

Hugh Miles: Oral History Transcription

Name of interviewee:

Hugh Miles

Name of interviewer:

Mike Salisbury

Name of cameraman:

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1. Current project and how Hugh's interest in wildlife developed

HM: It's 25th September 2006 and we're in the garden of my home, Chilbrook Croft, and I'm Hugh Miles.

Int: And talking to an old mate, Mike Salisbury, we've done quite a lot of things together. Because I haven't caught up with you for a while, what are you on at the moment, what's your project at the moment, Hugh?

HM: I'm doing a fishing series. It's now become eight one hours on angling around Britain. A series of adventures with a friend called Martin Bowler and we're using friends all over Britain, different experts on different species. The exciting thing about it is I'm doing a lot of underwater stuff because just filming fishing I did a series for BBC2 many years ago which is still selling, and still showing on Sky TV.

So I've filmed fishing and it's sort of routine, but the underwater behaviour of the fish is amazing. I'm using a Polecam and some of the stuff we're seeing is extraordinary and really big fish too. It's extraordinary how it's just a little Polecam as you know on the end of a pole and you stick in the lake, and it's extraordinary after a couple hours the fish get used to it and they push it out the way if you're putting food in. Or else just carry on

behaving in a natural way and there's stuff there I think that's never been filmed before. They do a lot of fin flashing, for instance, which scientists apparently, and I've checked with a fisheries biologist, a PhD, and he says they don't understand why the fish do what they're doing. So that's exciting.

Int: Part of courtship?

HM: No, no, it's not in the spawning season, just signalling to each other. And they say, for instance, roach with having the red fins it must mean something because otherwise they wouldn't risk having red fins because it makes them more vulnerable to predation. So it's intriguing, trying to understand what's going on but it's always nice to break new ground and try and find something new to do, and luckily I've found something new to do with this fishing series.

Int: Absolutely. Are you doing any more traditional wildlife projects as well at the moment?

HM: Not at the moment, no, because this is so full on because we're funding ourselves, so I can't actually afford to do it if I use editors all the time at the prices they charge. So I've had to learn how to use Final Cut Pro which, again, has been highly entertaining. So I'm editing it myself up until the final stages, as I always did with wildlife, and then take it to an editor so he can iron out all the problems I've created. And doing the editing has been on a computer because I didn't know how to switch one on two years ago. It's fascinating and every day you learn something usually by error as opposed to trial but it's good.

Int: It's funny you talking this current project being fishing. I mean I wanted to hear about that because I know that it might be something to do with fishing that in your boyhood might have got you out in the country. Is that so and sort of got you enthusiastic about wildlife or not?

HM: I always preferred being out in the garden to being in the house, and granddad fished so he gave me a bit of fishing tackle and encouraged me to go. Then I went away to school in the Fens and, of course, you're surrounded by water there. So fishing was one of the things I was interested in but the wildlife of the Fens was amazing. We used to get on a bike and cycle off and go and look at the Ouse Washes before they were famous for ducks and so on, and it was just something I grew passionate about. And every school holiday I would go off doing conservation work at RSPB reserves.

I was a friend of Bert Axel who was the guy who first invented the idea of managing land to create habitat, which he assumed the birds would take advantage of. I was there dropping rocks into a mere to create an island before the scrape was created, and in the end the rocks appeared above the surface and the tern nested on it next year. So that was a triumph and then we got pit props off the beach that had got washed up off a ship, and were building the basis for hides and so on. So that's what I did in my school holidays the whole time.

Int: Was it birds mainly that you got fairly expert at, at a young age because they would have been the things you saw most of perhaps?

HM: Yes, I guess. There weren't many mammals in the Fens and I loved the owls, for instance. So a pal and I used to go around trying to survey how many owls there were and mapping them. So we'd go around with a stick tapping on the pollarded willow trees and oak trees finding all the nests. So we had loads of barn owls

and stock doves and tawny owls and so on. Yes, it was wonderful.

Int: So a good grounding in field craft and things really as a boy, I suppose?

HM: Yes, I guess and just the love of wildlife. You just became so involved with it and involved with conservation which is what really drives me on. I mean there's actually no reason for making a wildlife film unless it's going to benefit the wildlife. I know now it's all grabbing audiences and making money and stuff but that's not really what it's about. It's about trying to do something for wildlife as far as I'm concerned anyway.

Int: So when you finished school at Ely, you were pretty good at music, you were pretty good at sport, and you'd done some photography I think and things. You had a choice then of what to do?

HM: Yes, I had a Box Brownie which granddad gave me and my first photograph was of a waxwing in a hedge in Ely which is great. I've still got the picture, it's rather a tiny speck in frame but I crept up to it, so I really enjoyed that. No, I was going to be a professional musician because I sang in the choir, the cathedral choir in Ely for about five years, got a scholarship there. Then we had madrigal sany and orchestra, and I played the French horn and went to the Royal Academy.

Int: But you actually went to the Royal Academy, did you, you started?

HM: Yes, I did an orchestral course in the summer holidays so I was taking it pretty seriously and won music festivals. I loved it when you got up on stage, you were sort of nervous and then you started playing and suddenly, you know, sort of show business. It was very stimulating. But then it was the early days of wildlife on television. It was the Look (1) programme with Peter Scott and they had Eric Ashby on who was the silent watcher in the New Forest. He was creeping around filming deer and foxes and badgers and so on, and I just thought, it was like a bolt of lightning, that's the job for me. I thought that was magic and there was also Heinz Sielmann with his woodpeckers and stuff. And Peter Scott, of course, had all these stories, so I read all his books avidly. So I decided I had to be a wildlife filmmaker. So I joined the BBC just for a year but then left and went to film college and studied film for three years.

Int: So what did you do first in the BBC before you went to film college?

HM: I was advised by Bruce Campbell, who was the head of the Natural History Unit then. He said just get your foot in the door and get a personal file at the BBC just to take you out from the crowd a bit. So I just did an administrative job, then went to film college for three years and filmed wildlife and so on while I was there. Then I couldn't get into the Natural History Unit so I, luckily, got into the Film Unit at Ealing. I loved that so much, the team spirit of working on dramas and first you were clapper loader and then you were operating the camera and then you got to light stuff, and with actors and so on. I got a bit carried away and stayed there for nearly nine years and thought; I'd better get refocused on what I want to do. So I went to the RSPB for five years and that was wonderful. The team spirit we had there because it was back where I felt I belonged which was in a conservation organisation, and we were all pulling together to try and achieve certain aims with regard to saving heathland and things, which is still a very topical subject even now.

Int: Did you end up heading the RSPB Film Unit? First of all you joined as a cameraman did you?

