

## Mike Salisbury: Oral History Transcription

**Name of interviewee:**

Mike Salisbury

**Name of interviewer:**

Peter Bassett

**Name of cameraman:**

Bob Prince

**Date of interview:**

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**Place of interview:**

Bristol, United Kingdom

**Length of interview:**

c.195 minutes

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### **1. The early years - first interest in broadcasting**

*Int: Okay, today is Monday, 14th May and we're in the home of Mike Salisbury in Bishopston in Bristol, and Mike's probably the most experienced and certainly the most respected producer that the Natural History Unit [BBC Natural History Unit] has ever produced. Spare his blushes. We're going to talk a little bit today about his career over the last 30 odd years. So, Mike, we'll keep it in chronological order and we'll keep it chatty so we can always go back if we miss some bits. But first of all can you just give do a little bit of an ident of who you are.*

MS: Yes, sure. I'm Mike Salisbury. I've been working in the Natural History Unit about 35 years I think altogether and I retired last year. Well, what's it now, May 2007, so I retired in about February 2006 after a long time. But I'm still working as an independent producer now and working back with the Unit doing a Natural World (1) at the moment, so I'm still keeping my hand in.

*Int: You're actually busier now than you were when — .*

MS: In a way. I mean I love the job so much that I couldn't really consider retiring you know, retiring altogether. I can't imagine just sort of giving up like that because, I mean to be honest, you were very kind in your introduction but I've had an absolutely wonderful career and I've been extremely lucky all down the line. You know, things have fallen in place and I've been in the right place at the right time and so forth, and I haven't found any of it really onerous. Well, there are odd bits that I can talk about but mainly it's been a delight and so — .

*Int: So right at the beginning you know you said you were very lucky to have this career. Was this the career you wanted, or was it television you started off to go for, or were you always passionate about wildlife or wild places?*

MS: Well I think I got my delight and interest in wildlife from my mum, no doubt about that because I can remember even as a very little boy, we lived on the edge of the countryside in Hertfordshire, and whenever we went out taking the dogs for a walk or anything she was always pointing things out you know. Getting me to learn the names of the trees and the plants and you know what birds were around, and looking at caterpillars and things, and I think particularly insects. I got an absolute fascination for insects, like a lot of little boys do I think, and spent hours in the garden watching ants and feeding them bits of breadcrumbs, sort of seeing what they did with them and all that sort of thing.

So, yes, definitely a parental background and we did a lot of camping. I came from a family that loved the outdoors so that was the start of it. I think very early on I remember my parents taking me to a Walt Disney film called *The Living Desert* (2), and I saw that and I was absolutely knocked over, bowled over by it. And it gave me a yearning to see a desert for myself and then they did *The Living Arctic* (3), and then I wanted to go to the Arctic. I suppose I saw those first of all when I was 8, 9, that sort of time and I started to read books about far off places and about wildlife and you know realised the world was an enormous place and had a lot of interest in it, and I've always loved exploring and that sort of thing. So I began to get this idea that there was a lot to see out there and particularly in wildlife and so on. And then my dad bought a television and I started seeing that there were even programmes on television that were absolutely fascinated me. I think I was probably a bit of an anorak as a teenager you know, I was a bit of a geek because instead of wanting to watch cowboy films and things, I really marked off documentaries, I had a real thing about documentaries. Not just wildlife ones, all documentaries. I thought that whole business of telling stories on film about real things, real people, real wildlife and of course, picking up on that, I would be able to see things like *Zoo Quest* (4) and that's where I saw David Attenborough for the first time.

I remember as a teenager thinking, "My God, all these people have got dull jobs all around where I live you know, in shops and insurance offices and things, and there's this man going around looking at wildlife all round the world." I thought, "God, I'd like to do that." I remember actively thinking that and then there was Armand and Michaela Dennis and there was Jacques Cousteau. Suddenly I wanted to be you know, a scuba diver and go off with Jacques Cousteau.

So all those early people, Peter Scott, even George Cansdale bringing animals into the studio you know, was fascinating. So they did influence me a lot, those early television people, and I think I held it as a sort of pipe dream that if there was something anybody asked me which I'd really like to do, I'd say I'd like to be David Attenborough or Armand Dennis.

So that was a sort of teenage thing, and then I got into photography actually. I got into stills photography in a really big way. I became absolutely passionate about stills photography and every sort of spare moment I had I'd go out on my bike all round Hertfordshire, taking photographs of things and doing my own developing and printing and that sort of thing. So I got to know a lot about the technicalities of photography which



fascinated me, about f-stops and film speeds and things. I realised much later on obviously that all that stuff, lenses and focal lengths and things, were going to be extremely useful in my later career. I didn't know at the time, but you know, they were.

