did get something usable.

JH: But this is a long time ago, this is in the 60s. Then you got involved with "Cowboy in Africa" (5) with Ivan Tors.

ST**:** Yes, there was an American producer called Ivan Tors who had a very popular series in America called *Daktari* (7)*,* which was supposedly about a vet. Tors came to Africa to shoot a feature film called *Cowboy in Africa* (5) and John Mills played a part, not a very big part but he was there. He was great fun, he was a wonderful man. Andy Marton was the director. He was responsible for directing the chariot chase in *Ben Hur* (8) and the two cowboys were the stunt men on that chariot. One was dragged under the chariot and of course in the cowboy film they have him being dragged by a wild animal, having lassoed it and then being dragged by it, and that sort of stuff. A pretty horrific film really, never went anywhere.

I was shooting the film about making the film and I know I got into hot water because I didn't film the leading lady enough because I didn't think she was particularly attractive, so I didn't film her very much.

JH: Now also wasn't it Ivan Tors that got you involved with the ABC (American Broadcasting Company) American Sportsman series (9)?

ST**:** Well, yes. ABC Television was distributing the *Cowboy in Africa* TV series (6) which I was working on by then. Therefore they put pressure on Ivan Tors to release me to the *American Sportsman* (9) programmes because they needed another cameraman for a number of reasons. So I had no option but to go, although it was hunting which I don't agree with, I don't like, and so the whole thing was about hunting.

JH: But Bing Crosby and Phil Harris- they were not particularly successful in shooting their sandgrouse and you must have had a lot of fun with them around the camp fire.

ST**:** Well, Bing Crosby was a very nice man and his co-partner in the shooting of sandgrouse was a fellow called Phil Harris who was a trumpeter and a comedian in the 20s I think, and he was also a great character. He required a tumbler full of Jack Daniels whisky before breakfast to get going but they were amazing. They made up these songs as they were trying to shoot sandgrouse and I think they shot about 5 sandgrouse out of 500 rounds that they fired off, so they didn't kill many birds.

JH: So it must have been quite fun. Then on the back of that Cowboy in Africa film (5)there was a series, wasn't there, called Africa Texas Style (10)?

ST**:** Well I don't recall that because it must have been cut when Africa

JH: They were three or four years apart.

ST**:** Well, I don't know anything about that.

JH: Then you worked for a little while with the safari outfitters called Ker and Downey?

ST**:** That's right. Another way of earning a living at that time was to film clients who came to Africa. They came out on safari and they wanted their safari recorded so I would go out with them. I only did three safaris for Ker and Downey. One was a hunting safari which really opened my eyes to the professional hunting business and how it operated really under the whole idea that it was a sporting business, a sport activity, which it wasn't. It was far from sporting, anyhow that we all know nowadays.

Then I did a safari with two people called Hume Cronyn and Jessica Tandy. Jessica Tandy had been married to Jack Hawkins but now was married to Hume. Hume was a very successful Broadway actor and Jessica, of course, was a world famous actress.

JH: Yes. I think her most memorable role was Driving Miss Daisy (10)*.*

ST**:** That was one of her last ones but they became my lifelong friends. In fact, Hume Cronyn on his own bat took most of the film I shot of him on safari to all the major networks in America on his behalf, just to publicise me and he never told me about it for years. I found out from other people. He was one of these really genuine people.

JH: He was a sweetie actually, yes. When he came back we looked after him and we sent him back to Tsavo with you.

You did a little bit of shooting in Uganda for the BBC at this time. You went to do some storks?

ST**:** Alan Root very kindly passed on a job to me in those early years to film storks for the BBC. They just wanted footage of all the different storks in East Africa. I don't know what it was for. Alan's passing on this job to me gave me the chance to earn a few shillings from 10 days work or something with the BBC. I went to Uganda, I was married by then, with my wife and we both went back up to Uganda. I found shoebill storks nesting, that's a whale headed stork, the same thing as a shoebill. We found them nesting in a place where they'd never been seen nesting before in fact. Then, as so often happens in wildlife filming, the one and only egg was destroyed by a mongoose or something.