HM: Yes, and then after about a year, it was Anthony Clay, he retired and then I was given the job basically of running the show, and it was wonderful. We had a great team around us, there was just four or five of us and we had to produce 100 minutes of film a year for the Festival Hall which was the big film show. So you had a deadline to create 100 minutes of film, which was pretty terrifying. But the more important thing we did, I felt, was to get stories about birds onto television and we did quite a few co-productions with the Natural History Unit, and got films shown on Natural History Unit. But even more important was to tell good news stories on the national news, like the ospreys would return to Scotland. So we'd get some film together of an osprey diving and so on. Put together a package, send them the press release down to the national news, and we'd get two minutes on national news, 6 o'clock and there's 10 million people watching. I mean that was a huge, I felt, hugely valuable use of the Film Unit's time.

2. Filming ospreys

Int: Well, you talked about ospreys. I think that was a film (2) I remember as one of your early big achievements, of a single species film that had a whole story of the whole cycle of behaviour but also had a conservation message and so forth.

HM: Yes, that was wonderful. The children had just been born and so we moved lock, stock and barrel to Scotland for a couple of years for the summer, and got there before the ospreys arrived. Then just desperately tried to get really good fishing shots, for instance, which is the key to actually getting the osprey hitting the water and they're doing about 50 miles an hour. So it sharpened up your reflexes a bit, and just finding nests that were successful. In the first year we failed because the nest failed. Everybody said it was because I'd put the hide too close but luckily then obviously the female had died or something, and when the female turned up then built the nest on top of the hide. So that was a relief because suddenly the finger wasn't pointed at me anymore for making bad decisions about how close you could get.

Then the second year we had a nest and the male, I think, is still alive even to this day. 20 odd years and still breeding at that nest which is wonderful. Mr B10 he was known because each of the nests had a code. But there was a lot of security then, a lot of pressure on me not screwing up because there were so few nests. I think there were five or six, seven nests when I did it. I mean there's about 100 and they're diving - there's even four just down the road in Poole Harbour at the moment as I speak.

Int: Which is a success story actually.

HM: It is, it has been a huge success story and maybe the film contributed a little to people's understanding about what they needed, and about their migration to Africa and so on.

Int: Yes, I remember the scenes in Gambia, isn't it? The Gambia?

HM: Yes, we did, catching flying fish. One actually grabbed one one day - the wrong end and it was trying to take off it with it and, of course, the flying fish's fins came out, and this osprey was labouring along and the wind was catching the fins, and it kept on hitting the water trying to get off. It was great. We built so many scaffolds for nests and perches and so on, that we thought at least if the film's a failure I can get a job with

SGB [scaffolding company] when I'd finished it.

Int: I bet it's not the first scaffold you've built anyway, is it?

HM: No.

Int: No.

HM: It was amazing what you did, it was ridiculous. 70 feet up and you've got a plank of wood and a 21 foot pole because it was in the old days, and you're just walking across a plank. I mean if you felt you'd be finished. I never fell off.

Int: Yes, health and safety wouldn't approve of that now.

HM: God, no. I don't know how anybody ever does anything now with all these forms and stuff you have to fill in.

Int: One thing that's quite interesting is you were saying the technicality of filming osprey, for instance, trying to get those shots, those classic shots of diving and so forth in slow motion, catching fish. I mean you are actually, whether you like it or not, renowned for your technical ability of focus pulling and following birds, particularly in flight and that sort of thing. Did you learn that as an ordinary cameraman do you think, in those drama days? Did the technical side come easily to you?

HM: Well, focus pulling on drama was pretty straightforward although it was something you had to do. Isadora Duncan with Ken Russell with her dancing round and you were trying to judge where she was, and I guess what it taught you was to just keep cool and not get over-excited, and I guess I learnt that from drama. But with wildlife it's a bit suck it and see really. It's all happening so quickly you just hope and you can't even really see because the camera's running at 24 times normal speed, and you only have to lose the focus for a flicker and it's suddenly NG [no go / not good?]. Sometimes you think, god, I've got a great shot and the osprey's going phew, phew, when it's coming straight towards and past camera with the fish wriggling. You think, well, I think I got that and when you actually see the rushes that is exciting, when you realise you didn't screw up. But there's an awful lot of NG takes.

Int: I've worked with you and you always seem very at home with your camera, with the technical side. You don't fuss around a lot. It seems like your main concentration is obviously on what you're filming, and that must be a big advantage not to be worried about the technicalities all the time. If you get just so used to it I suppose.

HM: Yes, I guess, it's just a tool and I've never been a technical wallah anyway. Exposure's, oh well, that's about F8, it's probably 12 5 today and you just get used to it. So it became second nature, yes, and it does enable you to concentrate on the animal, and you just have to because all the time the animal's suggesting things to you about what it's going to do and, of course, you have to react before it does it. But also whether you're screwing up, whether you're too close to it, is it nervous, is it anxious about your presence, are you modifying its behaviour? Because of course what people want to see is wild behaviour and if it's actually

modified by your presence, then they're not really getting a true picture of what that animal's about. So you have to be concentrating on the animal intensely all the time.

3. Getting close to his subjects

Int: I mean talking of that, it's jumping the gun a bit, but you've done some absolutely fantastic films of single species, where you've got the trust of the animals, and I'm thinking of the early film on otters in Shetland (3). I'm thinking of pumas (4), leopards (5), other things. That must be of that subtle balance between getting the animal's trust and then hoping, observing that they are behaving naturally. How did you do the otters, for instance, because that's a famous first really?

HM: Yes. I was inspired to try the technique with a wonderful book which you're probably familiar with, J. A. Baker's *The Peregrine* (6), which is a fabulous classic. It's basically the story of how he won the trust of a peregrine falcon by just wearing the same clothes everyday and he'd do the same walking, and the peregrine got so used to him as part of the landscape that it took no notice of him anymore. In the end he could walk up to a peregrine in the middle of a field while it was eating a starling or something. It was an inspiring read and I thought, well, maybe that's the way to actually get so you're really close to animals which were allegedly impossible. Like no one had actually really got to grips with otters.

So I tried that, wore all the same clothes everyday and just walked the same route, and slowly but surely won the trust of one particular otter and obviously you have to be able to identify the one you're following. In the end she'd swim right up to me in the edge of the sea and I'd almost touch her on the head. She wouldn't actually let me touch her but she'd walk all round me. One day there was a big squall and her cubs got washed out to sea and she couldn't find them because they were beyond where she was swimming up and down. She got absolutely demented and was screaming, and the first thing she did was came up to me and looked all round and between the tripod, thinking that I must have the cubs because she'd got used to me being close to her and the cubs so much. It was very moving and I almost swam out to go and rescue them but I thought I'd probably die, and I had two young children up in the croft nearby. So I thought, well, maybe not. But they were lost so we had to start all over again, and she had new cubs in a few months' time and then we started off again filming the cubs.

