

## Mike Birkhead: Oral History Transcription

**Name of interviewee(s):**

Mike Birkhead

**Reasons why chosen for an oral history:**

Mike Birkhead is an independent natural history film producer who has made many award winning films, including a series of in-depth films that document the plight of tigers and elephants.

**Name of interviewer:**

Huw Cordey

**Reasons why interviewer chosen:**

Longstanding colleague and friend

**Name of cameraman:**

Alan Griffiths

**Date of interview:**

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**Place of interview:**

Bristol, UK

**Length of interview:**

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## 1. The early years

*Int: Can you identify yourself and what position you have?*

MB: My name is Mike Birkhead and I'm an independent producer with my own independent production company.

*Int: Called Mike Birkhead Associates. Who came up with that title?*

MB: Actually the reason I'm called Mike Birkhead Associates is because I now have an associate which is my wife, Caroline, but it could be my dog Lola. Alastair MacEwen nearly 30 years ago set up a company called Associates, Alastair MacEwen Associates and he'd just got rid of London Scientific Films and he made it very clear that having overheads was an absolute killer and his company went under. Ever since then I remember it so I thought if it's good enough for Alastair its good enough for me.

*Int: But I remember, just taking you back to 92, when I was part of your company and it was still called Mike Birkhead Associates but I remember not being an associate. I guess it's best to start at the beginning and can you tell us how you got started in this business?*

MB: I was an academic for an awful long time because I couldn't do anything else and I was an academic for about 10 years doing various degrees and postgraduate degrees and post doctorate degrees. After I'd done those I was sitting in the library at Oxford one day reading *Nature*, a very erudite magazine, twiddling my thumbs thinking I'm not clever enough to stay at Oxford for the next 25 years I'd better find myself a job. Very luckily I was flicking through *Nature* and it said London Weekend Television (LWT), I didn't really know what London Weekend Television was at the time, wanted a researcher to work in their current affairs and features department.

So I replied to the advert and said I'd be interested to work in your department and they offered me an interview. A couple of weeks later I walked down the South Bank to this huge building which is now the South Bank Television Studios and was interviewed by an array of very frightening TV execs. That place included John Burt, Greg Dyke, Jane Hewland, it was full of proper TV people, luckily none of them meant anything to me at all. I went away and they offered me a second interview.

*Int: So those people actually interviewed you for this job?*

MB: Yes, all of these people were there and they asked me all these journalistic questions because it was a current affairs and features department, it wasn't a natural history department. I didn't know what a current affairs and features department was but luckily they needed a specialist to work on a television series called *City Safari* (1), so they needed an academic who knew a lot about natural history and I'd been doing a doctorate in zoology and post doctorate in zoology, and I must have impressed the producer. So eventually they asked me back for another interview and I got the job. So that's how it started and I didn't realise it was an incredibly sought after job because it meant nothing to me at the time.

They offered me the job and I remember walking in on day one and they said well done, well done, you got the job and I thought is it that good. Did anyone else apply and they said, yes, thousands applied, this is a really good job and I thought, well, that's great.

*Int: So they spotted the talent from an early age with you, Mike.*

MB: I was really lucky. There was a very quirky producer called Gavin Weightman. If it wasn't for him I wouldn't have got employed in this department. He did his own thing entirely and he was an amazing character, very good fun character but he did his own thing entirely. He was a presenter and a producer/director at London Weekend and he just said I want that bloke and they said, no, he doesn't know anything about journalism, he's not a journalist at all. Gavin said, yes, but he knows about buddleia and he knows about ducks and birds and I want him. So I got really lucky to be employed just because this guy wanted me.

I remember they asked me all the clichéd questions like what newspaper do you read and things like that and of course I said just to wind them up the *Daily Mail* and the *Daily Express* and they were going we can't employ him.

*Int: But it's funny how that happens so often in this business, isn't it, the serendipity? So many people you actually talk to say they got in just as a piece of sheer luck.*

MB: Total serendipity. I just wonder if I hadn't walked down to the library and opened *Nature* magazine I'd have never got in. The only thing in my favour apart from being certainly knowledgeable compared to anyone at London Weekend Television about anything to do with urban wildlife. But I had done a lot of stills photography so I knew about photography. But the great thing was once they employed me they sent me straight on a film course at the London Film School for three months which was a really enjoyable and useful thing to do. So as part of the job they trained you which is a luxury nowadays.

*Int: Absolutely but were you always interested in nature because you were nearly a professional footballer for Leeds?*

MB: I never thought I'd get a chance to speak about that. Yes, that was much more important. Well, I was a failed academic for years and years and years and once I got booted out by Leeds United juniors I realised I had to do something. My brother was a very determined, single-minded academic in natural history or behavioural ecology and I hadn't got a clue what to do at all. It reminds me of my daughter now and the only option was to follow what my brother did because I had no idea what else to do. My dad told me I'd be a dustman if I wasn't going to be a footballer so I thought I'd prove him wrong.

*Int: So nature wasn't a passion from an early age?*

MB: No, not a real passion. My brother and my dad went birdwatching and I could either stay behind or I could go birdwatching with them. My dad had a nice pair of binoculars, a nice pair of Zeiss 10 x 50 binoculars which I think came off a submarine or something but they were great for spotting birds and, as you know, I've always been preoccupied with good binoculars.

*Int: You have. In fact, when I got my first job with you, you said the first thing you have to buy with your first month's salary was a pair of binoculars and I also bought a pair of Zeiss 10 x 40 so I had you to thank for them, and I still have them nearly 20 years later.*

MB: You've got my dad to thank for that. So I think that's what started me off.

*Int: Yes, so you passed that love of binoculars on to somebody else.*

MB: It literally opened up a new world. I did go birdwatching a lot with my brother and did develop a passion, and my brother said you're so useless at schoolwork like he was to start with, unless you do something and develop a passion you won't get anywhere. So I did a project on grey herons, the roosting habits of grey herons and won the school biology prize. I'd never won any academic prize in my whole life before that. I think I won two prizes at school, one was dissection of the earthworm and the other was my grey heron project. They were the only things I could do and I think that meant that I studied zoology at university which is what my brother did. Then I did my doctorate the same as my brother, then I did a post doctorate same as my brother, and then got lucky and read the *Nature* magazine and went onto work in television.

*Int: But you are a good birder, you're quite an instinctive birder. I remember being with you in that first part of the Badlands (2) filming where we both stood on the prairie falcon tower and you said have you seen any prairie falcons recently and I went, no, I haven't seen any for weeks. You picked up your binoculars and you looked up and you said there's one there.*

MB: I think the interesting thing is if you've read any of these books about how to succeed at whatever, and if you're a tennis player it doesn't happen randomly it happens because you put the hours in playing tennis or the hours in birdwatching. They say once you've done 10,000 hours you might be good at something. I suppose looking back I probably have spent 10,000 hours birdwatching so I can recognise almost any bird with a quick flash of it as it's flying by. So that wasn't serendipitous that is just putting in the hours thanks to dad's binoculars.

## **2. London Weekend Television**

*Int: So your first job was on City Safari (1), have you got any amusing stories about that?*

MB: Well, it was great to get employed having been an academic for 10 years, so it was really exciting to have what my dad and mum would call, everybody's dad and mum calls a 'real job'. I had to get a train to work instead of a bike, walk from the station, Waterloo to the South Bank Centre, and on day one I thought that's fantastic. I was getting paid more than my brother who was a professor and I thought amazing, I've got a real job and they're going to pay me more than a professor on day one.

So I turned up at London Weekend Television incredibly sort of pleased and thought they're going to suss me out and they're going to tell me you shouldn't really be getting paid this much. This was the early 1980s. As I walked in the union representative met me and said, Mike, welcome to London Weekend Television, sign on the dotted line. You'll be a member of [Association of Cinematograph Television and Allied Technicians] ACTT or whatever it was and, tell me, how much are you getting paid and I thought, oh, that's me out, I'm getting paid as much as a professor. I told him whatever it was, I can't remember what it was, £12,500. I had to tell him and he said what grade is that? I had no idea what the grade was. Anyway I told him and I looked at the piece of paper and he went, umm, and I thought, no, I'm going to get in trouble now. He said that is just terrible and I thought, oh God. He said they're paying you far too little, come with me and he took me to the union rep's boss and they told him what I was getting paid and immediately they put my pay up by two grades on day one. It was a lot of money.

They also told me some things I probably shouldn't say on camera about what else you have to claim for as an ACTT member. So it was a complete eye opener. I was in the Department of Zoology at Oxford for six years I think, five or six years, doing my doctorate and my post doc. There was no money, there was nothing, you didn't get paid virtually anything. That transformation from that academic world to a glitzy showbiz world. On day one I had a pee next to Parkie in the gold rimmed toilets, it was amazing, and Bruce Forsyth and Cilla Black, they were all there. My favourite was meeting Cannon and Ball, they were terrific. So instead of meeting Professor Southwood and Professor Perrins it was much more fun having a pee in the bog next to Parkie.

*Int: So it all went downhill from then in your career?*

MB: It did. I had several years at London Weekend TV. I enjoyed them all and it was a really good formal training.

*Int: You'd had experience with obviously the zoology side but when you started on the filmmaking side did you take to it straight away?*

MB: Actually thinking back as to why I may have been appropriate for getting into the world of media because you could have been booted out very quickly. The project I did at Oxford for my doctorate was working on swans. They were all dying on the River Thames and my professor got the Queen, who owns all the swans, to pay for someone to do a doctorate and find out why they were all dying, so it was quite a popular project we worked on.

*Int: So did you enjoy the filmmaking part of it when you started on City Safari (1)?*

MB: Well, I was just saying I think the reason I may have felt fairly comfortable with being exposed to some media, not that I'd had any great experience, was my project at university studying the royal swans sponsored by Her Majesty herself. We were exposed to a lot of media coverage because the media rang up almost on a daily basis: what's happening, what have you found out about all the swans dying on the River Thames, is there going to be an answer? So there was a lot of media involvement so I was fairly used to camera crews and that kind of thing which helped a little bit but I didn't know anything about it.