JH: Then I think after that you moved to Tsavo National Park to live there as a filmmaker. You got a special deal out of the National Parks to live there and make films.

ST**:** Well, one thing that I'd always been so aware of is that, especially in feature filming, that people who made these films, who finance them and so on, would come to me with a preconceived idea of how Africa should be shown on their films. This irritated me more and more as I became more experienced and the more confident I became, and so in 1970 I think it was, something like that I decided to try to make a film on my own.

JH: That's when you moved to Tsavo.

ST**:** Yes it was about then

JH: You made a film with one of Daphne's Sheldrick's orphaned baby elephants with Bill Travers, An Elephant called Slowly (11).

ST**:** I went to live in Tsavo around 1968/69 I think. I lived in a tent with my newborn son and my wife. Then I moved into a house in the Tsavo Park and I worked on a feature film with Bill Travers and Virginia McKenna called *An Elephant called Slowly (11)*. That featured some of the orphaned elephants that had been raised by Daphne Sheldrick, the wife of the warden, David.

JH: I think you had George Plimpton around that time with a film called Adventure in Africa (12). You were guiding George Plimpton around.

ST**:** Well, what happened after *An Elephant called Slowly* (11) was that with my great friend Monty Ruben we got Bill Graff, who was the producer of *Born Free,* which had been made a few years before, interested in a story that I'd assembled, written up about an African elephant.

My wife and I worked on that for a year's filming which was unheard of in those days and it was shot in Panavision, that's a 35mm wide screen. The Panavision Company of Los Angeles came in as a partner which is how we were able to afford this fantastic, huge camera and top of the range equipment.

So we spent a year doing that and that included at one stage Panavision sending us a prototype for a new silent camera that they had built. It was an absolute monstrosity in terms of size. Technically, of course, it was pretty brilliant for the time but it was huge and it was handheld and you had to have it on your shoulder with batteries that weighed tons. Being a rather small person I couldn't really walk that fast with it and so one day when I was on foot trying to film an elephant the elephant charged me. I couldn't move so I just said to myself I might as well just stay there and film it and see what happens. The elephant stopped about 10 yards from me and was most confused because I didn't run away.

JH: Well, it was a memorable shot in the film which did very, very well. It was nominated for an Oscar for cinematography.

ST**:** That's right, yes it was. That was quite a thrill.

JH: I could imagine it would have been. It did very well. It won a number of awards and it was released in 10 languages.

ST**:** Yes, that's right and for me first of all to be able to film that story in widescreen, **anamorphic** Panavision was tremendous. Then they took me to Hollywood for eight months to oversee the editing and that's when I learnt all the different processes of filmmaking, all the opticals, the titling, the music, the effects, everything. I went there with the idea of learning all that and that put me in great stead for the rest of my life.

JH: I'm quite sure you did, yes. Then we had the Lion at World's End. You did a little bit of filming for that with Bill Travers again.

ST**:** I think George Plimpton came in there.

ST**:** I'm thinking back on it now because I don't think it could have been before *African Elephant* (42) actually.

JH: Then Christian the Lion (13), you filmed the whole of that, didn't you?

ST**:** Yes, I filmed *Christian the Lion* (13).

JH: With Bill Travers again.

ST**:** With Bill Travers, yes. That was about George Adamson and the lion Christian who came from Harrods.

JH: That was 1971 and 72, those two films about Christian. Then I think the next one, you did another feature with Robert Halmi called Visit to a Chief's Son (14). You were second unit director on that one.

ST**:** Yes, that was another one of these great epics that died a natural death luckily.

JH: So then you got back to doing something much closer to home, you made a film called The Ivory Poachers (15) for the wildlife clubs of Kenya.

ST**:** What I'd been doing from 1970 onwards was using any funds that I raised from working on feature films to shoot my own 16mm footage, and started building up a stock library. Out of that I made this little half hour film called *The Ivory Poachers* (15) so that the director of Kenya National Parks could take it to America for a fund raising trip, and also to give to the wildlife clubs of Kenya who were an amazing organisation which had started up, so that they could show it around the country.