Int: Doing that sort of film when you're reliant on getting the trust of an animal or a pair of animals, and if something goes wrong you're in their hands to do something about it. There's nothing you can do, can you? You just have to have the time to start again or whatever.

HM: Yes, or the budget, or neither which you get these days.

Int: Has that happened with other single species?

HM: Yes, I had this with the puma I was doing in South America. Initially, for the first couple of months really, whenever I saw a puma they just ran off and I thought I'm never going to be able to deliver this film. It was for National Geographic. But I was trying to use the same technique as I'd had with otters and leopards and so on, and wearing the same clothes and so on. And one particular otter [puma] started to be quite not as afraid. Now they're afraid because they go sheep shearing as I used to call it and the gauchos used to shoot them, so they hated humans.

Anyway this particular, well it turned out it was a female, but it was a young animal and it was a bit inquisitive as all cats are. So you'd play on that and you'd sort of hide and the cat would think, where's it gone, then you'd show yourself a bit. And slowly but surely, it took me about four months, I won the trust of this cat and then I could walk around the mountains with her and it was wonderful. She'd go to sleep 20 feet from me and if I'd come home for a break to see Sue [HM's wife] and the children, then I'd go back, she'd sort of walk toward me and miaow. Was she threatening me or was it like hello because she would communicate with me, and I'd say things to her, especially if she was being a bit silly and stalking me and things. So I'd get up and say, naughty. I mean it was extraordinary and for me that was the film that I felt was closest to why I love making wildlife films, just because you had the trust of this animal which would normally would mistrust any human.

Int: Absolutely. But was there a setback in that?

HM: Well, yes. We had an occasion when I was checking the caves. She'd disappeared and we didn't see a puma for eight, nine days, and I started checking the caves and found bullets by one of the caves and blood inside it. It was one that I knew she used and thought, oh my God, no wonder she's gone. So basically I thought that's the project finished. I remember with Donny, my assistant, just sitting on the side of the hill and just so depressed, it was appalling. But luckily after another few days we found her and she showed up and she was okay. But they had poached at least three pumas out of the park. So we were always on borrowed time and I thought, well, the only way of dealing with this is to go and see the gaucho who we knew was doing in the poaching in the national park. And basically offer him money, by bribing, because we had so much invested in this cat, to not come and shoot her because we knew she went over the fence into his estancia and it was only a matter of time before she'd get shot. We discussed it with Donny and he was very careful about how he words this so he doesn't insult the guy because he won't admit to shooting it. We said, well, in the worst case scenario he's going to make the money and he's still going to shoot her but at least we've tried.

Anyway he was as good as his word and she didn't get shot until we'd finished the film, about a year and a half later but then she would have been as all pumas. They had a case recently, there were 17 pumas taken in a local estancia shot, it's terrible now. They had a fire and all the growth was outside the park. So the guanacos, their main prey, went outside the park and, of course, the pumas are where the main prey is and lots got shot. So the BBC went back recently to film pumas and had one sighting, two sightings or something. Whereas three years ago for Planet Earth (7), the new series, there were lots of cats around, offspring of some of the cats I filmed when I was there all those years ago. Yes, that's amazing.

Int: So the situation's got really bad just recently?

HM: Desperate recently, yes. A lot of persecution of cats, there's hardly a cat around. But it was a moving experience being with her and, as I say, being able to walk around with her. Then she had the cubs and at first she was really nervous when she had the cubs and didn't trust me. But in the end it was okay. One time it was extraordinary. She chased down and ran down a guanaco calf and I was watching this because it was too dark to film, and it was too light for the night vision camera which I had. So I watched it happen and then walked up to see how she'd killed it because she'd got hold of the throat and pulled its head back, finished. It was lying there and Penny was just - I named her Penny this cat - was sat just nearby. So I walked up and had a look at it and the blooming little guanaco calf jumped up and ran over to me, and I thought, oh God, this is a breach of trust. The cat is going to be seriously pissed off with this. I tried to shoo it away and the cat was watching and I walked away from the cat, hoping. In the end anyway, I managed to get rid of this little guanaco calf and it ran off over the hill and Penny was off after it. So I thought, oh well, she's got a meal and

I'd better get the hell out of here until she gets too fed up with me. But that was extraordinary, her prey leapt up and came to me for rescue.

4. Filming wild dogs, lions, cheetahs and ostriches

Int: You did a fantastic film on wild dogs (8) as well. Did you use a similar system there? Did a pack of dogs get used to you there or was that a different problem?

HM: Yes, they did but it's different in East Africa as you know. All the animals are so well habituated to vehicles. It was just a question of being careful.

Yes. They were so used to vehicles that generally they were habituated to vehicles. The trouble is so many vehicles used to chase after them when they were hunting and actually spoil the hunt. You'd challenge the drivers and I used to get seriously pissed off in those days and get mad, and shout and scream and stuff. I'm much calmer now - old age. Because it was appalling - they would stop the dogs hunting and usually when the dogs set off on hunting wildebeest they would always make a kill. They would never fail, they would always run something down. So when they did stop it was always humans who spoil the hunt for them.

So we were careful not to ever get too close to them. But they were wonderfully trusting. The worst case is when you did interfere is if they hated hyaenas. So they'd start biting a hyaena's arse and chase it, and if you didn't get moving quick enough the hyaena would run and hide under the vehicle, to stop its arse getting bitten. So you'd be surrounded by dogs all of which were mad as hell and you couldn't drive off because the hyaena was there. You felt really awkward then because you were actually stopping what was natural. Poor hyaenas.

Int: Actually there was a rather sad ending, wasn't there, to that wild dog story?

HM: Yes, it was a tragic story because there's a lot more Maasai moving into East Africa, and the Maasai have dogs and rabies is endemic in the dogs. Of course, sometimes they greet the Maasai dogs and lick each other, and of course that's transmitted, so the dogs got rabies. At one stage in October we had 44 dogs in the pack because two females mated and had young which is very unusual in wild dogs as you probably know. So we had 44 basically and they were reduced to none within six months, and we had to pick up the dead ones because the scientists wanted to analyse why they were dying. So we were having to pick up these dogs that we knew by name and throw them in the back of the vehicle. It was horrible, really awful and the last one of mum calling for its offspring.

And bully for National Geographic because for them to make it a happy ending, and I said it is not a happy ending, they're heading for extinction. I don't think the dogs have been seen in the Maasai Mara ever since that film was made. But luckily National Geographic said, no, you can have an unhappy ending because it is an unhappy ending for East Africa's dogs. They're hardly in the Serengeti and in Hugo's famous film (9) in the 1960s there were eight or nine packs. There isn't a single pack in the Serengeti now and it ain't short of food because there's 1.6 million wildebeest. So it's tragic really, very sad, because they are wonderful animals.

