

Hans Christian Alsvik: Oral History Transcription

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1. The natural history unit, NRK

Int: Hans Christian let's start with your unit, the natural history unit in Oslo. What does it consist of? Tell me a bit about it?

HCA: Well, it isn't a big unit of course, we are a small country, but in Oslo which is the headquarters, we have three biologists, two of them also cameramen, we have two programme makers which are not biologists, and we have a staff of some six/eight people. But we are producing an original show or programme of 30 minutes every week, all the year around, and we can't do that in Oslo of course. So we are using people all over Norway, in the different NRK offices, like you have one in Bristol for example, which is the natural history unit yes, but you have a local office in Bristol as well. So we have something like, actually we have a seminar next week with people producing for us and we will be something like 35 people.

2. NRK wildlife programming

Int: The show that you produce each week, what's that called and what's the format?

HCA: It's 29 minutes, it's called 'Ut inne Nature'(1), which means 'Out in Nature'. They are all Norwegian programmes, made in Norway. Ten times a year it is a magazine programme with small, short items, which are in a way what we call 'classical nature' or 'blue-chip', if you prefer that. But the other programmes are very often about, it could be about, for example a bird or a mammal but very often human beings are included in our programmes because, I mean there is a debate about that now, everyone is asking for more human beings, and some years ago we didn't use, or you didn't, especially the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), didn't use human beings at all in the programmes but Norwegians live so close to nature and interact with nature in so many ways, and also it's far easier to, if you include humans in a programme, it's easier to make half an hour in three weeks, which is the production time very often.

Int: Can you give us a kind, an example of a typical magazine show that you would do, if you can think back on one, the sort of ingredients that would be in it.

HCA: They are all being made on a small, kind of farm in south-eastern Norway, and that's in a way our studio even if it's outside, it's always outside, lots of animals, birds around there. Two programme leaders, a man and a girl, introducing the different parts, which could be, let me think, one of the last shows was about, one of the last items, big items, was about the fish and its feelings, in a way - can a fish feel, can a fish be hurt, does it know anything about the world around him/her? Which was a very interesting, maybe a bit untypical, theme. Then we had something about the bird of the year in Norway which was the wagtail and something from the Lophelia reefs in Norway which are coral reefs, underwater materials shot by an Englishman by the way. And then we have very short pieces of the viewers own material, I mean 30 seconds, a minute of special things they have recorded or filmed on their Sunday trip or whenever, and we always end with a kind of a quiz, a very short one, very short, so there are many ingredients and it differs of course, from time to time.

Int: And when is that transmitted?

HCA: After the news, the news is seven o'clock and we start seven-thirty.

Int: So it's a prime time slot?

HCA: Yes.

Int: So does that indicate that wildlife programmes are popular?

HCA: Indeed, indeed. You know, we aren't too many people in Norway but, even now with all this channels, we can have something like 600/700 000 viewers, which isn't bad. I mean the big, big shows, quizzes and entertainment programmes something like 1.2 million viewers, so we are quite satisfied, yes.

Int: Do you get feedback from your viewers and what sort of feedback?

HCA: Well, all sorts. Now we have just started with the internet and have the website so we get quite a lot of feed back that way but also letters and phone calls and from children down to seven/eight years, up to old ladies of 90 years, very, very different and the contact with the viewers is important and it is really good.

3. Use of bought-in programmes

Int: Are they particularly interested in their own wildlife or do you also serve up more exotic locations?

HCA: No, very seldom in our own programmes, that's for the bought in material, which very often is BBC material.

Int: Does the audience, does the Norwegian audience, like the exotic or do they like...?

HCA: Yes, but we very seldom have the same number of viewers for bought in material. The dinosaur series, close to the Norwegian programmes, but the last I mean, what is called, the return of the dinosaur?

Int: 'Walking with Dinosaurs'(2).

HCA: 'Walking with Dinosaurs'. Yes, right.