JH: They're still going and doing very well. In the same year you also made a film called Africa, Forest or Desert (16) for the World Wildlife Fund for Nature.

ST**:** Yes, in 1974 I think it was.

JH: This was all over East Africa?

ST**:** Hugh Lamprey, who was a well-known ecologist in Kenya, he got the World Wildlife Fund interested in making a film on forests.

JH: Deforestation?

ST**:** Yes, and all that. David Shepherd, the artist, specifically painted a picture and sold it for £20,000 so that we could make this film and I travelled all over Kenya.

JH: You went to Rwanda.

ST**:** I went to Rwanda and filmed with Dian Fossey who I'd met before.

JH: She's forgotten that and she wasn't very complimentary to you, was she?

ST**:** Dian was a little upset when I arrived unannounced and called me a leech and that was I there to 'suck the blood of her gorillas'. Well, frankly if it wasn't for Dian there wouldn't be any gorillas up there anymore today because she pioneered that and she stuck it out for 12 years alone on that mountain. Four days later when I was leaving she was crying because I was leaving and wanted us to stay longer because she realised that we were pro conserving the gorillas. We were not there to shoot some commercial film at great benefit to ourselves and nothing for the gorillas. She realised that of course.

JH: She wasn't very people friendly, was she?

ST**:** Well, she was very friendly to the right people.

JH: 1976 you made another film about poaching in Tsavo for the American Sportsman (9) series and the producer wanted John Huston to be the narrator but wasn't sure how to get hold of John Huston.

ST**:** During the 1970s I was accumulating footage for myself, working on feature films to get the money to do this. Another film I did was with ABC Television. They wanted to do a poaching film on elephants and poaching and all that business. So as I had a lot of footage about that, in order to make a bit more money to carry on, I collaborated with them, and because I knew John Huston from very early days actually - I'd met John Huston because I'd tried to get him to work on a feature film which I'd dreamt up and so on. He was very keen but anyhow it never got going but I'd met him then.

So I said to the American producer, look, I could get John Huston to narrate this for you. So I called John Huston who was in Morocco directing *The Man who would be King* (17) with Sean Connery and Michael Caine. To cut a long story short, John agreed to do this, provided it would help elephants, and I called the producer back half an hour to say he had agreed. He was so surprised that I could fix this up, and later we both flew to Morocco and John recorded this film sitting in his hotel bedroom.

JH: Late 70s, we're at now, 1978/79. You were visited in Tsavo by David Attenborough who was starting to

think about his first big series called Life on Earth (18).

ST**:** Yes, that's right. David Attenborough came with Richard Brock, one of the producers on the series, *Life on Earth (18)*. They spent a couple of days I think it was with me.

JH: Well, they looked at your footage, didn't they?

ST**:** The looked at my footage, yes. They got some ideas for *Life on Earth* (18) from what they saw of mine and had intended to get me to do these sequences but I never heard back from them.

4. Working with Survival

JH: At about the same time I think Alan Root suggested that Survival (19) should look at some of your footage?

ST**:** It was Alan Root who made the introduction to *Survival* (19) for me.

JH: After David Attenborough had been to see you?

ST**:** Yes, after the BBC Natural History Unit had approached me I didn't take that offer from the BBC.

JH: Well, were you an independent and they weren't offering any realistic figure, were they?

ST**:** The BBC didn't offer me enough money to cover the cost of these films. So then Alan said, well, why don't you go to Anglia. So he fixed up for me to meet Colin Willock, the managing director, and the money was a lot more but *Survival* (19) had a rule that cameramen were not allowed into the editing room. So I said, well, I'm not prepared to go that road because I spend my whole life making these films so why should I suddenly be excluded at the last moment?

So as a result of that I teamed up with Bill Travers who was really instrumental in me being able to finish two films, one of which was *Bloody Ivory* (20) which was 90 minutes long.