Initially I found it quite difficult filming them because I was used to individual animals that you could get on a wavelength with, because they communicate with you and they're sort of aware of you. So you can get on a wavelength with them. Whereas the pack of wild dogs, they're all so busy in amongst themselves that actually you may as well not be there and I found that a bit distressing at first. But then I just got to admire their tenacity and their hunting skills, and the way they were such mates with each other and they all supported each other. So in the end I got to love them as much as pussy cats.

Int: Yes, that's the fascination of wolves as well isn't it, is that pack behaviour and the way they all support each other and everything. Talking of East Africa, I think it's true to say you've had phases of filming a lot in getting used to a particular place, and that leads from one film to another. East Africa, I can't remember when the Impossible Bird (10) was. Was that before Life on Earth (11) because I remember working with you on Life on Earth (11)?

HM: Yes, we did a lion hunt (12), didn't we, in the Ngorongoro. God, that was amazing, wasn't it, that's wonderful. The second day we were able to plot what shots we needed in case they did the same thing again and they did exactly the same things. It was like plotting a drama, you could decide where your shots were. God, they were good that pack of lions and they were the classic hunters where one would peel off and create a diversion, so they drive the wildebeest into the rest of the pack. They had a double kill, didn't they? Yes, I remember because we wanted two shots and I went off into the marsh to try and get it, and reckoned if they attacked me I could get back to the vehicle before they got me. And you all thought not a chance, thanks. I got out for a pee, do you remember that time? We didn't know where the pack was and I got out for a pee and went a discrete distance from the vehicle, and this lioness leapt out of the grass in front of me. You were all cruel, laughing, I went about six foot in the air. It was good.

Int: Yes, I do remember that. Those were the days when the Ngorongoro crater, there was nobody else there, was there, which was fantastic.

HM: No, it was extraordinary. It was closed because of political problems, wasn't it?

Int: Yes. But that was a real privilege to work there at that time. We were lucky, we were very lucky, to be able to camp and stay down in the crater.

HM: In the lurei cabin, yes. It was drawing short straws as to who would go and get the cold beers at night, not just because of the lions but the puff adders living underneath the cabin. You wouldn't be allowed to do that sort of stuff, well, you can't live in the crater anymore. No, I was certainly filming in East Africa in the golden age really when there weren't many vehicles, not many tourists, and not many restrictions.

Int: No. Because we filmed cheetahs as well if you remember, and that probably led to you being keen on filming cheetahs later on. But those brothers, do you remember catching up with those brothers?

HM: Yes, they were there in the crater. Well, when we were doing *Life on Earth* (11) we had those two males that were chasing wildebeest and that's a pretty rare happening nowadays.

Int: That's right. Because me and Martin Saunders were in one vehicle and we'd got there and we had no radios in those days. Why we didn't have radios because we were trying to save money. We needed to radio

and say we need two cameras on this, and then you arrived.

HM: Luckily, right place at the right time, that's one of the tricks, just get lucky. It's better to be lucky than good.

Int: And as Martin Saunders's film ran out, you were able to take over weren't you? I was sort of doing we've had a rap here signs and you were in the other vehicle and were able to start filming. So we just got a sequence and his film ran out just when it made the kill, and you'd just started filming. So the editor was able to crosscut.

HM: It all integrated beautifully. Ron Martin, dear Ron, and John [Sparks] nearly screwed the end because he was so excited when we got the hit. He said, "Did you get it, did you get it?" I said, "Yes, yes, yes," and as it's rolling over in the dust and he hits the windscreen of the car. I said, John, the camera going. Luckily Ron was able to get the scissors in so it was right.

But the ostrich film (10), going back to your original question, the ostrich film (10) was after that.

Int: Right. Was Life on Earth (11) your first time in East Africa?

HM: Yes, it was. My first freelance job, I'd just gone freelance. It was pretty terrifying because I remember I was with John [Sparks] who was one of the senior producers in the Natural History Unit, and I'd done some work for him as an attachment from Ealing. He said, oh, I think I'll have a shot of that Tommy chewing the grass, and I was so nervous I remember thinking, oh blimey. I'd done lots of filming but I was really nervous, it was my first shot as a freelancer. Filming a Tommy chewing grass but I soon got into it, it was great, and the lion hunt was a wonderful sequence.

Int: So did you get the idea of doing an ostrich film (10) from then, seeing them around?

HM: No, it was an idea Peter Bale, the executive, and Lance Takel - they wanted to do an ostrich film (10). No, as you know, we came home early because we'd got the lion hunt and they didn't have enough budget left for us to stay. So I came home and arrived at home about 3 o'clock in the morning, and Sue [HM's wife] said, oh hi, but you're not meant to be here. You're meant to be in East Africa, they want you there for an ostrich film (10). So I had to get back to Heathrow the next day and get on the plane and go back.

The ostrich (10) was wonderful but again I was able to use what I'd learnt from the peregrine film [book] (6) because the ostriches kept running away, and I thought, well, we're not going to be able to film this. But slowly but surely by just doing the same things and behaving in the same way, the ostriches got to trust us and then we were able to get decent footage of them. They're wonderful animals, amazing.

Int: Again, you got, sort of crèche-ing behaviour and things which people have tried since and haven't seen in such scale.

HM: Well, the guy who was doing a PhD and he'd been studying the ostriches for eight years and never seen it. But it was the crucial piece of behaviour, the fact that the ostrich families bring all the young together into a crèche for safety from predation. I thought, well, it's rather a key sequence to film. Anyway I got lucky because we got it.

Int: Yes, it was wonderful. It wasn't the first of your many awards but I mean that did win a Panda or something, didn't it?

HM: Yes, a Panda for photography I think it was.

Int: Yes, probably 1982 or round about there, yes, something like that. Because that was before Kingdom of the Ice Bear (13-15), wasn't it? That's 1982. Because you were still doing films for the Unit as well as other people, weren't you, at that time?

HM: Yes, I was doing some sort of day jobs, if you like, camera for hire sort of thing. But starting to do my own films.

Int: Because Animal Olympians (16) that you and I did some of that together. We were trying to get cheetahs, you remember running fast.

HM: Yes, cheetahs running.

Int: For Jeffery [Boswall].

HM: That story, do you remember? That you've dined out on.

Int: I should have brought the piece of bone. Can you recall that?

HM: Yes. It was roaring off and we had a high speed camera for the running, and we were trying to get there ahead of it and suddenly we had a puncture. There was this bone from a Tommy or something through the tyre and that was it, and it hammered off into the distance and hit this Tommy.

Int: An old cheetah kill probably. There was a bit of femur or something, sharpened at the end, it went straight through the tyre.

HM: It was the only hunt we had for 10 days, we failed. It was very rare we failed but we did that time.