And at school I did a peculiar combination for A level. I did English because I was fascinated in writing and all that that entails, and I was fascinated in biology, so I did zoology and botany and English as my A levels. That was a perfect combination I realise now because writing is very much a part of being a wildlife producer, as you know, and you've got to be able to write to present your ideas, and then to write narrations at the end of it all. I loved literature, I loved the way people told stories and I know it sounds a bit old fashioned, but I think one of the basic things about documentary filmmaking and wildlife filming is no different from that is you've got to be interested in telling a story, communicating a story that people want to keep watching. I think you know, some programmes do fall down on that, some of mine have fallen down on that. They haven't had as good a story as they should have done. So that's the background thing that I did that's always been useful.

For some peculiar reason I've been a bit of a cussed character in my life sometimes. I decided, all my mates were trying to get into university and I thought "They're all going to university, I'll do something different, like I won't go to university". And instead of that I sort of started a job in industry and got extremely bored with it, realised that I wished I had gone to university now but maybe I still wouldn't. But I went on voluntary service overseas in the very early days, when Alec Dixon had just started it. I went to Swaziland and I was 19 at the time. I had to work my passage out on a steamship, helping the crew and things, which was great.

It was a great adventure and I was off to Africa. You know I was now setting off on this world trip that I'd always dreamed of, so it was a very exciting moment. I just had a tin trunk, went up to Liverpool, jumped on this ship and off I went.

*Int: Did you take your stills stuff as well?*

MS: I did. I did indeed and spent a lot of my spare time when wasn't — . I went as a mechanic actually. That was another thing that I did as a hobby was take cars and engines to bits. I don't know why but I did. I was fascinated in the way things work. It's another thing that's been incredibly useful over the years. Anyway Swaziland was a great experience. I did lots of things including I taught at a school where Nelson Mandela's children by his first wife were there. We had to smuggle the kids from South Africa, the African kids, over the border at the beginning and end of each term because they weren't really allowed to study. It was in the middle of the worst bit of apartheid.

So it was all very formative and exciting, but in between there was all this wildlife you know I was seeing real African wildlife and going out with my camera and keeping up that fascination with the wildlife. Collected loads of insects and dried them and brought them back, etc.

When I got back I still had this dream that I ought to be doing something with photography and writing and things, but I didn't get into what it was and so I did a spell in — . Well my dad ran a little firm that sold lawnmowers and did them up and things, and horticultural machinery generally and I went into that for a bit, for a few years, very half-heartedly I might say, although I still enjoyed taking things to bits. But in the meantime I'd started getting interested in amateur dramatics and directing plays, and things like that, and lighting. And again, I'll come back to how that was useful later, particularly in *The Discovery of Animal Behaviour* (5), which was a drama series. And I started writing for the local paper on various things about either nature or as a sort of roving drama critic, and so that got me interested.

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Then I got married and I just suddenly thought I'm in my late 20s, if I'm going to realise this dream I've got to do something about it. So I said to my new wife, Viv, "I want to stop this steady job and would you mind if I gave it a year and see if I could get into the BBC because I know I won't be happy unless I give it a try." I was still watching documentaries. I was watching wildlife stuff, I was watching Horizon (6) in particular because I was fascinated in science, and those science documentaries, I thought they were brilliant.

So I just thought, "well, I'll go and batter on some doors". So I gave up my job and thought my dad would be cross, but he was very supportive, luckily. He said, "No, if that's what you want to do give it a go but there's always a place back here if you want it". So anyway, I gave myself a year and I made a real nuisance of myself to people like Peter Goodchild, the editor of Horizon (6). All sorts of people who kept fobbing me off on the phone, "Well, we'll get in touch if there's anything you could do, if somebody goes on holiday, a researcher or something". And of course, nothing happened so you had to take a deep breath and ring up and say, "Hey, you promised that you'd do this and nothing's happened". You realised you were making a nuisance of yourself and you could imagine people saying, "God, I wish this bloke would go away".

And I remember the day, I just decided to go up there and I managed to get myself into Kensington House where Horizon (6) was, and I just presented myself at Peter Goodchild's door and just said to his secretary, "Oh, I'm the guy who's been ringing up a lot and nobody seems to take any notice on the phone, so here I am". At that moment Peter Goodchild came out of his office and his secretary said, "This is Mike Salisbury who's been pestering you a bit". So he said, "All right" and took me in and he said, "To be frank Mike, there aren't any spots. But tell you what, next week we've got one of our producer's researchers is going on holiday and if you want to do a bit of research for him, see how you get on, you can do it".