But once I joined London Weekend and they sent me on a film course, yes, I found it all fairly enjoyable.

This character that I worked with, a bit like you working with me years ago, was pretty tough. A bit weirder than me maybe but the one good thing about Gavin Weightman was he was a very entertaining character. The one thing he did insist on was a full lunch every single day, a three course lunch which we could have at London Weekend Television and red wine every single day. Whenever we were on a film shoot with friends that we know we would have to stop and have lunch, and you would have to have the menu given to you whilst you're out on location at 11 o'clock and you ordered your lunch. Then you got to the lunch location and you had about an hour and a half for lunch. So it was quite easy to get used to that way of life but it was a very unusual introduction to the kind of work we did because you never had that when you worked with me to start with.

*Int: I was lucky to have lunch.*

**MB:** Exactly. So it was a very unusual start but a very entertaining one.

*Int: But do you think you could have gone in a slightly different direction, gone into the more factual documentary, more newsworthy documentaries rather than the nature documentaries once you got into LWT which weren't particularly well-known for their wildlife films even then?*

**MB:** Well, after I worked on *City Safari* (1) which was a two year project then had to do my penance and work on the *Michael Aspel 6 o'clock Show* (3) and news and political programmes, and they put me off very quickly doing those other kinds of programmes. Although I thought it might be an interesting way to go to be a journalist, more journalistic and work on a range of programmes, it was a very erudite department, factuals and features in London Weekend TV. They employed a lot of academics and when they did the Brian Walden *Sunday Politics [Weekend World]* (4) programme their shooting ratio was even worse and it was shot on film. It was even worse than many wildlife programmes because the way they operated was they got you to write the script first, a huge script, and they'd spend all week making sure the script was right. Then you bring in the politician, whoever it was, all the top politicians, and you'd interview that politician until they said what was on the script and they would make them redo it, redo it and redo it. The shooting ratio was well-known to be ridiculously low, 100 to 1, until the politician actually said exactly what they had in the script because then they could cut it up and put it in the item exactly as they'd written it in the script.

So it was really boring. I had no desire to work on programmes like that and the *Michael Aspel 6 o'clock Show* (3) was exactly like the *Jonathan Ross Show* (5) now except it was on a Friday night at 6 o'clock. I quite enjoyed that because funnily enough I did a whole programme on Wildscreen, 1986 it must have been. We had Virginia McKenna and *Born Free* (6). We went to Wildscreen. We did all sorts of esoteric stories which for them had huge novelty value and we had wildlife people in the studio in London, and it was really popular. We did a news item on Alastair McEwen who was working with us at the time and we told a story about how Alastair got married wearing strapped onto his arm lice because he was making a medical film on lice (7), and he had to walk up the aisle with lice strapped to his body because after the wedding he had to film them.

*Int: I first met you in 1989 when I was working at Partridge and I think you'd just started at Partridge then. What drew you to Partridge because it was a very different type of nature film that they made compared to the more gritty nature films at LTW?*

MB: Again it was just a random event. I worked at London Weekend for a few years with a few deviations on the way. I gave up a couple of times because whilst I was at London Weekend TV we worked with London Scientific Films which was Alastair McEwen who was the boss, who is now a well-known filmmaker, and Martyn Colbeck who's his young, up and coming gopher cameraman. We employed them for a couple of years so got to know them quite well and they did nearly all our wildlife filming for *City Safari* (1).

### **3. Becoming an independent producer**

MB: Alastair took me on to do a couple of projects in between working at London Weekend, and I gave up a couple of times at London Weekend to go and do some filming with Martyn Colbeck in Africa and rhinos and things like that. So I dabbled in other projects and then London Weekend was very quickly changing. I don't know if you know but [Independent Television] ITV got demolished by Margaret Thatcher in the mid to late 1980s and the writing was on the wall that it was going to go downhill very quickly. So I got a project with Gavin Weightman in-house with me as an independent production company making a new series called *Brave New Wilderness* (8).

So when I left London Weekend TV about four or five years later I was actually given a series to make as an independent which was a six part series, so that was quite nice. London Weekend Television encouraged people to be entrepreneurial unlike the BBC, so they really gave you an incentive to do things in an independent and under your own steam type of way. So they gave me a full budget and said off you go and make this for us as an independent and you're responsible to the same guy you were in-house. So that was quite a nice way to leave and to set up as an independent with something guaranteed.

Then I realised you had to make it on your own two feet if you weren't employed by anybody, so simultaneously I looked around to see who else needed producers to make programmes. It wasn't Partridge Films actually that took me on, it was a very strange company called Genesis that was Derek Bromhall who asked me to be a series producer on [*The Sexual Imperative:*] *A Natural History of Sex* [on *Planet Earth*] (9) which Mike Rosenberg had raised the money for from Channel 4. He lived in Oxford as well so I went back to live in Oxford and started being series producer for Derek Bromhall and Mike Rosenberg on this Channel 4 series on sex but that didn't work out.

*Int: It virtually sunk the company, didn't it?*

MB: That was a project that we probably shouldn't talk about but when you're in your early 30s it was quite an interesting experience. It had a huge budget and I worked on it for a year and took on lots of people to work on it. It was quite a good education retrospectively but there was something strange going on. Mike Rosenberg wanted Derek Bromhall to do it a different way, blah, blah, and then just said come to Partridge and make films for me, and that was quite a nice offer because they were without doubt the number one natural history filmmakers.

*Int: Before you did that you did that rhino film and according to Martyn famously walked off. Why didn't you enjoy the field work on that programme?*



# WILDFILMHISTORY

100 YEARS OF WILDLIFE FILMMAKING

MB: My dad was ill that's why I had to leave. I would have walked off anyway but I got a good excuse to walk off. I left a good job at London Weekend TV. I went to see the boss at London Weekend TV and said, look, a friend of mine has been given an opportunity to go and work on rhinos in Africa for three months, and he wants me to go and be his driver which I thought would be great fun and make a change from the *Michael Aspel 6 o'clock Show* (3). The boss who was called Brian Cox, he was the head of current affairs and features, said, no, you can't go and being young and stupid I said, well, I'm going. He said, well, if you go you'll never get your job back again but I really wanted to because in 1983 as an academic I'd worked on rhinos in Zimbabwe, and in 1975 I'd worked on Lake Kariba for a couple of years before the war came along which was the best black rhino area in the world, south of Lake Kariba.

So I thought it would be great fun to do it, and Martyn and I got employed by, not a real producer, he was a very flamboyant lawyer called Philip Cayford and he was making a programme for National Geographic called [*The Rhino War*] (10). Martyn had been employed to do the camera work on the rhinos and he just needed a driver so I went along and worked on that for a while, gave up and then came back again perversely. I can't even remember why I went back.

Then another friend of ours filled in the gap, a nice young guy Paul Miller. Do you remember Paul Miller? So Paul drove for him for a month and then I went back for a month.

*Int: Mike, was it then when you realised you didn't like to spend a lot of time in the field? You've never been one to spend a lot of time in the field though have you? You like going out on field trips but you like to keep them short.*

MB: Yes, and I think it wasn't that moment but it certainly was bog standard. I'll go back. In 1975 the first thing I did as a graduate was I got a job to do my PhD in Rhodesia and about a month before we went out to this research camp on the south bank of Lake Kariba the camp got raided and everybody was shot and the camp was closed down. So my professor said to me do you still want to go and like a fool I said, yes, that'd be great but I had no idea how dangerous it was.

So I think my first exposure to overseas work wasn't good. I slept with a gun under my bed, terrorists were killing people all around us, and in the end I had to leave because I either had to fight in the war or not fight in the war. I was married then but not to my present wife. I decided that I didn't want to fight, I didn't want to fight my way every day to my research base. The plane we flew up on to Lake Kariba was shot down on two occasions within a month of me leaving and everybody killed. The first time they were all killed when the plane hit the ground and on the second time half the people were killed and then the other half were shot by the terrorists. So I always felt justified for leaving at that point.

*Int: Now I understand why you were such a nervous traveller but mind you, you pick some pretty exotic destinations for your films.*

MB: I think you're right there. If you were a psychologist, if I was on the psychologist's chair now and you were interrogating me and looking back. Actually if I go back further than that, I got sunstroke on my first holiday with Neil Rushdon in about 1969. I was somewhere in Yugoslavia, Split, and I had to come home. So I've always been a wimp, I've never been anything but a wimp and those experiences must have just built up over time. Then as I realised that when you become the producer you can choose what you do yourself. So my strength was never spending hours and hours, weeks and weeks, months and months in

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the field.

*Int: Your cut-off point is about 10 days, isn't it?*

MB: Max, absolute max.

*Int: Mainly because you starve to death as well because you don't like any of the indigenous food, do you?*

MB: Yes, absolutely. When we get to another part of my career I'll make that even clearer but I wasn't cut out for travelling. I was cut out to be a Leeds United footballer as we said and eat sausage and chips, that would have been my forte really.

So all of a sudden I found myself having to go off to exotic locations. Even when I went with Alastair in that time when I was still working at London Weekend, we did go off for three months to Malaysia to film flying lemurs, flying frogs, flying snakes. We did three months travelling around the Malaysian peninsula and I can remember being ill so many times. So all these little incidents add up into making you think it's best I'm a stay at home producer type. So I soon realised that it wasn't for me.

*Int: So in a way I suppose this is question that could come later but I might as well ask now: why have you carried on doing the films that you've done?*

MB: Because I know that I can get better people like you to go and work overseas for a long period of time. It's not being abroad. A lot of people in our industry think travelling is the be all and end all. I don't think it is the be all and end all, it's part of the process to get the material that we need to make a film.

*Int: Funnily enough I think that's changed. I think in the 90s, or certainly when I started, that's why people wanted to be in this business and I think it's changed, people don't want to be away for as long.*

MB: They're more like me now.