Int: Yes, I know. We did fail on that one.

HM: And we nearly died. Do you remember we had to do ostriches running out on the salt pans at Etosha - not Etosha, Arusha.

Int: It was near the border, wasn't it?

HM: Yes, what's the park called? You were so busy following and I was filming on the one side that we nearly hit the post marker between Tanzania and Kenya, just swerved at the last minute. I mean we'd have died.

Int: Yes, I just looked up at the last minute and thought f..k. Oh sorry – no.

HM: I still think about and think that was close, if you hadn't looked up.

Int: Driving Land Rovers in East Africa, I mean it's a wonder not more people have. I remember hitting one of those with Maurice Tibbles in the crater, hitting one of those drainage ditches by the side of the road at full speed, trying to get somewhere for a hyaena kill, I think, and hitting that. It threw Maurice Tibbles up so far that he almost knocked himself out on the roof.

HM: Concussion holes they call it. When we were doing the wild dog film (8) and they were so fast and we had to roar around, and Samantha Purdy was my assistant. She was driving like mad and you'd hit these concussion holes and one time we did and I hit the roof. As I was coming down the camera hit me under the chin and smashed the rear view mirror. So I had foam stuck in the top of the thing just in case because it kept on happening. Hazards of the job but the excitement of it as well. Go, go, go, we're going to get there.

5. Filming for Kingdom of the Ice Bear

Int: We got as far as early 1980s and that was the time when, I mean we'd worked together on Discovery of Animal Behaviour (17), doing some stuff. Then I know you went with an idea to Peter Jones about the Arctic. Why the Arctic? Why suddenly an interest in the Arctic?

HM: Well, I think as a filmmaker you know as well as I do you're constantly looking for subjects that don't appear to have been done before. It struck me that I hadn't actually ever seen anything comprehensive about the Arctic, and I love the Arctic because of all Peter Scott's books and the fact that the wild geese go up there. He went to Canada, Northern Canada, looking for Ross's geese and things like that. So I thought, well, maybe the Arctic is one. So I looked into a bit and then took the idea to Peter Jones, and it was obviously three one hours and I couldn't cope with that myself. So asked you if you were interested and luckily you were and it was bloody good fun. You were thinking, oh well, I'll stay at home and get people to go out there, and I said, no, the whole thing is you've got to be there to enjoy it. So we went out there together and had a good time in the cold.

Int: Yes, we did. We had to prepare for it, do you remember that?

HM: Oh yes. Well, it is dangerous so we went on a climbing course in the Cairngorms on snow survival, didn't we, and snow and ice survival, and learnt how to use crampons and how to slide backwards down a



mountain and arrest yourself with an ice axe, and make snow shelters and find our way in a white out and stuff. But it was actually the point. Then we went to the marines and stuff, and they said you do have to realise that the cold can kill and we were going to be in seriously cold conditions.

But I do remember on one occasion actually learning how to use an ice axe and having it always with you. We were always reminded you never know when you're going to have an accident. You were on a skidoo and the skidoo rolled over on an icy patch and you were sliding down the mountain towards a rather large drop, certainly big enough to kill you. You managed to arrest yourself before you actually went over the edge. I remember you were miles late from our arranged greeting place and you turned up about 9 o'clock that evening and very shaken, and woke up in the middle of the night, I remember, saying don't go near the edge, don't go near the edge. You were having a nightmare about the fact you nearly died.

Of course, in those days we didn't have any radios or anything which was sheer madness. God knows how we survived doing that polar bear denning scene because we were there for six weeks, and we were separated by —. Well, no one knew where we were, no one in the planet. Which is actually very inspiring but you wouldn't have to take those risks these days and you would be allowed to either. But it was fun.

Int: I always feel that some of those places we went were true wilderness. Did you feel that? Because you go to some places in Africa and although they're different for you - for us, there are usually people not too far away. But if you remember there are some places we went to in the Arctic where the nearest person was, what, two or three hundred miles away.

HM: It was spectacular in that respect. When we were on Edgeoya which is the most south easterly of the Svalbard island archipelago, there were valleys we were going up and down looking for polar bear denning where probably no human had ever been. And certainly the nearest human was, well, at least 200 odd miles away, and to the south the nearest place was Britain. I think to the north the nearest land was actually Siberia over the North Pole, so it was pretty remote but inspiring for that.

Int: Cuts you down to size, doesn't it?

HM: Yes, makes you very humble and doesn't make you any more careful. But makes you very sensitive to how much at risk you are. If you remember, Rasmus was leading us in a white out and he suddenly stopped skidoos and we thought what's up? He walked forward and there was a huge crevasse in front of us and some sense made him aware, otherwise we'd have all gone over the edge whether we'd have survived but that was extraordinary.

And then after that we had to walk along with reindeer droppings and if they didn't actually land in front of you, you knew you had a hole in front of you so you turned round and went round a different way until the cloud blew away. Yes, it was pretty much living on the edge there. But as John Schmidt said, that lovely saying he said, if you're not living near the edge you're taking up too much space.

Int: And that was all to do with trying to get that - we wanted that classic shot of a polar bear mother bringing her cubs out for the first time.



HM: Yes, and we had bad luck, if you like, in that we were late simply because we couldn't get to the island because there were cracks in the ice, maybe the first signs of global warming. So it was for days we waited to try and get across, and in the end we had to go to the expense, and we didn't have enough budget to get a helicopter to take us across the gap to the island. Then we were the best part of a week late and so the dens we were finding, there was a tendency for the bears to have already left, if you remember.

So we kept on finding the signs and no bears, and one we wasted four days. Do you remember Rasmus and I sat in front of them and the bear kept on coming out and looking out, and all the signs were she had cubs, and we felt it was just a matter of time? In the end she did leave and she had no cubs. So that was desperate.

Int: And that again was one of those animal moments. I remember you telling me that you suddenly felt guilty. Is it our presence that has disturbed her and perhaps if she has got cubs she's abandoning them.

HM: Well, that's always a worry but then we went and had a look in the den and found there were no signs of cubs. So it was only for a couple of hours we were feeling bad about it but luckily we hadn't caused any disruption. But we certainly thought that when we did finally find a den with cubs in it, and there was great hugs between Rasmus and I, because you and Berge were looking elsewhere for ones in case this wasn't a successful site. Because it was in a place where a polar bear wouldn't normally choose to have cubs. It was right on the southern tip of the island and it's a dangerous place because there's lots of male bears going around, and they'll kill the cubs.