JH: It was shown on the BBC.

ST**:** Ultimately it was shown on the BBC.

JH: It was shown on the BBC in the end but Bill Travers did some negotiating so that you got a very much better deal.

ST**:** Yes, he did the negotiating with Chris Parsons from the BBC and with Aubrey Buxton from *Survival (19)* for *River of Sand* (21) which was the second film that we finished. So that's how I started being independent and making progress with television films of my own you might say.

JH: Well, because of the success on Survival (19) of River of Sand (21) you then agreed to do another four films for Survival (19).

ST**:** Well, the first thing that happened was that *Bloody Ivory* (20) was nominated for a BAFTA award for best documentary of 1979. Then through Bill it was shown on BBC1, *The World About Us (22),* and *River of Sand* (21) went to *Survival (19)*, and then both these films went around the world to different networks. By that time I personally had become much more confident and so on, so I went back to *Survival* (19) and said would they allow me in the editing room and I had these four films partly finished, were they interested and I got a yes on both accounts this time.

JH: These four films, the Walking Birds (23) 1984.

ST: Yes, *The Rains Came* (24) which was the sequel to *River of Sand* (21) and *Walking Birds (23)*, and *The Meanest Animal in the World?(25)* which was about honey badgers.

JH: And Birds of A Feather (26) I think.

ST: It was about quelea, these little birds that fly around in millions.

JH: Destroying everything.

ST: Well, they're reputed to destroy crops but in fact the effect on crops is negligible compared to other ways that crops are destroyed, like fungus and insects destroy many more crops than the quelea but it was fashionable to blow up the quelea. So it was easier to vent your anger on a bird than it was on a fungus.

5. Feature Films

JH: Then you went back to features and co-directed a feature for a Japanese company called A Tale of Africa or Green Horizons (27) and that was starring the actor Jimmy Stewart.

ST: I had two children in 79 who were fast approaching the age when they had to go to school. They had been taught by my wife through a correspondence course up until then but then the day was fast approaching when they had to go to a proper school, and at the same time this offer from a Japanese company to co-direct a film came along so I took it, and I took it for the money. This film went on and on an on for something like 18 months because the Japanese could never agree amongst themselves.

Anyhow finally we finished the film and Jimmy Stewart played in the film. I remember talking to him on the phone asking him if he would do this film, and there was an old man's part and there was a young man's part. He said to me, “well, Simon, I presume you want me to play the old man's part?” I'd forgotten to say what part I wanted him to play. His wife chipped in and said “I don’t care if he plays the rhino as long as I can get to Africa” and, of course, Jimmy Stewart was a great conservationist so he came.

So all these people in these features, the more features that I did I began to associate with people who were associated with wildlife. As I sold more films I didn’t have to take any film that came along for the money.

JH: But after that you did a French feature film, In the Footsteps of the Elephants (28).

ST: That was with Catherine Deneuve and Philippe Noiret. The reason I did this was, a, because Monty Ruben, my friend in Nairobi who handled all these films, asked me if I would do it and the director was a famous director Philippe de Broca and he was a great character, and so I thought, well, I'll give it a go. So I went out with Philippe de Broca and on one occasion he wanted a charging elephant, of course. When I was filming this herd of elephants charging towards us I didn’t know that these poor elephants had been shot at recently by poachers from a car. The long and short of it was that the elephant came through the side of the car and picked the whole car up and threw it around a bit, and fortunately then went off.

Afterwards I said to Philippe de Broca, well, we'd better go on and see if we can get this shot again and he said, “I'm very frightened.” I said, “well, I've got news for you, so am I” and he said, “no, I pay you not to be frightened.” What can you say to that? Anyhow in the end we got the shot and we got some other interesting material. We went down a river floating on an inner tube for point of view shots from an actor supposedly looking out of a boat. Unfortunately a sharp stump punctured the inner tube and so I was left standing in this river, in which there were crocs, of course, but holding the camera trying not to drop it into the water.

So then when we came to be picked up. Then of course I had no spare wheel because I'd used the tube from my Land Rover.