*Int: Yes. Have you noticed how that's changed?*

MB: Absolutely but it's partly driven by finances. The first job I asked you ever to do I said pack up and go to the 'Badlands' for a whole year. Well, we couldn't afford to do that anymore, could we?

*Int: Just wouldn't happen but also I think people are more attuned to the filmmaking side of it rather than just being in the middle of nowhere and enjoying nature.*

MB: Also cameramen say to me they don't want to be away from home for more than three or four weeks. You couldn't say that before, could you? Absolutely they have to go away for long periods of time even now but it's nothing like as long as it used to be. When we worked for Partridge I don't think it was unusual for a cameraman to be away for nine months.

*Int: No, absolutely not. Anyway going back and moving on at the same time, did you like the ethos at Partridge Films? Did you like the way Michael Rosenberg shaped his programmes? It was a very particular type of programme that Mike did and he did it over and over again for about 5, 10 years, didn't he?*

MB: Yes. I do like watching telly and I've always been keen on television, and I did really enjoy that memorable series that they made called *Fragile Earth* (11). Apart from *Life on Earth* (12), *Fragile Earth* (11) was probably the most famous natural history programme made in the 80s. I know *Life on Earth* (12) was 79, wasn't it, but *Fragile Earth* (11) was very special, wasn't it? I think it made me think I'd like to be involved with making programmes like that and Partridge were the big film production company in those days. They won all the Pandas at Wildscreen, didn't they, for all those kinds of special productions. Their ethos of filmmaking was not dissimilar to London Weekend, money wasn't an object in the early days because Mike Rosenberg, I don't know where he got his money from but we were all allowed to go off on location and do things exactly as we wanted, weren't we? We could go off and film them time and time again if the footage wasn't good enough.

So I'd had a pretty privileged start at London Weekend TV and then Partridge was a very privileged, fun place to work, wasn't it, in North London and a very interesting ethos with a charismatic leader like Mike Rosenberg running the show. So it was a really special place to work and rather a privileged place to work but I wasn't truly involved with Partridge like a lot of people were, I was rather tangential to it. I wasn't like that African bunch that went to work at Hugo's camp.

*Int: It didn't really run as a business, did it, Partridge Films I think it'd be safe to say.*

MB: Well, it's interesting. It was a hugely successful business. It got brought by, was it, HTV.

*Int: It was but it was mainly because Michael put his considerable wealth into it because he loved the filmmaking more than making money which is what made it so special I think.*

MB: But it was a great apprenticeship working with someone quite so renowned and special as Mike Rosenberg because he was a unique talent. It wasn't that he particularly taught us how to do it because he didn't, did he? He wasn't the sort of bloke that said do it like this, do it like this or do it like this, it happened totally randomly. I don't think he ever told me to make a programme.

*Int: No, because he wasn't interested in the making he was interested in the finishing, wasn't he?*

MB: Yes.



*Int: But having worked at LWT where they probably had much more focus on what the programme was about and the direction it was going, did you find it quite difficult when you went to work at Partridge where it was much more about, well, see what you get and we'll do something when we're back in the editing rooms? There was no conservation element or news element, it was just about making people really appreciate the natural world, that's what Michael was all about. Did you find that strange, difficult?*

MB: Well, it was totally random what happened at Partridge and people were flocking to Partridge for them to make them films. Everybody - ABC, WNET, Discovery - they all wanted Partridge programmes because in the 80s they seemed to win every single Panda going. So people flocked to them and he hadn't got enough people to make the programmes, and he had to change from being the individual filmmaker to handing them out to people. He didn't know how to do that because he didn't really know how to say Hugh or Mike or John or Brian you be the producer. He had no structure in that company whatsoever and I was quite happy to just pick it up and do it and he never stopped me. I can't remember how many programmes - 12, 15 programmes for Partridge but I don't think he once asked me to make a programme.

*Int: No, and the way he employed people was incredibly random. It was completely different from your experience in LWT where you probably fought off a thousand people. If you got a job at Partridge Films it was often just because Michael quite liked you and you might not have any experience whatsoever. You could have been a school leaver who had a 60 foot garden and that was the closest you ever got to nature but if he liked you he would send you out to the middle of nowhere to make a film.*

MB: But actually I was at Jackson Hole with you earlier last year and there must have been nearly 10 of us from those old Partridge days, and most of the people did prove to be quite successful, didn't they? Although there may have been a lot of misfires there were a lot of people that are still in the business 20 years later. So it gathered like-minded people in a stimulating environment to do unique films I think. I don't know how the BBC looked at us at Partridge in those days because the Natural History Unit was well-known but not quite as high profile I guess as it is now. I think they looked at Partridge as a quirky place that seemed to be making all these brilliant films.

I do remember being offered a job by John Sparks funnily enough from the Natural History Unit, thinking about where I would end up. John Sparks and Peter Jones asked me to work on *Trials of Life* (13) in the late 80s when I was at London Weekend TV. I decided not to do it and I decided to work with Partridge and I've never regretted that decision but I do remember John Sparks telling me off. I didn't know John Sparks at all. He rang me up and gave me a complete bollocking on the phone saying you don't turn down the BBC, you don't say you're not going to work for us. I said, sorry, but I don't think I will.

*Int: But then you did work at the BBC and that's when you did your first tiger series or tiger film.*

MB: Yes. I didn't intend to work for the BBC. I was an independent type of person and producer and I'd learnt how to sell programmes by listening. It wasn't a tried and tested procedure in those days, late 80s, early 90s. There wasn't a structure as there is now so you had to find out how to sell to people, what places you could sell to. The BBC had just started to be told to commission a few independent programmes and I put a programme idea in to, funnily enough I think it was John Sparks for the *Badlands* (2). John Sparks was running the *Natural World* (14) office then. He said we could eventually do it.

That was the first real, solid independent commission I ever got for a programme where they gave me the



quarter of a million pounds to put in my bank account. It was John Sparks commissioning the *Badlands* film (2) for *Natural World* (14) but he really put me through it and said why should I commission you? I think he was getting his own back for me not taking that job on *Trials of Life* (13) but he eventually quite liked us and gave us the commission. That's when I came looking for you because the person I'd been working with had decided not to carry on working with me and funnily enough decided to work with the BBC, which was Ian Grey who's still a producer I think, isn't he, for the BBC.

So I needed to find a producer because as you've said already I wouldn't go and spend a year in the field filming prairie dogs (2). So I had to find someone more young and dynamic and I was happy to do that and, hey presto, you filled the bill. That was the first true independent production I did and it was a very interesting experience because you had to work out how to do it. You got the money in the bank and you had to sign a contract, I'd done it at LWT a little bit, and you had to deliver a year and a half later. It could be quite nerve wracking if you think about it because, as we know, the prairie dogs don't always sing to our tune and they might do their own thing. So it was quite a gamble in a number of respects but it proved to be quite a good one in the end.

#### **4. A changing industry**

*Int:* *Land of the Tiger* (15) was probably what launched you really in some ways.

*MB:* *Badlands* (2) launched us, Huw, in terms of making it as an independent which I think is a hugely important move in the evolution of being a filmmaker nowadays. You could either work for a company like London Weekend TV or BBC but because of what happened in the late 80s, Margaret Thatcher decided to completely demolish ITV as it was because ITV had done something that she really didn't like and she made it very clear she'd demolish ITV which she did. I knew I had to get out and all the London Weekend people all left and set up independent production companies.

So there was a period of time where the stability of ITV as being the rich boys completely disappeared and then all of a sudden the only big player in town was the BBC or you had to find another model, another way of operating. That flirtation with Partridge for two or three years taught me as well how to survive as an independent and put a worldwide perspective on making films because Partridge were very good at getting money from America, wherever they needed large funds. No one else I knew had that model of getting the finance together.

So Mike Rosenberg, although he was a really unusual character, was an incredibly clever chap in bringing in finance from all over the world. Just by being there for two or three years, I don't know if you found this, but by watching how Mike operated you could see how important it was to put together a package of financing to fund the programme. That was a really important step in the evolution of me being an independent producer, and that was one of the biggest transitions because you saw how it could be done. Because it didn't progress nicely for Mike, it sort of went downhill, didn't it, in the late 80s and early 90s, you also saw how it could go wrong. So it taught me quite a lot of lessons about how you have to be careful with the financing, unlike Partridge, because if you don't have personal finance and wealth like Mike had to keep projects going, once you'd spent the committed money from a broadcaster you were going to be in trouble.

So that day with *Badlands (2)* where they gave me whatever it was, £200,000 to make the film, was a really hugely significant moment for me because I had to think now I have to deliver the programme.

*Int: But that international financing really determined the sorts of films that you could make as an independent wildlife filmmaker. They couldn't really have a UK slant, they had to have this very general look about them that would work with whichever country, and all you had to do was change the commentary and it was just as good in Namibia as it was in Malaysia.*

MB: No, absolutely. It was a really important learning curve to be part of that. So for me it was quite lucky to be involved with a very unusual commercial company in the first place like London Weekend Television. Then with a few little blips along the way end up working with the most successful in our genre independent production company, Partridge, for two or three years which set me up for doing my own thing which I knew on the international level very little about but it was a really enjoyable time then. You had to actually change from being a producer, someone who knows about great crested grebes or prairie dogs or flying squirrels which I did but I didn't want to spend weeks and weeks in the field worrying about getting the shot of a prairie dog, whilst I knew simultaneously you had to raise the money for the next project.

So very early on I realised that it would be good to divide and delegate to other people that were happy at being in the field which is what I did when I asked you to work on prairie dogs for a year. I think the trick to being a successful independent producer is to keep several plates rotating at the same time. So whilst you're making one film and filming it in the *Badlands (2)* you're raising money for your next one, you're editing your next one, and you've got all different stages of production going on simultaneously. That was an important lesson and I think if you were going to survive you had to learn that lesson. The filmmakers who just focused on their one project would have found it incredibly difficult because if you're not simultaneously selling the next project, raising the money for the next project, you're going to have months of unemployment afterwards.