Anyway we found one and we were delighted and we were waiting in the little igloo for her to bring the cubs out, which we'd just seen a sign of, and then she just came out and went walking off on to the sea ice and walked off into the distance, over the horizon. And that's when we thought, oh my God, we are too close and we've made her abandon the cubs. Because Rasmus is a very experienced polar bear expert and he says they don't do that if they've got cubs. So we were feeling completely gutted and then about three hours later she came back and went up and started suckling her cubs. God, what a relief that was. Then, of course, she did all the famous bit of sliding down the mountain on her back as if she, well, she hadn't seen daylight for three months and she was very happy to be out in the fresh air and the sun.

Int: Yes, an absolutely classic shot, shot on a very long lens with any amount of doublers and things.

HM: Yes, it was and also because it was so cold. I think it was minus 36 with the snow and the wind, and my eye was watering and it froze up so I couldn't actually really see, and the viewfinder iced up. So I was actually having to focus pull by memory if you like, by instinct, and I was mightily relieved when we got back to Bristol and found it was still sharp when she reached the bottom of the hill.

Int: I mean I remember coming to that half an igloo that we'd built as a hide, and coming there and fetching you out in the evening, after you'd spent a day in there at minus 37 or whatever, and you had hypothermia. I mean you had it really badly and we took you back to that dreadful hut with frost inside, and you got into two sleeping bags.

HM: Yes, and you gave me hot soup and hot water bottles. You didn't actually sleep with me that night, did you, to keep me warm?



Int: No.

HM: No, I don't think we went that far. I had to sleep with the camera to keep it warm. I thought things are pretty bad when you've got to sleep with your camera, they've got knobby elbows. Keep it warm, stop it freezing. No, I recovered, thank God.

Int: The survival manual said as a last resort you get into bed with the person who's suffering from hypothermia.

HM: Naked, apparently it had to be.

Int: I'm glad it didn't come to that.

HM: You'd have let me die, wouldn't you? Let's face it. Because we went back the next morning if you remember and the polar bear, she'd come down the hill and she was actually in our igloo. She ate one of the thunder flashes we'd left there and we were hoping she wasn't a smoker because that could have been quite interesting. And instead of going out of the door that she'd meant to, she just walked straight through the front wall and back up to the cubs. So we very had to be very quiet, so we didn't disturb her, try and build the wall back up again. That was funny.

Int: Amazing. People ask me often about the danger of being near to polar bears. To do with respect, in not putting yourself in danger. I mean what do you feel about that with dangerous animals?

HM: Well, I mean you hear about how dangerous polar bears are from people who'd gone to the Arctic. I think they try and make themselves out as macho because they say, oh, they're always trying to kill you and stuff and it's a load of b.....t. I mean to put it into perspective, our main scientific adviser, Ian Stirling, who'd worked with polar bears at that stage for 25 years and he was out with them every day. He never had to kill a polar bear. He'd never had any bad incidents with them, and that just goes to show how actually undangerous they are. And so people who have to shoot polar bears are usually either overreacting because they're about 50 yards away and look inquisitive, which of course they are, they're trying to smell you. But they just shoot them because they think they're going to be in danger and they're not.

So I think it's very sad, and certainly as a filmmaker it would be just desperate if you were put in a situation where you had to shoot a polar bear. It's only television, it's not worth putting an animal like that at risk.

Int: No. But it's also a case, isn't it, of respecting the signals they're giving you if they are getting a bit annoyed with your presence and just backing off enough to stop them being annoyed.

HM: Yes, because a polar bear isn't exactly very expressive, not compared with a pussy cat. But they do lower their heads and their ears move slightly but basically they lower their heads, and if they're seriously pissed off they start [HM imitates the noise]. Then you definitely need to be somewhere else because they are going to charge you if you get to that situation. So just get the hell out. It's when the skidoo won't start because it's so cold and the bear's closing on you, you think, oh Christ, and then you fire a thunder flash and

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then you leave your jacket on so it smells that. By which time you're far enough away and the situation has eased somewhat.

Int: Well, we used to fire those little pen torch flares over their heads and they'd watch the thing going over their heads and then wander off, and forget that you were there as the source of this wondrous firework display.

6. Filming the sequence of the barnacle geese

Int: In Kingdom of the Ice Bear (13-15), I think one of the seminal sequences was the barnacle geese in Greenland. Because you did that without me.

HM: Yes, I went there with Mike Reid, an old friend who is still an old friend and lives just up the road. It was something which was always in doubt as to how the barnacle geese got to be 100 feet below the nesting cliffs. They nest up on high ledges, 100, 200 feet above the tundra because of the Arctic foxes. So they're safe from predation there but then they have to get the chicks down to the river, where again they're safe and no one's quite sure. They thought they're probably carried down on the backs of the adults.

So anyway we set up on the ledge with the birds and they started getting very excited, and the Irish expedition who were nearby said, yes, we saw something happening last year and we think from when they start chipping the eggs to when they hatch and leave was about three hours. So we thought, oh, this'll be easy so I just had a Mars bar and a bit of water. 30 hours later they still hadn't left the ledge. So it was a long wait and it was so silent up there and, of course, she was very nervous and the chicks were there in the nest. And actually trying to peel a Mars bar when it's so silent, everything a human ever does is very noisy and she kept on pricking her ears up as I was desperate to try and eat my Mars bar.

But in the end she jumped and she went down and hovered in the updraft and got the chicks very excited, and in the end they just jumped and they parachute down, and they are feathery and they're so light, and they actually bounce when they reach the ground. But needless to say the foxes are waiting below with the frying pan to catch them like Tom and Jerry and snaffle some of them. But many of them make it to the river. So it was a very exciting thing to see.

Int: A real story of amazing animal survival in a year, that impulse to breed and pass on your genes to the next generation, amazing.

HM: Yes. One of the great rules of wildlife filmmaking is you don't interfere with the animals, you let things happen. On one occasion we'd been waiting for about nine days for the mum and the chicks to jump down so we could get the shots falling down below. Then she was leading them all towards the river and there's huge boulders below the cliffs where a piece of the cliff had fallen off. A couple of the chicks fell down the crack and mum couldn't get them out and they could climb out, and she was going demented. But in the end she lost patience and went towards the river with the other chicks, and I thought I can't leave them here. So I reached down in the crack and got them out and stuck them in my woolly hat to keep them warm, and walked down towards the river and then released them for mum and happy families. They went off to the river and lived happily ever after we hope.

Int: Brilliant.

7. Making films with a conservation message

Int: Just the last thing on Kingdom of the Ice Bear (13-15). You talked earlier about conservation issues and things, and I remember that the series had started as a two part series, purely wildlife. You and I both thought that we ought to talk about the future of the Arctic, we ought to look at conservation and what biologists are doing, etc. And persuaded the powers that be at the BBC that it was good idea to add that programme. Do you still feel that was an incredibly important thing to do?