All sorts of funny things would happen when you're filming but it's not this dangerous occupation that people like to make it out to be. It's more dangerous being in a big city in taxis or something. Cabs will run you over or somebody will.

JH: It's as dangerous as you want to make it I think. A few more films then followed for Survival (19), The Walking Birds (23) and another mongoose film called Two of a Gang (29), Tumbler in the Sky (30), your Bateleur eagle film.

ST**:** The mongoose film, the main mongoose film was *Together They Stand (31).*

JH: That won the Golden Panda in 1986 at Wildscreen.

ST**:** That's right.

JH: Two of a Gang (29) was another one about mongooses.

ST**:** That was a spin-off, a half hour film, from the out-takes or the leftovers of *Together They Stand (31).*

JH: Then you worked on another feature very briefly, a little bit of a few sequences, for Steven Spielberg for The Colour Purple (32), 1985.

ST**:** I did African filming for *The Colour Purple (32)* which in the final film was very short but it was a very complicated shot because they wanted giraffe running across the setting sun, and then a girl comes into the shot and does a dance. So the co-ordination of all this was split second timing and at the last moment I had to make an alteration to the shot. The sun was not low enough when the giraffe went across so I had to start on the sun, pan down to the giraffe without the sun in the shot, and then the girl came in and did her dance. Now we're talking about filming this on a long focus lens, of course, so the focus was critical, the exposure was critical, and the timing. Well, somebody was looking after to me because it worked.

JH: Well, Spielberg was very impressed.

ST**:** Yes, Spielberg was very happy with it even though it was not the shot he'd originally asked for specifically but what can you do about that, this is Africa.

JH: Then you moved onto probably Kenya's biggest feature up till then, Out of Africa (33). You were the second unit director on that.

ST**:** Yes, I was the second unit director on *Out of Africa (33)*. That was probably the best and the greatest film experience that I've ever had.

JH: Well, you were working with Sydney Pollack.

ST**:** I arrived one day, I was flown in and the next day I got malaria and I was a week out of action. Anyhow, I was trying to direct, trying to line up Robert Redford with elephants with sweat running down my face and retching from malaria. It was not a very happy moment but he was very good about it. He said you'd better take my seat in the helicopter to go back and he got in the camera car and drove back himself which was very nice of him.

I was flown out a couple of days later. They thought actually that I was dead because the nurse on the unit gave me quinine and I'm allergic to quinine, and I'd told her this but she hadn't read the small print on the medicine and I reacted to that. So it was not a happy time but then I came back and had a marvellous time. To be a second unit director of a major feature you could just say “I want a helicopter or I want this or I want that” and it was brought, it was given to you. You were able to create and then somebody else had the problems of the administration which is wonderful.

JH: That was quite a treat I think.

ST**:** Yes, extraordinary.

JH: But after that you went back and did another special film for Survival (19) about Daphne Sheldrick and the orphans of Tsavo.

ST**:** Yes, I did that, from footage I had accumulated

JH: You'd been doing that over a number of years.

ST**:** Yes, all through the 70s I'd been accumulating footage after *Bloody Ivory (20)*. So I'd just brought this film up to date and then put it together, and then Daphne Sheldrick and I flew to New York for the publicity stunt. We arrived the same day as Chernobyl so we were sidelined. I do remember Daphne having a row with the hairdressing girl before we went in front of the cameras. This lady said to Daphne "I'm just going to do your hair". She said "there's nothing wrong with my hair" and Daphne's a fairly forceful lady anyhow. So we had a big altercation because according to union rules this lady had to do her job, far off wildlife filming.

JH: Well then you got involved with another big feature and you were second unit director and photographer again on Gorillas in the Mist (34).