*Int: Also, and as you said at the start of this interview, you've never been one to take on big overheads which is something else you probably learnt from the Partridge days because that's what really sunk Partridge, the overheads.*

MB: Well, I think coming from Yorkshire I'm naturally parsimonious and careful with my money and you have to be as a producer and you know that too. It's not a case of being mean it's a case of being realistic about it and making sure that you account for things. A lot of what we do is dependent on how careful we are with the budgets and how we allocate all the resources. So London Weekend did actually teach me a lot about finance, a lot about being entrepreneurial, a lot about making things work in the real world. Whereas I think looking at colleagues who have been brought up in the BBC it was a completely different environment to be brought up in. I didn't get involved with the BBC, maybe that's why I didn't take on the job when John Sparks offered to me.

I remember Peter Jones saying some very strange things to me in the interview. Apart from what I thought was quite an arrogant BBC approach to things, he said things like if you come and work on *Trials of Life (13)* with us we never pay academics for interviews. With my brother being an academic and having been an academic I thought that's a very strange thing to say. He said, no, we never pay them. They work for the government and they'll do all the interviews for nothing and you have to tell them they'll do all their interviews for nothing. I thought that's not for me.

There were a lot of other stories as well. It just didn't seem right at the time.

## **5. Working with the BBC**

*Int: Which brings me to your time at the BBC then because having been a successful independent why did you take the job at the BBC doing Land of the Tiger (15) which was pretty much an in-house series which took most of your time?*

MB: That goes back quite a long way before then. I did *Badlands (2)* film with you. You worked with me for a year which was an enjoyable thing where we spent a lot of time in the *Badlands (2)* of South Dakota filming prairie dogs, where you spent most of the time overseas. I've got very fond memories about that too with you working with Native American Indians, and living in a trailer. Having experienced the coldest temperatures on the planet, what was it, -50 with wind chill and the film broke as it went through the camera. But that film I think took us over a year to make, didn't it?

*Int: Then Grand Canyon (16).*

MB: Yes, and then simultaneously I was selling the next film but what happened when I was making that film I was selling the next project which wasn't the *Grand Canyon (16)* at that time, it was a film I'd always wanted to make on peacocks. The BBC had shown interest in taking in projects from independent people. So I wrote in and called it *The Tale of the Peacock*. I wrote to Keith Scholey. Was he the commissioning editor for *Wildlife on One (17)*? I said to Keith I want to make this film on peacocks, wrote up a treatment, and having come from the Edward Grey Institute of Field Ornithology at Oxford I knew a lot about peacocks and all about their evolution.

I thought it was a really great idea and Keith gave me a call one day and said, Mike, I really want to do this film, and this was also something that taught me a lot. He said I really want to do this film, Mike, but a bird film on its own, *The Tale of the Peacock*, isn't really going to work so we're going to have - he didn't use this term but we do nowadays - to sex it up a bit. So if you can make it *The Tale of the Peacock and The Tiger (18)* I'll commission it. I said but I don't know anything about tigers. I don't know anything about tigers at all and he said, well, I'm going to find it really hard to sell unless we include the tiger. We love the idea of India, peacocks really nice, but I'd like you to get the tiger in there.

As I hadn't sold many films all by myself I thought this is really weird, I don't want to do the tiger. He said we'll pay you to go to India and check it out. So they gave me three weeks travelling money and I took Mrs peacock with me who was a scientist called Dr Marion Petrie who knew where all the peacocks were in India that we could film. We had to film their wonderful leking behaviour. So I thought I'd better go and check all these locations.

I think this was 1992 and we planned an itinerary around northern India but it soon became very obvious, hardly anyone had filmed in the BBC for 10 or 15 years before. I had no idea why. I couldn't find anyone to help us, it was a closed book. Everywhere I rang no one had been to India, very few people had got any expertise, so that's why I took Marion Petrie with me.

Off we went on our travels around India and, of course, she could take me to all the peacock locations but I had no idea where to find tigers. I'd been to the bookshop and the only books I could find on tigers were by a famous Indian natural history guy who was Valmik Thapar. He'd written two or three famous books on the tigers of Ranthambore. So I looked at these, they were stunning books, tigers running through the water catching deer in the middle of this lake under this glorious mogul fort. It was absolutely gorgeous and we decided to go there. I thought it'd be great fun to see a tiger.

Everybody wants to see a tiger but, as you mentioned, I have got a very dodgy stomach and I was very nervous about travelling to India with a dodgy stomach. So I was quite nervous about the whole trip. No one could tell me anything about India. I was nervous about my stomach and I knew nothing about tigers.

Anyway we set off, got to Ranthambore. I think it was our first location and predictably day two stomach completely shot to pieces. We'd had a load of chillies the night before. Some kind Indian, a wonderful guy called Fateh Singh Rathore with one of these wonderful Rajasthani moustaches and a big cowboy hat, had entertained us at his house on the outskirts of Ranthambore. He'd been the director of Ranthambore National Park for the last 10 years which was formally a maharajah's hunting ground.

Anyway he met me with Marion who was looking out for the peacocks. She knew nothing about tigers. He fed me, made me ill straightaway but on day two when I was recovering from my stomach we were sitting on his veranda overlooking parts of Ranthambore. His radio went and I could tell it was something bad but they were speaking Hindi so I didn't know what it was, very excited chit, chit, chat, chat. He comes off the radio and Fateh says two men have just been shot down the road, there's a tiger poaching incident just taken place. We hadn't seen a live tiger by this time. I said these blokes have been killed? Yes, he said, because they've killed a tiger and they've found the tiger skin.

Then Fateh started telling me how bad it was at the moment for tiger poaching around Ranthambore and all I'd seen was this incredible book on beautiful tigers in the 80s. They were all known individually: Genghis, Sita, all these wonderful tigers that Valmik and Fateh knew individually and on day two I realised 90% of them had been killed by poachers. I thought, oh God, this is going to be terrible for the film, how are we going to make a film, all the tigers have been killed. Then it suddenly dawned on me, this is the film I should be making, not *The Tale of the Peacock and the Tiger* (18).

But I thought this is very dangerous, these two men have just been shot dead. We had to go to the area to see what was happening and all the time I had this conflict in my head thinking this is a really big story but I don't want to make it because it's too dangerous.

Anyway on our trip the first thing I had to do was fix my stomach. So not being an experienced traveller I decided to take Immodium so this was on about day three. It stopped all the problems with the bad stomach and carried on travelling. We had two or three other locations to go over the next two or three weeks and every location we went to there was bad news about tigers. We found the peacocks. There was a park in north western India called Sariska where there were loads of peacocks and it immediately became obvious that was the best place to film peacocks but there were no tigers, they'd all been killed.

Then we had to go to the world famous Corbett National Park which is about three days drive away in the early 1990s. We had to go and see if there were any tigers there. When we got there another national

park's guard was shot dead by tiger poachers and again it was the same thing, oh, no, I think I'm going to have to make a film on the problem facing tigers. I was thinking all the time I don't want to do it. At that time you were in the *Badlands (2)* I think filming prairie dogs and I thought could I get Huw over here, he's braver than me. All the time I was thinking I don't want to do this but this story is so big.

Anyway I was starting to relax a bit at this point, it was nearly the end of the trip, and I knew how to do the film on the peacock and include tigers if we could find any tigers. But I knew that we had to make a film about the problem with tigers being killed by poachers which the world had never heard about. 20 years before that the Indians had set up a tiger saving conservation project called Project Tiger, and all the world knew was that India had saved the tiger from extinction. All sorts of famous people had been involved with this project and all the publicity said India has saved the tigers from certain extinction since 1970 when they banned hunting. So this was really huge news.

I was coming to the end of the **recce** and we went to Corbett National Park. I think it was 10, 15 days since we'd been at Ranthambore and the Imodium finally started wearing off. Nothing had happened since Ranthambore thank goodness. Then I was told I had to meet a minister in Corbett National Park. I can't remember why but a minister was waiting to show us around and find us some tigers on elephant back in Ranthambore. Unfortunately the Imodium was wearing off as I got closer and closer to this location, and I do remember meeting my first Indian minister and simultaneously running out of the car and just going to the toilet straightaway, saying I can't do it and he's going there's a tiger and we have the elephant, come now, I can't. I had to go to the toilet and I disappeared. After about an hour I finally got out of the toilet, got on the elephant and saw my first tiger with the minister.

*Int: Do you remember it well, that first moment?*

**MB:** I do, it was fantastic. Apart from the terrifying moment of the Imodium wearing off it was just pretty exciting because on elephant back riding through Corbett National Park. Did you go to Corbett?

*Int: No, not Corbett.*

**MB:** Corbett was beautiful, Himalayas in the background, beautiful location. What was that famous film, that famous Indian trilogy?

*Int: Jewel in the Crown (19).*

**MB:** *Jewel in the Crown (19)*, it was just like that. You were riding through this long grass on the back of an elephant seeing tigers.

*Int: Can you picture it now because I remember seeing my first tiger on that series that we'll talk about and it's one of those animals that when you do see for the first time is indelibly marked on your memory. Can you picture it?*

**MB:** Yes. Well, mine was for two reasons. One is I've just got out of the toilet terrified that I was going to



make a fool of myself in front of the minister and having these elephants waiting for us. Yes, I can remember it now. It was walking along by the side of the road and this beautiful amber and black colour. But the conflict in my mind was knowing that I had to make this film about the tigers.