Int: That did very well but the other shows, don't do so well, don't top it?

HCA: Yes. David Attenborough's last bird series (3) did something like 400 000, which is good, of course, but not as good as Norwegian programmes and it tends that the magazine programmes are the most popular.

Int: How long has the unit been in existence?

HCA: As a unit for six/seven years. I mean for the first, almost 20 years the unit was me. I mean I did all kinds of things, I didn't film, I didn't record but all other kinds of things I did, bought in, made the Norwegian version, wrote scripts, everything.

4. The early years

Int: Well let's talk about you, which came first an interest in nature or an interest in filmmaking?

HCA: An interest in nature.

Int: And when did that start?

HCA: Well, it depends. Shall we start with Adam and Eve, I mean I'm born in northern Norway, lived there for the 17 first years of my life and what was important to me and to most children up there was to, to use nature, to be outside, winter or summer, rain or snow or sun, didn't matter, we were always playing, walking, hitch-hiking, outside, we almost never were in our homes. My grand-father and uncles and parents were very interested in nature, so it was a part of me, it was natural, in a way. Then I moved south, and after a few years I started as a journalist in a newspaper and you can't, in a small newspaper in Norway, you can't do too many nature stories there, but I made some. And then I, after some six or seven years I got a job in the news department, in 1966, and after working in a newspaper, I must say I hated news. So very soon I tried to, to find some kind of speciality, so I made quite a few short pieces about nature, ecology, birds, whatever and a few small films of something like 10, 15 minutes, as I was in the news department. And after two years I left, I made all kinds of documentaries for a few years but mostly nature, and inspired by my background of course, and a few older friends I started making nothing but natural history. For the first, when it really took off, I travelled all around the world almost, even if I sometimes saw that the big companies made far, far better programmes than we did because we had no resources, we had not a long time just went for two weeks, three weeks, but I travelled to east Africa for example, made programmes about the ecology of east Africa, something like in 1970/71 which was rather early I think. I was in the Netherlands, I was in northern Finland in the middle of winter, 40° below, travelling for three weeks on skidoos. We went to Siberia to Lake Baikal, made the first whole programme from Lake Baikal which also was in '71 or '72 or something like that, so we travelled quite a lot, but as I say, I think the last big trip was to China in 1980 I believe or '81, and we made probably the first natural history documentary in China. But after that I had to admit that the big companies did far better programmes and that we should concentrate on Norway where we have a lot of nature. So then as I said, some six years ago the natural history unit of NRK really was there, a lot of people, in the beginning we had something like 50/60 people trying to make natural history documentaries, they weren't all too good but at least we had a Norwegian programme every week. So it's been long way but it has been great fun.

5. Trends in wildlife filmmaking

Int: During that time have you seen, just in the industry, from your perspective, from a Norwegian perspective, do you see trends in programme making, patterns?

HCA: Yes, I mean to give a very short answer to that is not easy but there are a few things which I have thought about, one is, are we, or you, I mean not me I don't have a chance, but is there a tendency in the industry to always try to make something new, to find a new angle for the pictures, to introduce graphics? I mean a good example is John Downer's film on eagles (4), the BBC special, we had reactions in Norway from viewers and even from journalists who said, yes it's all good and well, but we, as a spectator, I always thought how did he do it, the technique, in a way overshadowed the message and I don't like that, that's not my taste either. I have for, as I mentioned earlier, for a long time tried to introduce the idea that man, who looks upon himself as the most important mammal should take part in the programmes more than they did, than he did, the answer was always, almost always no, we want to make **blue-chip** natural history documentaries, no people, no nothing. And the interactions between man and nature is important I think in programme making, and at Wildscreen this year, everyone is talking about bringing, well not everyone, but a lot of people are talking about bringing man into the programmes, in a way, there are trends and I don't like trends, I like that we should try and make the best programme on the theme we have chosen. It is not a question about man or not, it is a question about man in programme when man is needed in programme, that's the most important thing now. It has also been, yes I think that is a point, it has been, from my experience a tendency for example, with the big Attenborough series that if it is possible to choose examples outside Europe, in England yes ok, but outside Europe as far away as possible lets choose them, when have we seen good examples on behaviour and species and all that from Denmark, from Sweden, from Finland ,

from Norway, from Germany, Spain? All kind of exotic things are exotic and interesting but I think that nature close to us, the European nature for example, is indeed interesting and it's our nature, it's our part of the world.