ST**:** Yes, *Gorillas in the Mist* (34) followed along. The same producer, (as Out of Africa) Terry Clegg, came to me in 1988 and Michael Apted was the director. Michael went on to direct one of the big James Bond movies after this, probably much the same as directing *Gorillas in the Mist* (34) I should think. That was a really fantastic experience for a number of reasons, the gorillas are fantastic. Over five weeks we climbed that mountain 42 times starting at 5 o'clock in the morning with porters carrying all the heavy 35 millimetre cameras and gear. Then we were only allowed four people at the gorillas so that came down to every one of us having to carry heavy equipment for as much as eight or nine hours a day, up and down the mountain, at 10,000 feet in the rain, stinging nettles and so on.

But the other memorable part about this film was that Sigourney Weaver was so fantastic because she really cared about wildlife and I'd ascertained this right in the beginning when I took her up on a **recce** in the first stages. I knew she cared so I was much more enthusiastic about working on the film.

JH: Well, she'd done her homework about Dian Fossey as well, hasn't she, and she knew something about the plight of the gorillas.

ST**:** Definitely but she wasn't just a figurehead, she actually cared about them and even today, years afterwards, she's working towards looking after the gorillas, helping the gorillas, fundraising and all that sort of stuff. She did exactly what I asked her to do, no more, no less, with the gorillas and this gave me the confidence to allow her to do more with the gorillas without getting hurt. I mean there's a very different responsibility from making a documentary when you've got a major star on which a multi million dollar film depends. You can't have her hurt by a gorilla and it's only one person's responsibility.

JH: Well, it was a successful film and then you did another feature in 1990 with Clint Eastwood, second unit director again, White Hunter Black Heart (35).

ST**:** Yes, that was again because of Terry Clegg, the producer, who said you've got to do this, you've got to do it. That was an experience because Clint was very different to what he comes across in his films, those early films, *Pale Rider* (36) and all those cowboy films.

JH: Spaghetti westerns.

ST**:** He was a very caring man. He cared greatly about children and about animals and serious issues in

life. It was really good working with him. After I think five weeks on the film I said to him one day, "look, I'm not doing anything here now because I've done all the filming you want me to do, would you release me, would you let me go home?" I said "I've got films to work on." He looked at me straight in the eye for about half a minute which seemed an eternity, and he said "I guess you're the sort of guy who likes to work on your own films rather than mine." So I said, "yes, Clint, that's right, I do" and he said, "well, you can't go for a couple of days." The day after that I was called and Clint did an interview with me about elephants and the plight of elephants. He set that up himself and that's why he kept me back. So he was a genuine fellow.

JH: Then another film for Survival (19) in 1992, Keepers of the Kingdom (37).

ST**:** *Keepers of the Kingdom* (37) came out of an accumulation of footage. It was interesting because it was about how supposedly elephants destroy the environment but actually they don't, they change it. If they've got a big enough area to live in they don't destroy it, they can ride with the changes. You get the elephants going down in numbers because they die from malnutrition, not starvation, malnutrition, and then they come back again in balance with the vegetation. I had film records of this over 30 years. So we put this altogether into a film and it played a very big part in the ivory debate around the world.

JH: Yes, it did indeed, I remember. Then there was a little half hour for Survival (19) called The Hole Story (38).

ST**:** *The Hole Story (A Treeful of Birds)* (38) was sort of out-takes from mostly *The Walking Birds (23)*. It was about the little birds that lived in holes in the tree where the ground hornbills were nesting. It was not a very successful film.

6. African Environmental Film Foundation

JH: Then came a major change in your life. In 1998 you started the African Environmental Film Foundation.

ST**:** By 1998 frankly I'd had enough of commercial filming and the main reason for this was because multinationals had taken over *Survival (19)*, and the whole tone of filmmaking was changing. You had to have a 'bloody kill' within 30 seconds of the opening and you were only allowed a film tigers or killer whales or sharks or something like that. In the minds of the people who were putting out these films, buying them, paying for them, that was what it was all about.

Oh dear, the last film that I made for *Survival (19)* was the Great Ruaha River (39). I emphasised that lions failed to kill more times than they were successful in their hunts but they didn't like that, they wanted to have the kill. So my daughter said to me, "look, why don't you put a kill in, put one in, sell the film and get out of this, and I know you want to start this foundation for making films for local African people."