So I eventually got back to Britain, had to report back to Keith Scholey that *The Tale of the Peacock and the Tiger* (18) is easy to do. It's going to be hard to get tiger footage because those tigers that everybody's read about in Valmik Thapar's books they're not there, they've all been killed by poachers. So we can make this film but I've got to work out a way of getting good tiger footage but what I really want to do is make this film about the tiger crisis and Keith was fantastic. He just said we've got to do this, come with me now, meet the new head of the Natural History Unit, Alastair Fothergill. I knew Alastair, he'd rung me up a couple of times about bird stories years ago when he was a researcher at the Natural History Unit. I'd heard about him being the new, charismatic head of the Natural History Unit.

Keith took me to see Alastair and said we had to make this film about the demise of the tiger which we'd call *Tiger Crisis* (20) and Alastair said you can't make it as an independent, you have to make it in-house which was a completely new dynamic to me. I said, well, I'm an independent producer and I live near London not near Bristol and he said but I want you to work in the department in Bristol and make the film for the BBC. So that's how I got involved with the BBC in I think it was 1992 or 93.

*Int: Wasn't it 94?*

MB: No, it was definitely 92 or 93. So that's when I got asked to make a programme. I was still an independent but I made it inside for the BBC.

*Int: You had one leg in each camp at that time, didn't you?*

MB: Yes, because we working on *Badlands* (2). We'd got the next independent one commissioned called the *Grand Canyon* (16), and so I had to spend the next nine months making this film *Tiger Crisis* (20) which was probably the most important film at the time that I'd made because it had international implications. The world didn't know that tigers were being killed and it had huge implications not only for me as a film producer but in terms of my career.

## **6. Filming tigers**

*Int: Tiger Crisis (20) had a really big impact for the reasons you gave. Everyone thought tigers had been saved but the reality was very different and you've gone on to make one tiger film after another, and you've more or less documented the demise of the tiger over the last 15 years. We always talk about how important natural history films are in raising awareness and making people appreciate the natural world. Does it depress you at all that you've made a lot of very well-known tiger films, often about their demise but nothing really has changed over the last 15 years, in fact the situation is probably worse now than it was when you did Tiger Crisis (20) in 1994?*

MB: Does it depress me? It does depress me but at the same time I know that if we hadn't made these films it would be even worse I think, that's not meant to sound arrogant, you can make an impact. The good thing about working for the BBC was the BBC is hugely well-known around the world and respected and it carries a lot of clout. So your film gets shown all over the world, publicity attached to it and each time we made one of these films it did make an impact. At that time in 1993, the year we made it, we interviewed the minister who was completely, as a lot of people were, in denial about the state of the tiger.

I mean we got the skins, we did a sting operation, we proved that they were killing tigers. We found the biggest haul of tiger bones ever found. There's no way they could deny it. So the guy who was running Project Tiger he got sacked as a result of that and we filmed the Minister for the Environment denying that he knew anything about it because his Project Tiger boss hadn't told him. So I don't get too depressed about it, I'm pragmatic about it and know that the films can make a difference, and we worked very hard to make sure the film got a lot of publicity. Everybody then called it the Tiger Crisis.

We called the film the *Tiger Crisis* (20) and then the world started calling this the Tiger Crisis of the early 90s, and acknowledged that from the 80s where there's Valmik's books documenting all these wonderful tigers, each one individually known to Valmik and Fateh Singh Rathore, had all been killed by poachers, and their skins and bones transported to China.

*Int: So the first Tiger Crisis (20) did make a difference and things improved and changed and we went on to do Land of the Tiger (15) and then, of course, in the last 15 years or so there's been several other tiger crises that have happened. So do you think, and I would agree with you, that your films have made a difference in raising the awareness, and that probably leads us to what sort of impact natural history films make generally. But sticking on the tigers for a moment, do you think we can save the tiger in the wild through more films about their demise? Do you think we're still in that stage where we can carry on making films about the disappearance of the tigers and make a difference still?*

MB: I'm not put off. There's a lot of bad things about making hard hitting films like, for example, *Tiger Crisis* (20). The Indian authorities did their best to get at us after that and wouldn't let us back to do any other filming, that's the way they react. That's why people hadn't been in before me when I said that there weren't a lot of filmmakers that had been to India when I set off, is because there'd been a bad incident that had taken place. They weren't welcoming to people that wanted to make films that may expose things that weren't going right. Again, we proved that to be the case for them, they didn't welcome us back.

But 15 years later I made similar films, *Tiger Zero* (21) and *Battle to Save the Tiger* (22), and the fight has to go on, you can't be put off by it and each time we made one of these films we did make a difference. The thing that I as a former scientist couldn't believe when we did our film *Tiger Crisis* (20) was in the late 1980s/1990s, the only evidence that there were a lot of tigers in India were mainly Valmik's books from Ranthambore National Park. You could see all these beautiful individual tigers and you could recognise Genghis the huge male or the beautiful female, whatever she was. You could see these individuals and know that they were there.

But the Indian authorities had developed a technique for counting tigers called the pugmark technique which was absolute rubbish scientifically, and it relied on footprints in the sand of the tigers. They traced these on a piece of tracing paper and they suggested that by tracing them and measuring them you could determine the sex of that tiger, the age of the tiger and all the rest of it, and determine the numbers in a national park. From my scientific days I knew that just didn't work. It soon became very obvious that the number of tigers that they said were there was a complete fairytale and it has always been a fairytale.



We pointed that out in 1993 and a scientist had done research proving it to be completely wrong. He'd done a test where he'd invited six national park officers to examine an enclosure that he'd covered in tiger footprints and asked them to determine how many tigers had walked through this enclosure. Every single one of them was out by a factor of, who knows, 10. So the science didn't back up what the Indian authorities were saying.

When in 2005 I did the next lot of *Tiger Crisis* (20) which was called *Tiger Zero* (21), I knew it was going to take something special to do another film like that. What happened was all the tigers in one national park had gone so they couldn't use this ridiculous pugmark technique to say there were still tigers there. Not only could they not say there were still tigers there but in the past they would say when there's probably only three there, they'd have said there were 30 there. No one could deny it because there was no way of ascertaining how many tigers but when all the tigers go from a national park there's none left, not a footprint anywhere, they can't deny it.

So the first time since we'd done *Tiger Crisis* (20) there was a national park, the nearest one to Delhi, that lost every single tiger and it was like this is the moment, they're going to be in real trouble the authorities because they can't deny it. So we went back to make another film then called *Tiger Zero* (21) and again I think it was really worth it because I think at that moment in time the authorities realised they were in trouble, that they couldn't use this smoke and mirrors technique to pretend there were tigers in places when there weren't.

So I think when big media companies like the BBC make these films and make these points it's harder for the authorities to deny it.

*Int: Do you think tigers will survive in the wild based on all your experience?*

MB: I think it'll be a long time before they disappear completely but they are disappearing really fast, so you've got to recalibrate everything. In the late 1980s and early 1990s when we started making *Tiger Crisis* (20) there were said to be around 4 or 5,000, I can't remember the exact figure, tigers. A complete fabrication, they had no idea how many tigers there were there at all.

*Int: It was half that, wasn't it?*

MB: But they made it up. You'd no idea. There could have been more, could have been less. They had no idea whatsoever and we pointed it out: you've got to get a scientific way of measuring the number of tigers. In 2005 when we did *Tiger Zero* (21) I said you're still doing the same thing, do you believe this man's technique which was useful in 1970 but it's not useful now. You can put down camera traps, you can do all sorts of other modern scientific techniques. Not necessarily because of our film but partly as a result of all the publicity surrounding the death and disappearance of all the tigers at Sariska, they did start using proper techniques. So for the first time they're starting giving sort of accurate figures. They're still corrupt, they're still making up a lot of the figures and there's now said to be about 1,400. Valmik reckons there's 1,000 at the most.



So will they survive? Who knows. We both hope they do because they're the most charismatic animal on the planet really.

*Int: But going back to the impact of natural history films, what are your thoughts on what genre, what type of natural history film makes a big impact? We've always had this debate, haven't we, whether the programme should be conservation, heavily conservation minded so you have a message in the films or whether you make beautiful films about places which make people appreciate what's there, the sort of Michael Rosenberg style of filmmaking. Do you have any thoughts on what makes the bigger impact in terms of people's appreciation of natural places and whether it can help save them?*

MB: Without doubt I think in general, for the general public the glorious celebration, *Planet Earth* (23) type programmes make a bigger impact. Only the cognoscenti, only the people that really want to know about the crisis watch the crisis film. You can make a big impact in the media but I think it's very important to make both. But without a doubt the *Planet Earth* (23) type series make a bigger impact in terms of public awareness.

But luckily for us, you and me, is that after we did *Tiger Crisis* (20) and *Tale of the Peacock and the Tiger* (18) we knew we should make a wonderful film on the natural history of India as well. That was really useful because it countered what could be perceived as bad publicity with *Tiger Crisis* (20) type film, and we did it for the first time a hugely successful and popular film, *Land of the Tiger* (15). Ironically I suppose we used Valmik Thapar who was part of the bringer of the bad news for *Tiger Crisis* (20) and, if you like, found him as a superb presenter for a big six part BBC blockbuster series on the natural history of the Indian subcontinent. Without doubt that made more of an impact on more people than *Tiger Crisis* (20). *Tiger Crisis* (20) targeted people that it needed to target, pointed out there was a crisis and added to the publicity about dealing with the tiger crisis.

But *Land of the Tiger* (15) and those kinds of films we were making then drew, I think, lots and lots of people, visitors, to the Indian subcontinent that hadn't realised quite how exceptional it was, not that we had either until we filmed from the top of the Himalayas to Sri Lanka to the Andamans and Lakshadweeps. So we filmed every square inch of the Indian subcontinent for the first time and again that was for the BBC because Alastair wouldn't let me make it as an independent.

I remember writing it up on the back of an envelope and saying we've got to do this series, *Land of the Tiger* (15). John Sparks had made a wonderful series called *Realms of the Russian Bear* (24), six one hours about the natural history of the Russian subcontinent with a wonderful Russian presenter who I really loved, Nikolai Drozdov, who was brilliant. It was a wonderful series but that was a few years before.