HM: Absolutely, yes, because we were able to air some of the problems of the Arctic and some of the concerns, some of which are coming true now, and gave a broader picture of what the Arctic was all about. It gave us an opportunity to deal with some of the issues that we couldn't deal with in the purely wildlife films. I remember when we showed the rough cut to Peter Jones, he looked at it and then said, um, looks like a load of porridge to me, which is about insulting as you could be. We thought it worked anyway, so we stuck to our guns and kept it the way it was and I know he wanted a narrator to narrate it, and we had all the scientists and the Inuit speaking their own thoughts about the Arctic. Anyway we persisted with that. It went out the way we wanted it to, and Mick Rhodes had been up to the Television Centre at one of the big meetings with the big chiefs, and they said we thought Kingdom of the Ice Bear programme 1 (13) and 2 (14), were good. But they said the icing on the cake was programme 3 (15), that gave us a complete picture. That was for me one of the great triumphs, I was really pleased about that response.

Int: No, so was I, I remember that, yes. It just gave it a completeness.

HM: It's nice to see that happening now going to the present with Planet Earth (7). It gets criticised for being just pretty pretties and why aren't you dealing with the issues. But the fact that there is now a series of Planet in Crisis (18, 19) or whatever it might be called, about what the issues of the day are and what is concerning environmentalists. So I think that's excellent. I think we should be dealing with those sorts of things.

Int: Since then you've done films which have very strong themes like that as well as your famous pure, blue chip wildlife films. I mean I'm thinking of the one you did in Newfoundland.

HM: With Patrick Morris, People of the Sea (20). Yes, that was terrific. We started off with it being more a wildlife film but the more time I spent looking into the story and exploring the possibilities, the clearer it became that actually there was a much stronger story to make. I remember it was part funded by the BBC and part funded by National Geographic. When we delivered the film to National Geographic, by which time the film was a very powerful conservation story about the decline of the cod stocks in Newfoundland because of the over-exploitation of the capelin, which is the base of this pyramid of life in Newfoundland. National Geographic said you haven't delivered the film that we commissioned, and thinking that they would withdraw the funding, and luckily they didn't. They said luckily it's a better film than that which we commissioned, so that was a relief and it went down extremely well.

I mean it won awards for best conservation film at film festivals which was very heartening. But the best result of all is the Premier of Newfoundland saw it who used to be the fisheries manager, and he was so impressed by it he said would the BBC supply us with 300 copies, so every school in Newfoundland can have a copy. So the children were brought up understanding about their environment and the dangers of

over-exploitation of a wildlife resource, and that was just a wonderful result. Best I've ever had from a wildlife film actually.

Int: That's great. I mean do you think as wildlife filmmakers actually we do enough to give back to the countries we work in, in terms of education and wildlife? Have you been involved in that much yourself?

HM: Wherever possible. You always try and make sure that copies go to the authorities wherever. Well, I always do, and that scientists involved actually see the finished product. But generally I would say not. I mean there are exceptions. I know Alan Root, for instance, and Hugo van Lawick, were always very determined to make sure that the authorities and some of the schools got copies of the films they made about environmental issues in East Africa. Simon Trevor as well. They've done a lot in that respect. But generally speaking, no, I don't think so. We just go out and we have a nice time making a wildlife film and that's the end of that, and then we move on to our next project. We should do more. There should be a department in the Natural History Unit really responsible for making sure that the message gets across that copies of these films get to the schools, so people can learn about their environment. Okay, so it takes a bit of your budget but it should be put to one side so that could be achieved I think.

Int: No, I agree. It's something I've championed myself.

HM: Have you ever got anywhere?

Int: Well, I've put aside bits of budget, I did for a Madagascar film on lemurs. I put aside some budget and gave a video machine and copies to the zoo in Antananarivo, so that local children who were learning about foxes and badgers from European biology books instead of learning about their own indigenous wildlife. So they didn't know they were living in somewhere precious.

HM: Yes, quite. We did have a case, I did a film about Tunisia (21) which won some conservation awards. One about Lake Ichkeul in northern Tunisia, one of the last remaining big freshwater bodies in the whole of North Africa and extremely important to wildlife. They were just opening a new information centre on the top of the mountain there, and I made sure they had copies and continued to have copies when they were worn out. In order that they could be shown to the locals when they visited, so they could understand why the lake was important as a freshwater lake.

Int: Right, that's important.

8. Life as a wildlife cameraman

Int: Well, starting with Kingdom of the Ice Bear (13-15) which we made together and after that you have really worked as a producer, writer, director, cameraman. You've been trying to keep the projects totally under your control. Is that something that you've enjoyed doing, trying to make it the way you want?

HM: Yes, because I think it's easy to dilute the experience and my take is really that people turn on a wildlife film in order to get as close to the experience of actually being there as possible. One way of doing that, is to keep it as intense as possible which means even that, because often the animal that you're following is



aware of the camera and is sometimes looking at the camera, why not speak that story from behind the camera because people know that it's being filmed. Rather than have a disembodied voice, albeit it's David Attenborough and he's wonderful at doing it, why not have somebody who was actually there at the time so it can be a more intense experience for the audience?

So if you can transform people for an hour from their living rooms and make them feel they were actually sharing that experience with you, then that's the trick and that's what I try to achieve. I think it's easier if you do all those things yourself. Apart from the fact, I know it's selfish and a great privilege, but actually it's so much fun, that all those creative process and I'm not a loner or anything. I love bringing all these other players into it, of course, which you have to when you're making a film. But it is nice to try and drive the project from your own mind as to how you experienced it when you were there in the field.

Int: Is there any particular one of those personal films that you feel really did achieve that goal you set out to do?

HM: I think the film that for me was the most rewarding, I can't say whether it achieved what I'd hoped to. But the one that was undoubtedly the most rewarding, I think, was the one with the puma (4) because it is such a heavily persecuted animal, and to win the trust of an animal that is so scared of humans was just a wonderful experience. That's the ultimate goal of any wildlife filmmaker, I think. If you're out with the camera, to be able to walk along in the mountains with a completely wild mountain lion is extraordinary. In fact, it was Maurice Hornocker, the famous mountain lion specialist, who saw some of the rough cut with Keenan [Smart] at National Geographic. He said if it wasn't National Geographic I'd say that was a put-up job. So that was quite an honour, may be slightly backhanded but it's a great complement. But that was a wonderful experience, absolutely unbeatable.

Int: I know it's a privilege going to these out of the way places and so on. But the downside of it is that you have to spend a long time away from home, and we all know that being a wildlife filmmaker, whether it be a cameraman, producer, whatever, is hazardous to family relations and things. For younger people have you any tips as to how you've managed to avoid any disasters in that respect?