JH: For conservation purposes?

ST**:** Well, it was quite obvious that so few films out of the thousands that were made were made for the Africans who lived with the wildlife and who were nowadays responsible for the wildlife. The problems could not be shown as entertainment because they were not entertainment. The reality was not entertainment anymore and so you couldn't sell these films on commercial television but they were vitally needed here in Africa. So we made these films specifically for Africans in their own languages, in ethnic languages, and that's how the Foundation has become extremely popular with an audience of two million people in Kenya and Tanzania alone.

JH: Well, you're distributing copies of these films in all these different languages to schools, to wildlife clubs, to rangers, conservationists in the middle of nowhere. These are people who are now being able to see what is being done or what needs to be done.

ST**:** We distribute the films free of charge because they're there for people who can't afford to buy them. To me if you hang a screen on a tree and you watch people who've never seen a film or certainly never seen a film in their own language watching that film, I get a greater buzz out of that than watching a film I'd shot in Leicester Square or some place like that.

JH: I'm quite sure. Well, it's spreading the message into the places where it should have been going all these years and it's doing very well, this Foundation. You have more than a dozen films now that are out and available.

ST**:** In the next three months we will have produced 25 one hour films and we have a thousand copies of each made, DVDs now of course. On one evening you might get a thousand people coming in from everywhere to see these films. The thing is you can't measure the impact you're making but we're creating a vision, that's what we're doing, a vision for the future of wildlife which is going to guarantee we hope that wildlife will still be here in a hundred years from now.

JH: Now your daughter Tanya and her husband Ian are helping you to run this Foundation and you're still filming which is what you like to do.

ST**:** Yes. I'm lucky that my daughter, Tanya, and her husband Ian have come in and taken over all the administration and all that and the promotion and the grant writing and things for the Foundation. I've been able to concentrate purely on film making which, of course, is what I really like. I mean I live for my filmmaking and that's it and so I'm lucky. I'm very, very lucky indeed to have them and they're brilliant, they do it brilliantly.

JH: Well, they've got the same aims as you and they realise that you're much happier in the bush with your camera. Well, I hope that the Foundation goes on many, many years into the future and does what you dreamed it was going to do. It seems to me it's on the right track and I hope you're going to go on filming for a very long time, Simon.

ST**:** Well, nowadays one has been forced to move into video as against film and now that I've got used to that I've accepted it. I was not very happy with it in the beginning but now it's obvious for the Foundation that that is the answer for reasons of cost, reasons of lighting, all these different things, portability and so on. So that's where I'm going from now and I'm so happy not to have anybody saying to me 'you've got to finish this film by the end of the month' or 'I don't like spiders' or 'we can't sell flowers'. So basically I can film anything or everything that I want to film and work it in because it's all interconnected, that's the point. Everything you see around in the bush is connected and it all needs to be protected, needs to be understood and this is what we're doing.

JH: Well, exactly. Well, long may it last, Simon, and I hope you keep on filming for many more years.

7. The future of wildlife films

JH: Simon, where do you think the wildlife film industry's going? What do you think it's going to be like 10 years down the road?

ST**:** I think first of all it will depend on how much wildlife is left.

JH: Yes, that's a point.

ST**:** I would think also that what's going to happen because environmental issues are becoming so much more important to everybody, even people living in big cities are becoming affected by environmental issues so therefore they're much more interested in the environment and they're much more concerned about it. So therefore you could say that wildlife film might become more serious again.

JH: More environmental?

ST**:** When I say environmental I mean wildlife as well as the trees and the water and the air. It's like a holistic problem, they're all interconnected. So you could even make a behaviour film about a particular animal but from now on you might include the emphasis more of environmental issues into that behaviour. Whereas before it was always lovely and sweet and there were no threats and there was no reality.

JH: Well, it wasn't showing the exact truth but people didn't want to see doom and gloom, and I think now they have to have a bit of doom and gloom because it's too late and someone's got to actually do something.