So I said to Alastair we've got to make this series, *Land of the Tiger* (15), an obvious title. Stan Breeden had made a very nice one hour film called *Land of the Tiger* (25) but it was a great title for a series, and it was commissioned immediately. So without even trying I found myself working even more within the BBC and you worked on that as well, and that was a really good way to counter the bad publicity, if you like, of *Tiger Crisis* (20) with a glorious film about the natural history of this place that people clearly have a special feeling for.

## **7. Presenter led programmes**

*Int: It's still popular now. If you go to India people working in national parks will still tell you it's one of the things that still draw people back to the subcontinent. So it is interesting to think about the impact that these programmes have, the very hard hitting style like Tiger Crisis (20) and the much more lyrical style of Land of the Tiger (15). But actually if you look at Land of the Tiger (15), Valmik Thapar obviously had an enormous part to play in the success of it.*

**MB:** He's a hugely charismatic figure. It's interesting the two people I remember about *Land of the Tiger* (15) are Valmik Thapar who the one big disappointment was that the BBC didn't pick up on doing more series with Valmik. He was incredibly popular after that series and he should have done lots of other series and it never happened and I don't know why. He should have done a big series. I did individual programmes.

*Int: Well, he wasn't the easiest person to work with let's face it. He was a prima donna, amazing character though he was.*

**MB:** The other thing I remember about *Land of the Tiger* (15), we were lucky. There was a huge budget in those days and it was a very luxurious thing to make with the support of Alastair Fothergill behind you giving you 100% support with that whacking, great BBC budget, cover everything, film everything. It was superb and one thing I do remember doing was employing a very talented musician that you introduced me to, a guy called Nicholas Hooper who's now doing *Harry Potter* (26) feature films. We took him I think on three trips around the Indian subcontinent and if anybody remembers anything about the series other than Valmik Thapar it's the music. Nick Hooper's music was so wonderful, so charismatic, it just still sells now. Even now Nick says thanks for taking me on, it's made me so much money and it was a hugely successful score, wasn't it, and won a Panda for the music and everything. It's absolutely fantastic music.

*Int: It was, it was very atmospheric.*

*In the last 10, 15 years most of your programmes have been presenter led or featured people. What attracted you to that style of programme rather than the more classical presenter-less programmes that you started with when you went independent?*

**MB:** Yes, that's an interesting question. Maybe it's because I don't like to spend months and months in the field on my own filming prairie dogs. If you have a presenter led type programme, a person in the film, you can structure it more around that person rather than waiting for the rare natural history behaviour to happen. So I think it probably happened because of that, it enables you to structure the programme around what that person's doing but it's also commercial as well. I think there's a lot of pressure on us to find characters and I think generally it's difficult, isn't it, because *Planet Earth's* (23) obviously the most successful ever natural history series and that didn't have people in it at all although it had David Attenborough narrating it. It was pure blue chip. If I try and sell a film to the *Natural World* (14) now or Discovery or National Geographic they want a person in the film. They want a Mr gibbon and Mr tiger and Mr wolf.

*Int: Do you think that's pragmatic as well though because of money, it's a cheaper way to make a 50 minute film or a 60 minute film, to have 15 minutes of it with a presenter?*

MB: Yes, undoubtedly it's cheaper and there is a pragmatic side to it. I think one of my biggest disappointments in our business as we're talking about the funding model, funding for our programmes which aren't cheap come from three places normally - the BBC, a commercial distributor and normally an American co-producer. That American co-producer has an increasing effect on what kind of programme is commissioned and I think that's hugely disappointing. Whereas you used to be able to go and knock on the door of a John Sparks or an Alastair Fothergill and say let's do this, or a Keith Scholey, and they would say we're going to do it, nowadays they go, well, we'll probably do that if we can get the funding from America.

I think from a personal point of view the biggest disappointment I've got is the kind of programmes we're seeing in this country are hugely influenced by what the Americans will approve, and I don't think the public know that and I think that's a big disappointment.

## **8. The future of wildlife filmmaking**

*Int: So talking about the two types of filmmaking, the hard hitting conservation film which you've made a number of and the beautiful blue chip, landmark series which you've also done, which do you prefer? What has been your favourite television series or programmes?*

MB: Actually that's a good question. I actually really like making films that I think make a difference and I think the *Tiger Crisis* (20), *Tiger Zero* (21). Well, we've just done an interesting one now on Echo, *Echo of the Elephants* (27), which I've made a lot of things about in the last 10 years. I'm drawn to those kinds of films. When I think about them I want to make films that have a message, a conservation message but it's also that's just the way it's worked out. If someone gave me £10 million and said make a *Planet Earth* (23) I could manage. I'd be very happy doing that as well.

*Int: But do you enjoy watching those sorts of programmes?*

MB: Yes, absolutely. The most influential programme probably ever is *Planet Earth* (23). The series is absolutely amazing and it made a huge difference to our business, to the public's perception of it. So I'd like to work on those but I wouldn't like to work on them as a producer, I'd like to be the exec or the series producer overseeing them but I like the idea of programmes having that much impact across the world because that's why we make programme. But the individual programmes that you target about tigers or elephants or whatever, I think they're really worthwhile making them. When I'm thinking about what programme I want to make this is partly based on pragmatism because £10 million or whatever it is to make the kind of series like *Planet Earth* (23), or the one you're making now on North America, isn't normally available to small independents.

So there's a pragmatic side to what you can achieve and what you feel happy with but I think you know that the *Planet Earth* (23) are the things that make a huge impact. It's not just *Planet Earth* (23), is it, as such, it's David Attenborough and *Planet Earth* (23).

*Int: Do you have a favourite film, a film that inspired you more than any other to either stay involved in*

*this business or get involved or makes you feel glad you're in this business?*

MB: No, I don't have a favourite film but I know the series or types of films that made the biggest impact and they were definitely for me. *Fragile Earth* (9) in the 1980s without doubt, hearing Jennie Muskett's music and those evocative films in the 80s, I think for you and me, they made a huge difference. Really high quality, beautifully made films. Then John Sparks' series, *Realms of the Russian Bear* (24), was another pivotal moment for me in terms of what it made me do in my career. Then more recently, as I said, *Planet Earth* (23) was probably the most influential thing. *Blue Planet* (28) made a big difference to the industry.

So I think I appreciate programmes that changed the direction of the industry, and/or me, but I couldn't pick out an individual film that I liked disproportionately more than another.

*Int: When I was in my 30s a BBC producer of some experience, in fact somebody who'd been there for probably 20 or 30 years and was on the verge of retiring, said to me, Huw, there's nothing new, it's all been done before. Of course, we went on to do other things that do feel new but how do you feel? You've been in the business now for three decades. How do you feel about the business? Can we carry on doing new things and, if so, how are we going to make it look fresh?*

MB: It is a challenge. I get somewhat frustrated when commissioners tell me you have to make something look modern or make it feel fresh because I think we do that anyway. Every single film we ever make is a contemporary film at that point in time and I don't perceive it as a problem. What I think my background, having worked at London Weekend TV, gave me was a sense of journalism and a sense of story. So even though I appreciate *Planet Earth* (23) it had no story at all and what I like is a film with a good story. So I try and create films with a story which is playing to a different kind of strength. I think we can keep adapting, can keep coming up with new things but it's not necessarily a technique thing. Like *Hurt Locker* (29), swept the board at the Oscars, what was it, it was a cracking story. There was nothing technically different and it beat the pants off *Avatar* (30) which had all those technical innovations in it. So I would like to go story always first.

*Int: So do you think there's a future with the big, blue chip, landmark series?*

MB: Absolutely, yes. People just have an insatiable, thank goodness, desire for them. Everybody talked about them. I think they're more popular than ever.

*Int: But what will drive them, the advancements of technology because obviously lions behave very much the same now as they did when we started working in natural history 20 years ago. So what is it that's going to make a landmark interesting to a new audience?*

MB: Well, I think that's a good question and I think it's time that the people who've got the money to make these programmes start rationalising it and thinking about it because *Planet Earth* (23) was huge and was new and felt refreshing for all sorts of reasons. One which was the use of **Cineflex** movie type technology that gave you a different visual perspective on the earth, whereas the follow up to it, *Life* (31), for me just didn't work particularly. Although it had stunning natural history and behaviour sequences it just didn't have the same impact and anecdotally the people I speak to, friends not people in the business, felt the same



too. So whoever's got the money to make the next one has to think how they're going to do it and it's not going to be easy.

I think telling stories would be good. I think people like stories. If you look at what's really popular now on the UK TV, my perception of what's really popular is that youngish physics professor doing that series on the solar system. It's beautifully put together but he's a fresh, young face so it's a new way of telling the story. That story's been told before although it's been updated. So I think we have to look at different ways of putting it forward and making the public appreciate the way we're putting it forward. But the old cliché is true, a good story will always be a good story.

We've just done a film on Echo which is, I think, probably one of the best stories we've ever told. Over the last 10 years I've been working with Martyn Colbeck and Cynthia Moss on *Echo of the Elephants* (27) who died last year at the age of 65. When I tried to sell the film after Echo's death that we needed to tell another story about Echo's death, and I'm sure you'd be included, I've forgotten how many we made, people went don't want another film about Echo. Even though she's died I had to make it different which is the same sort of idea that you're just putting to me now, how do you make it different?

So my job as an independent producer is to convince cynics, commissioners that it's going to be different. So I had the same sort of but smaller problem that you're just asking me about. So when I went to the two commissioners with this promo that we'd managed to cut about Echo's death, the world's most famous elephant, I had the conundrum of how I'm going to convince them yet again to take another film on Echo. It's the same thing each time, you've got to come up with a new way of doing it.