HM: I don't know, marry somebody who's incredibly patient I think, I mean Sue [HM's wife] is. I guess part of the advantage with Sue and I, and we've been married what 33, 34 years, 35 - bloody eternity anyway, it's far too long. We're old enough to know better now. But she came from the business, she was a make-up artist in the BBC and we met doing a feature drama thing in Munich and St. Moritz. So she understands what the industry's about, and so she doesn't feel too challenged about me being away and having all these young ladies falling over me all the time, and all that stuff, I wish. So it isn't an issue and never has been. For whatever reason, she's my best mate and still is, so we're lucky in that respect, as I know you and Viv [Mike Salisbury's wife] are. I think if you've got a strong relationship it shouldn't matter if you're away periodically. I mean I used to be away 230, 250 days a year.

One of the main things, I think, is to restrict your trips to about six weeks. I know you're compromising your work by doing that but in the end it's only television, and actually you can make a jolly good film if you just restrict yourself to six week trips because by then you're a bit burnt out. If you go full on, every day after day after day, by about six weeks you're burnt out. But if you longer than that, and I did do some trips longer, your family becomes so independent of you that actually to make that adjustment, when you go back into the family and start wearing the trousers again and telling them what - or suggesting maybe - what they ought to be doing, there's no place for you. Well, who are you to tell us? So I think if you restrict your trips to six weeks, it worked for us anyway.

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I envy people who actually maybe go to the Bush for two years and live the life. But I've been selfish. I've wanted the normal family life with children at the local school and the community and friends, and also to do the jobs. So I've been lucky to be get away with it, if you like.

Int: Well, it's obviously worked for you.

HM: So far. You'd better ask Sue [HM's wife] if it worked for her.

Int: But then films like Tom's [Tom Williams] River (22), filmed very close to home. A wonderful film about the guy who looks after the river. Are there any disadvantages of working close to home as well?

HM: Awful, far worse.

Int: Really? Why?

HM: Because you're constantly on duty and if you don't want to compromise and you want to do the best you possibly can, which I was always do. The moment the sun comes out or the light's just right or the tide or the river's in flood, or it's just come down, or you know the trout are spawning or the salmon are running up the weir. You have to just drop everything and grab the camera and go. So you never, ever really relax and I was working on it on and off for four years. I was doing other films as well because you can't make a living just making one wildlife film once every two years. It just doesn't make ends meet, you can't pay the mortgage. So I never really had a day for about four years while I was making that film. No, it's much better to go away for six weeks and then work, and then come home and maybe spend half a day relaxing before you then get ready for the next trip. But you do have half a day off.

Int: You've won numerous awards, I don't want to embarrass you with how many, but Golden Pandas and BAFTAs for camera work and god knows what. Are there any of those that stand out for you as really proud moments of achievement in particular?

HM: I was delighted about one in particular. We did a special which was one of the Attenborough Wildlife Specials (23) for BBC1 on the tiger. I worked very closely with Chip Houseman for 2, 2 and a half years on that and his photography was absolutely stunning. He's a very talented bloke, lovely guy, very close friend and that won a BAFTA for cinematography and that was largely for Chip. Chip sadly died before he knew how successful the film was and before he knew it had won a BAFTA, in a plane crash in Thailand. But it was wonderful for the family that his skill was recognised by the industry. So that would be the outstanding BAFTA.

Int: I mean it's a really clichéd question but you've been all over the world, been to some amazing places and so on. Again, it's one of these questions like is there one place that turned you on more than any others, or is there a place that really lifted your spirits in some particular way in the world?

HM: Yes, lots of places for lots of different reasons. Obviously the southern Andes in Patagonia because it was such a wonderful experience with the cat but also it was a stunning place because the weather was so



changeable. One minute you were getting blown to the ground literally, you had to hang onto a rock to stop yourself getting blown away and then it would be calm and tranquil and there'd be little ducklings on the lake. Then the next minute it'll be frozen snow and you'd be padding round in complete silence following the tracks of the cat. That was wonderful and equally up high in the Himalayas, I was working on Planet Earth (7) for Ned Kelly and you were up really high, sort of 17, 18,000 feet and luckily I'm very good at altitude. I found it spiritually very uplifting and I love Buddhism, I think it's an amazing, well not really a religion, as a sort of belief, a lifestyle if you like. And that was wonderfully uplifting just being up high.

Then for the snow leopard film (24) with the Ladakhis. You remember that for different reasons. The landscape is extraordinary but the people are just fantastic. The Ladakhis, they couldn't do enough for you. Constantly helpful, constantly positive about what you were trying to achieve that day and how you would achieve it. And then when the weather was lousy, because they're Indians so they're made keen on cricket, so you'd have an England versus India cricket match and clear away the snow. So they were wonderful, fun loving people, brilliant people. So you remember the locations for different reasons.

Then, of course, there's Alaska which is pretty special because the halibut were huge and the pink salmon fishing was amazing, and the story was great as well. It's nice to go to lots of different places.

Int: I noticed you mentioned halibut but you don't mention Arctic char.

HM: No, it's funny that Michael. Have you ever caught an Arctic char?

Int: Hugh, I've caught two enormous ones and it's a great shame that you've never caught one.

HM: Allegedly, yes. I saw the pictures. I think they were computer generated, weren't they?

Int: In those days you couldn't do that.

Int: But on a more serious note, fantastic places. As wildlife filmmakers we go to all these places and you've been doing it for 30 years or so, like me. How do you feel about returning to places and finding that they've changed, presumably often for the worst, hopefully sometimes for the better? But does it make you very pessimistic about the future for wildlife, habitat, for people?

HM: No, I think not really although it's right - sometimes you go to a place and it is degraded. Sometimes you go back and it's actually better, and when I went back to Torres del Paine for Planet Earth (7), to help them to find pumas, it was actually a far better park than when I was there. The guanaco herds had increased and the number of pumas was extraordinary, it was fantastic. It was rich and the vegetation had recovered a bit but since then they've had a fire and all the pumas have been shot, and it's a disaster. So it's best not to go there.

But I think the good thing about wildlife generally, and certainly we are going to more and more polarised into honey pot places because the world is being degraded. On the other hand there's a lot more understanding about what the environmental issues are. I mean it was only 1970, which was European Conservation Year, and people didn't even know what conservation meant. Now you can even make programmes about

environmental issues and get away with it, and get the funding even. Even if politicians actually choose to ignore things like global warming, at least they know it's an issue and more and more, I think, as the general public understand and believe, then they're going to push politicians into actually doing something about it. And I think that's beginning to happen and that's very encouraging. Of course, David's got more and more involved, David Attenborough. He's such a leading figure in people's understanding of what is going on in the world, what wonders there are there. But he's becoming more and more committed to actually getting the environmental message across and I think that's very heartening. It's very important he does it before he pops his clogs. Well, next time you see him just tell him we're rooting for him to go and do it more. I think he has to because there'll never be another Attenborough.

END

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