6. The European wildlife filmmaking industry

Int: You set up, with others, a European series (5), tell us about that?

HCA: That was, it was in a way a rather old idea, it came up between myself and Arne Weise from Sveriges Television AB (SVT) in a way as an answer to all these exotic series we had seen for so many years. And we thought it would be nice if European companies could cooperate, so the initiative was Norwegian and Swedish and we very soon got Yleisradio (YLE) in Finland, Danmarks Radio (DR), and who else, Westdeutscher Rundfunk (WDR) to pre buy the series, but we worked for, I think, three years to finance the whole thing and the budget was very, very low compared to other big series. And we hired a British company to do the shooting, Green Umbrella, and they even had to forget about their fee for the series, their fee was a part of financing the whole thing, it was very, very difficult, I think the budget was something like 23 million Norwegian crowns, which is something like £2.3 million, for eight programmes which is nonsense compared to other series. But we made it in Europe and we cooperated with, what is it called not IUCN but something similar and our choice was to make one programme about every main habitat in Europe, so we filmed in something like eight/nine countries, ten maybe and we used cameramen from Britain, from Norway, partly from Sweden, from Poland, from Austria partly and from Spain partly, because even for a man who is not a member, or a man from a land who is not a member of the EU it was good to have a European cooperation. Oh yes I forget about, of course the Dutch company Evangelische Omroep (EO) which also was part of the consortium.

Int: How did this series, how successful was this series?

HCA: It was successful in the countries who made it and I know that the distributor have sold it to many countries, and they have got their money back and Green Umbrella has got their money back, we haven't got anything so far but we are still hoping, the series is still around. And we continued partly that cooperation by producing a series which is being produced now, a mini series from the Baltic countries (6), which was my initiative and which also is being produced by Green Umbrella, with EO and Österreichischer Rundfunk (ORF), WDR, NRK, SVT, YLE.

Int: How's that broken down, that series?

HCA: It's being mainly filmed by this Polish cameraman we used in 'Living Europe'(5), and I saw a kind of an assembly for the first programme yesterday, so it is going to be finished in April/ May, we hope.

Int: April/ May 2001?

HCA: Yes right.

7. The future

Int: What else is coming up in the future for you?

HCA: I retired a month ago, as head of unit, I have had two brain strokes in two years, or in one year, which meant that I could not speak properly, which I still can't, it is very difficult to talk to you now. So I've just worked 50% the last year, and I'm now a kind of senior consultant in NRK, and I hope to be leaving with a good pension, very soon, but they haven't given me a decent bid yet.

Int: But you're not going to give up the film making?

HCA: I don't know, I mean I will finish this Baltic series (6) but no I don't know, I think I should think more of myself and what I want to do, I am planning to buy a dog, a Gordon Setter, go for walks, work in the garden and maybe write a little bit now and then. Everything has an end, the sausage has too.

8. The Norwegian audience

Int: When you buy in films from overseas do you have to adapt them in any way for the Norwegian audience, the language, do you tape or do you translate?

HCA: We translate and I have been narrating for many, many years. We use scientific advisors when we are translating and, I don't know if I'm allowed to say this but I'll say it anyway. Very often the foreign programmes, even those from the BBC, has a lot of commentary and I have been reducing that commentary down to something like 80-85%. I find that people are telling the audience obvious things which you can see, and very often the same thing not once but twice and that's, in my point of view, unnecessary, and there is tendency I think, in British filmmaking, to make programmes almost like some kind of peoples university, I mean they are very **didactic**. Which is good but it can be a bit too much now and then, that's my feeling about that.