I asked the two people that I knew would take it, one was from the BBC *Natural World* (14) which was Tim Martin and one was Fred Kaufman that runs WNET's *Nature* (32) in America, whether they would take this film on Echo, a retrospective on Echo's life: the unforgettable Echo or Echo, the world's most famous elephant. They both said no, they wouldn't take it. This was in a quick conversation. I said, well, just watch this promo that we've cut and see. Just, please, have a look at the promo and Fred Kaufman wrote me back a typical note. He said I really didn't want to take this but now I've seen the promo I want it, it's a must have and he really wanted it, and Tim Martin then did the same.

So the important thing for me is to find a different way of telling what might seem like a familiar story, which is what you asked me, and the trick is to be able to sell it. As an independent producer you have never got to be quashed when people say to you, no, I won't take it. You've got to think I'm confident enough that this will make a truly exceptional story.

*Int:* Yes, and there's probably no other genre in television where the expectation is to see something new.

*MB:* Yes, see something different.

*Int:* Yes, see something new and different. You can get away with all sorts of things in all the other genres but with natural history, especially with the landmarks, when people decide to invest time in a series, a landmark series, they want to see something new. Of course, all these things have been filmed before in some way, maybe not very well, and you've got to constantly reinvent them to make them feel





*fresh, making the familiar feel unfamiliar. But it's maybe something of a paradox in that I think landmark natural history television has always been driven by new technology, and so we're always on the cutting edge of making something look special and different. But behind it is someone who's always been there, David Attenborough, and the two things seem to go hand in hand. The familiarity of David Attenborough and the cutting edge techniques of the other particular landmarks.*

*Moving forwards, how do you think the landmark can attract a new and large audience without David Attenborough?*

MB: I think it's going to be really difficult. David Attenborough's once in 10 generations. I think he's going to be impossible to replace. He's a truly exceptional communicator and people trust him so much more than virtually anybody else. There are good, young presenters around but to develop that sense of trust and credibility takes a long time, and I think the recent big projects have proved how difficult it is not to have a David Attenborough directly associated with a project. That Echo film I was just talking about, David Attenborough's doing that because he's narrated all the Echo films and it instantly gives you a sense of credibility with David narrating it. But funnily enough the Americans didn't want him on their version which I think is a bit sad but they wanted to have someone else, almost a nondescript narrator, for the very reason that they thought David dominates it too much which is, I think, an interesting perspective.

So I think it's on this side of the Atlantic we need to find a new way of making. I mean has there been any single huge, successful series on the BBC that hasn't involved David Attenborough in our genre? Not really.

*Int: No, which makes you wonder what the future is for landmark natural history in the short-term because he probably has narrated his last big landmark series I would have thought.*

MB: Well, isn't he doing *Life in the Freezer* (33) or whatever it's called.

*Int: Actually that's true, he's doing Frozen Planet (34) but after Frozen Planet (34).*

MB: Well, luckily that isn't my problem because I'm not given the £10 million or whatever it is to make the big landmark series. You have to find a Valmik Thapar or that young physics presenter, someone that people like in a refreshing new way. But to find someone that lasts for 50 years and has that incredible credibility is going to be next to impossible I think. It's really difficult to find those people and I don't think we should probably preoccupy ourselves with it. But when you think about our industry and who are the biggest natural history presenters ever, the most successful, for me the opposite of the end of the spectrum you've got David Attenborough and you've got Steve Irwin. Steve Irwin made a huge impact in natural history like virtually no one else.

*Int: But I would argue that Steve Irwin didn't actually make people appreciate natural history whereas David makes people appreciate natural history and makes people want to get into natural history. I was lucky enough to work with him and travel with him, and whenever I've done other programmes you meet people, scientists, field researchers, who say I'm doing this because of David. I've never met anybody who says I'm doing this because of Steve Irwin although he was obviously younger and therefore maybe they haven't come through yet. But I don't know, I wonder whether that Steve Irwin approach actually made*

*people really appreciate nature.*

*People like the thrill of it, the wrestling crocodiles and David's always had that very hands-off approach to natural history, and I think that has a much bigger impact on generating a real love and interest that Steve Irwin never did but that's my impression.*

MB: I'm not saying that he fulfilled the same role, I'm just saying he was probably the second biggest natural history presenter there's been. He made a huge impact and he got youngsters in particular to love and watch natural history. Watching kids watching Steve Irwin they never channel flick, that was the trick he'd got. That type of TV was hugely successful, it was very entertaining, the youngsters would watch it, and they'd stick with it because they never knew what was going to happen next. I'm not saying it was our type of TV, it was just very successful.

*Int: But could he have been an equally successful presenter of sport? The point is that Steve Irwin's approach was to interact or wrestle with animals, and when you actually go into the wild of course you can't really do that.*

MB: No, the key is credibility and he had got some kind of, not necessarily our kind of credibility, he'd got credibility and passion. Passion and enthusiasm carried him through and people loved that and that's what David Attenborough has. He has credibility, passion and enthusiasm and people detect that, and that's what I think filmmakers need to get, whatever it is. The public when they watch our programmes they detect authenticity. The minute you put someone out of their comfort zone in a programme that isn't authentic they detect it straightaway. It doesn't have to be a Steve Irwin type of approach.

We did a film recently on the cuckoo (35) with the mildest, gentlest, least Steve Irwin type of person you could ever think of and he was hugely popular because people just liked his authenticity and his credibility. Loads of people wrote in and said this guy is so wonderful and you think, wow, he's just a gentle speaking professor of behavioural ecology from Cambridge. So I think the key is to find genuine, authentic talent which is what that solar system guy is.

*Int: I agree with you on Steve Irwin, he was incredibly passionate about the subject but it's interesting the American audience don't seem to need or require that same sort of integrity in their presenters or narrators. They're quite happy to have somebody famous narrate their series, their big series, rather than somebody who actually has the background in the subject.*

MB: Yes, which is why I was saying for us I think it's a huge shame that so much of our programme is dictated by what the Americans want rather than what we want because they're not the same as we've learnt time and time again. I think their desire to just hit ratings because people will turn on to watch it because it's Oprah Winfrey narrating is not what we would do necessarily.

*Int: Although actually arguably she has a great passion in natural history as well, she really does. Having been on her programme I heard it first hand.*



## **9. How to get in to wildlife filmmaking**

*Int: If somebody was starting in natural history today what would you tell them? I will say that I started in natural history, my first big break came through you and before I went off to do my first job with you, you told me as I was leaving, oh, by the way, one other thing, if you're no good I'll get rid of you which obviously gave me a lot of confidence. Would you say the same thing to a new recruit? What would your tip be to the new recruits? You get maybe two or three people approaching you a week, don't you? What do you say to the people trying to get into the business now because obviously it's changed enormously over the last 20 years?*

MB: I think there's more people trying to get into the business now than ever because it's obviously a very hard time to find a job. I probably get more calls and emails from people trying to get into the business. I always try and contact them and say come round for a chat and talk about it but I'm not very forgiving if they haven't made an effort to try and make their own film because it's so easy now to make some kind of film on your own. You can shoot it on your iPhone, edit it on your laptop, and you can make a three minute piece. It depends what the people come to me with.

*Int: You just couldn't do that when I started. You needed a film camera which cost £50,000 and you had to be able to afford £160 for a 10 minute roll.*

MB: Yes, impossible. I think what I went for in your case was passion. You knew what you wanted, it was obvious that you loved the subject. In your case it was different because you hadn't got a natural history background, you hadn't done a science or zoology degree. So it was a bit of a risk and I knew your wife better than you. So it was a bit of a risk to say to you go and do this unusual job being a researcher, assistant producer on a prairie dog film, I didn't even know if you could do any of it. So I had to give myself the caveat that if it didn't work out I could find someone else. I think you always need that caveat.

But it's hard to find new talent that's really good as you found out and I think you've got to give them a fair crack of the whip but they've also got to have something that's recognisably new and interesting to bring because we're going to need that. In the last five years I've started working with younger talent deliberately to bring something new to the table. So right now I find it really interesting to work with 30 year old directors that bring something fresh. It's not that fresh but it is great fun being able to interact with younger people that may have a different idea of how to do something.

*Int: You have to be very resilient, don't you, and I would describe you as somebody who's always been very tough and sometimes you're very focused, sometimes uncompromising. I think those characteristics actually do work quite well in this business. You do have to be quite resilient, certainly in the area that I spent more time in, the sort of landmark telly. Do you think that those characteristics still work well in this business?*

MB: Yes, you have to be resilient in the sense of if you pitch three or four ideas and they reject all of them you've got to be able to stand up again and do it all again with your next batch of ideas. I very often feel like a broom salesman so that when the commissioner says, no, we don't want your whatever film or that one or that one, you've got to be prepared to open your broom bag and say how about this one and keep on trying to sell them. The trick is as an independent producer to be able to sell the projects, that's what I was saying about the last Echo film. They told me they didn't want them but you've got to be prepared to



be resilient enough to say you do want it and this is the one you're going to have, and that is really hard to do.

I wouldn't recommend to anybody to be an independent producer anymore in our genre. It is so difficult because the biggest people out there are the BBC and they dominate our genre, and to work in that environment is really difficult. There are a lot of other genres in TV that's probably easier to make it in. You must get this too, almost everybody around the dinner table who isn't involved in our type of filmmaking says what do you do? You tell them what you do and they say you must have the best job in the world and it must be wonderful going to all these places and all the rest of it. I don't think I've got the best job in the world, I don't think I've got the worst job in the world either but it's a job. I'm a salesman half the time and nowadays the biggest difference from 10 years ago I'm probably a salesman/producer 80/90% of the time now and a filmmaker the rest of the time. You have to be aware of selling the next project, raising the money much more than ever before.

*Int: In fact it's got much more difficult in our genre because our genre has always required quite healthy budgets to do the subjects justice and they really aren't there, are they, for most people, so we've had to adapt. If that tendency continues do you think we'll still be able to make natural history films?*

MB: I have adapted and you know how big the budgets we had were in the mid 90s.