ST**:** Selling films became all about money and doom and gloom was not good for that, the bottom line, but again, I think it's how you present it because you don't have to, in a doom and gloom film it can still be interesting and inspiring.

8. Working with George Adamson

JH: Simon, you spent quite a lot of time in Meru and Kora I think with George Adamson?

ST**:** Yes, I spent quite a lot of time with George. In fact, the first time I met George was with Bill Travers and Virginia McKenna.

JH: That was on your elephant film?

ST**:** Yes, on the *Elephant Called Slowly* (12) film. We went to Meru. I was in the back of a Land Rover was filming, bending over the camera with my bum sticking over the side of the car and (Ugas), a big lion, walked up and gave me a good nip.

JH: George thought that was very funny, didn't he?

ST**:** Yes, George did. But then later I was six months with George in Kora filming *Christian the Lion* (13).

JH: Christian the Lion (13) and how he got on with Boy (lion)?

ST**:** That's right and how he was accepted by Boy and teamed up with Boy.

JH: But Boy was a bit of a problem and he attacked one of the staff once, didn't he, and you had to go and rescue him.

ST**:** There were a number of occasions when things were a bit wild with Boy you might say. One morning we heard this fellow screaming outside the enclosure. The humans were inside the enclosure, the lions were outside. Boy had grabbed a fellow who'd gone out against the rules. I mean the fellow had gone out early morning in the dark and it was likely a lion was going to jump on him. As I was running with George towards this noise George said to me get the car, get a vehicle, so I ran back and got a Land Rover. In the lights of the car I found George confronting Boy with a cattle prod. Boy was really angry and he had this fellow on the ground in front of him.

I don't know if you've ever tried to lift a body but it's pretty heavy. So I just said to this fellow, he was conscious, "get up, what's the problem, there's nothing wrong with you, get up". I bullied him to get up and I pushed him in the car, and George said "go back to the camp, leave me with Boy, I'll sort it out here". So I went back to camp in the car with this fellow and he was shouting at me. He said "tell them I fought the lion if I die, tell them". I said, "look, there's nothing wrong with you, what's your problem?" He said, "well, what's this" and he put his finger in his mouth and out through his cheek because he had a huge hole in the side of his face. Anyhow he lived.

JH: He lived to tell the tale.

ST: Yes, he did.

JH: But eventually Boy had to be shot, didn't he, because he killed somebody?

ST: Well, Boy did, yes, he killed somebody.

[End of file]

People, films and organisations mentioned

Alan Root
Andy Marton
Armand Denis
Aubrey Buxton
Bill Travers
Bing Crosby
Catherine Deneuve
Chris Parsons
Clint Eastwood
Collin Willock
Daphne Sheldrick
David Attenborough
David Sheldrick
Des Bartlett
Dian Fossey
George Adamson
George Plimpton
Henry Hathaway
Hugh Lamprey
Hume Cronyn
Ivan Tors
Jack Hawkins
James Stewart
Jens Hessel
Jessica Tandy
Joan Root
John Dominis
John Huston
John Mills
Meryl Streep
Michael Apted
Michael Caine
Michael Grzimek
Monty Ruben
Phil Harris
Philipe de Broca
Philippe Noiret
Richard Brock
Richard Costain
Robert Halmi
Robert Redford
Sean Connery

Sigourney Weaver
Steven Spielberg
Stewart Grainger
Sydney Pollack
Terry Clegg
Virginia McKenna

Companies

American Broadcasting Company (ABC)
African Environmental Film Foundation
Anglia Television
British Academy of Film and Television Awards (BAFTA)
British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC)
Natural History Unit (BBC NHU)
Panavision Incorporated
Royal Air Force (RAF)
Reader's Digest
World Wildlife Fund (WWF)

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Glossary

Arriflex: Range of cameras from world wide manufacturer of film cameras and related equipment
Anamorphic: Film format that allows widescreen images to be recorded on standard 35mm film.
Recce: an assessment of an intended filming location to ascertain it's suitability and any potential logistical problems

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