Int: What about things like, in Britain, one gets, if one put out a wildlife film with music in it, we get 50% of the audience writes in and says they loved the music, 50% of the audience writes in and says they don't like the music, I mean what's the Norwegian view of that?

HCA: The Norwegian tendency is that quite a few people call or write letters and say why do you put this music on natural history documentaries, and I've often asked myself the same question, is it a tradition from the old black and white mute films, which we have brought with us into natural history? I mean there is no symphony orchestra out on the lake or in the bushes, so I, the tendency in Norway is to have music yes, but not too much, we are a bit reluctant there.

9. Industry influences

Int: Is there anybody in the industry not just necessarily in Norway, but anybody in the industry which is, has been a big influence on you, on the way that films have been made in Norway?

HCA: Not anyone in particular, but there are some, some of the, I mean the Swedes they have quite a tradition with some big names, which I, I watched their films, very early, Suksdorf and Linblad and so on, and of course it has been important to meet with people in the natural history unit in Bristol. I mean I have been cooperating with them for something like 20 years and met the producers, very often discussed the ideas, watched the rushes even, and I've learnt a lot about film making from them. I've even been on location with David Attenborough a few times. So, I mean these are the big names of course, but it's very different, very difficult to compare, because your resources and your budgets are not comparable to ours at all, I mean we have to make it in another way but of course you are inspired, good and interesting people which you are meeting in this business and as I say this cooperation with the BBC natural history unit which started shortly after Life on Earth (7) which the BBC did not distribute, and after that the BBC enterprises at that time started this cooperation with several companies, and I'm proud to say NRK was probably the first and the Swedes the second. So we had a great time in Bristol many, many times, even if we never saw the town, we just came by plane, and by bus and went to the natural history unit, and back to Norway and Sweden in a hurry.

Int: How did you feel when the BBC didn't come in on the European project?

HCA: Well of course, we were disappointed but on the other hand a series of eight hours or eight 50 minutes, on the BBC would take up so much time, I mean you have your own productions and, if eight hours from us should be a part of the bought in material at the BBC I understand that was difficult. But, it's a pity that the series so far hasn't been shown in Great Britain. If that is because the British in a way are a breed apart I don't know, but I mean looking back at this cooperation with the BBC, the natural history unit, the first years we felt like small children coming to big mamma being told what to do, they didn't listen much to what we had to say, but during all these years I think we have got respect from all kinds of people in the BBC, which is good, which I look upon as a kind of a victory and there was, there was many years ago, I won't mention any names but there was a series which we had, which was a joint venture with SVT and NRK, we saw the first episode in Bristol and I said to the head of the unit at that time, this is a lousy programme I won't have it and the result was the series which was three hours, was re-cut with a new producer, and that's really a victory I think, even if it was rather impolite when I told him, the producer, this isn't good enough, I won't have it, it was kind of a small scandal but the result was good or even far better than it originally was.

END

Glossary

Blue-chip: A prestigious style of wildlife documentary which can be described as a depiction of mega-fauna, following a dramatic storyline, using only images of visual splendour, giving a sense of timelessness and with an absence of reference to controversial issues.

Didactic: Intended to teach or give moral instruction.

References

1. *Ut inne Nature* (NRK)
2. *Walking with Dinosaurs* (BBC, 1999)
3. *Life of Birds* (BBC, 1998)
4. EAGLE (The Wildlife Specials) (BBC tx. 17 December 1997)
5. *Living Europe* (Co-production: Green Umbrella, NRK, SVT, DR, EO, ORF, TVP, WDR, YLE, ITEL, WGBH, 1998)
6. *Baltic Secrets* (Co-production: EO, Green Umbrella, NRK, ORF, TVP, 2002)
7. *Life on Earth* (BBC, 1979)

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