*Int: I mean they're half that now if not more.*

MB: A lot less. For *Land of the Tiger* (15) we had £4 million. I made 13 programmes on Echo for £1 million. The budgets are tiny. I'm quite happy to adapt and shoot on different types of technology and I think that's fun, and I think that's part and parcel of it. I think when these cheap digital cameras came in in the early 90s I found that quite entertaining to start shooting and being involved with the filmmaking in a different way. I think old dogs have to learn new tricks and do it either themselves or employ young people.

The other thing we have to be able to do as producers I think is you have to learn, which I learnt a long time ago, to delegate and use other people's skills to help bring more things to the table to make them work.

## **10. Filming elephants**

*Int: You spent 20 years predominantly making programmes about two species, tigers and elephants. We've talked about what drew you to the tigers but what was it about elephants that made you think that they were good subject matters?*

MB: Well, I first started working on elephants in about 2000 when we made a film on Sri Lankan elephants with a wonderful Sri Lankan tracker called Sepala Gomasakera, who took me into see Sri Lankan elephants on foot which was incredibly dangerous because they're one of the most dangerous animals there is. They're highly unpredictable, much more dangerous than African elephants. That was the first one.



A good friend of mine, Martyn Colbeck, has been making films on the very famous Echo of the elephants since the early 90s. I knew that people loved elephants. I didn't necessarily get it myself that they were truly charismatic in the same way that big cats were but I did want to make a film on elephants. So I started by making a film on the Asian elephant which was another quite sad story. We called it *The Last Tusker* (36) because all the other tuskers had been shot out by poachers. Before you know it you're going down the same *Tiger Crisis* (20) route and making a film about the demise of a species.

I do remember one particular story about *The Last Tusker* (36) film. I took, who is now, a famous cameraman, Mark Smith, and his wife to be the camera couple on it. Mark wasn't quite so famous then but he'd been the cameraman on *Land of the Tiger* (15) and a few other things and he was clearly an exceptional talent.

On day one we decided to go out and find some elephants and some of them were running all over the place and you could tell they'd been shot at and they were very nervous. We eventually found one solitary female and Sepala was with me as the know-all about Indian elephants or Sri Lankan elephants. Mark and Jane were itching to get going and we'd seen Martyn Colbeck's beautiful shots of Echo and the elephants walking right by camera. I thought they were about 50 yards away, that seems like miles even when you're on a long lens. I said that's close enough, the wind's in our favour, you can get down and film because we hadn't worked out the cameraman system.

So Mark and Jane with a film camera jumped down onto the ground and were lining up a shot and Jane was saying to Mark what stock do you want, and he was going 45, this is the total film stock. I'd been talking to the driver and Sepala and Sepala wasn't there all of a sudden but it didn't matter. Then this elephant which was about 50 to 100 metres away suddenly lifted its trunk up as Mark and Jane were saying what stock shall we use. I thought that's funny, the elephant's lifting its trunk all of a sudden. I turned round to say to Sepala are we still all right and before I'd even finished saying raising its trunk it was running full speed towards us, and Mark and Jane were completely oblivious.

This thing wasn't a pretend thing. It's ears were completely back. He was doing 90 miles an hour coming straight towards the camera and Jane was going what stock do you want, Mark, and he was saying I think I'll have the 45. I said, God, this elephant's coming. I turned round to see Sepala and he wasn't there. This was the man who'd taken me on foot to see these things and he was there to guard us and this elephant was closing down on us, and I knew it was going to kill us. I just could see it was definitely going to nail us to the ground and it's quite interesting what strategies you make in that one second. You think I'll save myself.

Mark and Jane were the wrong side of the Land Rover, I got the right side of the Land Rover thinking it's going to go right through. The driver, who was the hero, ran towards the elephant shaking his coat like this and screaming at the top of his voice, and it veered off at the very last moment and didn't nail us which I thought it was going to. There's more man killing elephants in Sri Lanka than anywhere else but it didn't. Then I thought, God, where was Sepala who was meant to be our guide. As I turned round to see him he was coming out of the bush doing his trousers up, he'd had a pee in the bushes. He'd caused the whole thing because the wind had changed and the elephant had detected the smell of his urine and it had come straight for us. It was a really important lesson to learn about how careful you've got to be filming them. It really worked well for Mark and Jane because that was day one of like a 200 day filming trip.





But after filming those Sri Lankan elephants I got into filming Echo with Martyn again over about a 10 year period. It's been equally as encouraging as filming the tigers in one sense. They're an amazing species to film, and to be associated with Cynthia Moss who's studied elephants for 40 years and Martyn Colbeck who's studied with Cynthia as a cameraman for 20 years has been equally as special as filming as tigers.

We were filming with them a few weeks ago to say goodbye to Echo in our last Echo film and getting shots of them juxtaposed with the remaining family since Echo had died, and that whole family came right up to both of them when we were in the Land Rover. If this is the side of the Land Rover and we're filming from here, you got the whole family sticking their head right on to the edge of the Land Rover. It's quite exceptional. I don't know about you but I haven't had that many encounters with animals. We're trained not to get that close to them, aren't we, not to personalise our relationship with them and that's the one group of animals that I have seen rather than been involved with myself, how close you can get to animals.

*Int: Emotionally.*

MB: Yes, well, emotionally and physically. Cynthia's out there talking to the remainder of the family and they're listening to her. They're coming up to her shaking their ears and she's going poor Ella, how are you Etienne, how are you and they're listening to her. You have to see it to believe how special the relationship is and then Martyn likewise talks to these elephants. We had Elliot come up to him. I said, Martyn, we'll get this shot. Stop your Land Rover there. There's a line of 29 elephants coming and I want them to walk right by you, and Martyn has got a fantastic experience of putting the Land Rover right there. Then the elephants walk this close to his Land Rover all the way past. They just sort of go, hello, Martyn, and they go walking past.

I said, Martyn, introduce each one as they go past, it's like Nellie the Elephant sort of thing and he's telling me every one as they go past, this close to him. Then Elliot walks by and he goes this is Elliot. He knows them all. What Elliot normally does is Elliot walks right up to the camera, touches the camera with the tusk and walks by. Elliot walks right up to the camera, tusks right underneath the camera, touches the camera, he's knocking it around and Martyn says Elliot, don't do that, it's a very expensive camera, and Elliot's just going like this with the camera and then goes, okay, and walks off. Those are really sort of David Attenborough gorilla moments.

Martyn probably more than Cynthia has this unique relationship with the elephants that I've watched since about 2000 because we've made quite a few films since then and it's quite remarkable. One of the saddest moments ever which is coming out in our latest Echo film is when Echo died. This is the type of thing you would associate with. We knew Echo was going to die because we knew she was 64 years old and, in fact, the last programme we made in 2003 we went out thinking Echo was going to die and we've got to cover the end of this era with Echo, the world's most famous matriarch. But she didn't, she actually mated and she was probably one of the most sexy grandmas and she had a little baby at that point which was rather funny. So instead of dying she had her last baby.

So we had to wait for what we knew would eventually come. I was driving up to a holiday in Suffolk that morning when Cynthia rang me from Miami and said she knew that Echo was dying, Echo was down. One of her colleagues, Katito, was with Echo and Echo was dying and wasn't going to get up again. I thought, God, I've got to get out there and film this because it's going to be such a powerful moment. But I was in Suffolk, Martyn was completely gone. He was in the country but I couldn't get hold of him anywhere. So we had to get a cameraman out to Amboseli at the foot of Kilimanjaro as quickly as we could.

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We phoned the person who was with Echo on the ground and said, yes, she's down on the ground in a really bad condition and is almost certainly going to die. From a pragmatic point of view as a filmmaker I had to think how am I going to get a cameraman there now. Anyway we did eventually find a cameraman in Kenya with not a great camera but a good enough camera to go there and film the death of Echo. This is another thing that's typical about being a producer is you have to get there with all the permits and everything in place but you can't do it when it's just Echo's dying, get there now.

We get a cameraman there from northern Kenya. He finally gets into the park. He gets to the place where poor Echo is dying and starts filming. He has three minutes by this dying elephant with Katito who's crying and really upset, and Echo's breathing her last breath and her eyes closing. Then the authorities come and check us out. We have three minutes but it's the most valuable three minutes ever. It's the most emotional scene. I don't know if you've ever met Katito who's been following Echo for 20 years is absolutely distraught. They've known her for 20 years, she's like a member of the family and she's stroking Echo's head and Echo is snoring and she's talking about Echo, as she's dying.

Having watched and filmed this elephant for over 20 years it's an incredible moment. I think that's what we've got to strive to do, we've got to get people emotionally involved with our subjects and you've got to feel a special relationship with them. So it taught me all sorts of things about how you've got to be tough, you've got to get the cameraman there at the right period, make all those different things happen, and there's lots of different things you've got to bring together to make the subject work.

*Int: Do you think it's acceptable in certain situations to anthropomorphise in the film? Obviously the viewers are doing that anyway but do you think anthropomorphism, which was quite a popular way of making films in the early 90s, still has a part to play?*

MB: I don't think we have to do it necessarily. It wasn't being anthropomorphic about it. If this lady who knew Echo starting crying and treating Echo like a friend that's up to them. Personally would I do it, that's not a big thing for me either which way. I think the public love to do it. They love to familiarise themselves with the creatures and the way they do it is to think of them as human beings and in actual fact the science has turned completely 360 recently. It was totally unacceptable to talk about emotions, wisdom, love, joy, all these kinds of things 20, 30 years ago. Now they're all talking about it. The scientists accept that animals have a range of emotions and feelings way beyond what we used to think.

I've never found this with tigers. I think cats are really cold even if we have them as pets but if you look at Echo and the elephants they do recognise human individuals, they do have a relationship even with me and I wasn't there that much. They do know you enough and they do recognise individuals but I don't think we necessarily need to go in that direction. All I'm saying is getting familiar with individuals like Echo over 20 years is one of the most special moments for me as a natural history filmmaker.

## **Glossary**

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



**Cineflex:** Aerial camera system

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