It was a thing about the history of tanks actually and I went back home and I started ringing on the phone, saying I was working for the BBC and I was really cheeky. I got some really good contacts and the producer was, you know to be honest, quite impressed that I'd got the sort of information he wanted to. So he gave me another week and that went all right, then there was nothing else, then it went a bit dead. And so I rang up and said, "Look, could I have a proper interview with Peter Goodchild. I've done a bit now and I really want to get in and time is running out. I want to do this job". He sent a message through his secretary saying, "Tell him to come in a fortnight's time, and just tell him that the currency of this place is ideas". That's all he said.

So I was driving gravel lorries at the time, just to keep us in food because Viv was on a PhD grant and we had virtually nothing. So I was driving these gravel lorries and in between I would go to the public library. And I got out all the Radio Times (7) from about four years back and I made a list of everything that Horizon (6) had made, every subject that Horizon (6) had made. Then I went into the magazine sections and I started looking at journals of different subjects - medicine and agricultural, so on and so forth and tried to find articles about things that they hadn't done things about. So I was double checking if something was new and they hadn't done a film about.

I came out with about four or five ideas that I thought were worthy of a documentary but actually hadn't been done by Horizon (6), because I didn't know whether they were in production at the time but hadn't at least been aired. So then again I sat at home, in between gravel lorry drops, and pretended I was a BBC researcher. Did the usual thing in research, rang up somebody in the States who was the best endocrinologist in the world and he'd lead me to somebody else, and so forth. On each subject I got five or six top names who said they'd be interested in co-operating and so forth.

Anyway, then came the day I went to see Peter Goodchild and he sat me down and he said, "Well, you know





I said there's no jobs here and to be frank so many people ask for jobs as researchers and the only thing I'm interested in is ideas. So I'm sorry but it's just that's the way it is". And I said "I've got some ideas". "All right, well, I expect we've done them" and I said "Well, shall I tell you them?". I ran down these four ideas, told just with bullet headings of who the people were that we could use and what the story was, and so forth. And he went quieter and quieter and at the end of it he said, "Well, it's most, yes, I don't think we've tackled these". I said "Oh really", and he said "No". "Well," he said, "that's quite interesting really. I'll see if we could perhaps, perhaps you could have a little test of developing one of these ideas further".

And good as his word that's what he let me do and that was the turning point because then he just took me seriously, gave me a chance. He gave me two weeks here and three weeks there and so forth, and it gradually worked up. So it wasn't ever going to be anything permanent but at least it was a start, and it got my name on the BBC register of people who wanted to become researchers.

I still waited for the big break and that came with a call from a guy called, Richard Drewett, who was just about to start a chat show, a new chat show, because they used to do a chat show with Simon Dee. He'd been caught taking drugs or something and they'd given him the sack, and they needed a replacement show and they needed another researcher. They'd got one researcher, Patricia Houlihan, and they needed another researcher in a hurry and he phoned me up one day. I only just heard the phone and I got the phone call, and he just said "Would you be interested? I know it's not the sort of thing you want to do because you want to do documentaries but there is a job going and if I think you can do it. I just need somebody who's done something for the BBC before who's not totally new and knows the ropes".

So I went up and saw him on a Thursday and started on the Monday, I think. It wasn't Parkinson (8), it was a show called If It's Saturday It Must Be Nimmo (9) and it was an attempt to do a chat show with Derek Nimmo. It was a total failure, but I had a wonderful time, learnt a lot about studio programmes and things. It was only one series and then it was dropped, and then they decided we've got to replace it with somebody else and that's when they brought in Michael Parkinson. So I was kept on to research the first series of Michael Parkinson's shows (8) and that became a real success.

Although it wasn't what I wanted to do really, it was a really good foot in the door, because then you could look on the notice board in the corridors and see what jobs were going and that sort of thing. You were in and that's the great thing about anything like the BBC, is once you've got your foot in the door. I think it was precarious, but I was in. And in between — . My eye flickered then. I've just seen a blackbird go into its nest in the ivy — out the window. In between, I managed to get jobs with science features. They did a thing called Tuesday Documentary (10) then, which was a big solid documentary every Tuesday, and the science department did a number of them. There was a producer called Michael Blackstad, who I went to see and got on very well with, and in between the Parkinson (8) shows he gave me a researcher job on these Tuesday Documentaries (10), which sort of just filled in the gap beautifully. So I did about three series of Parkinson (8), so I did three Tuesday Documentaries (10). One about Nobel, one about computer privacy and another one I can't remember.

So, at the end of that I got an offer from the Light Entertainment Department" saying, "Okay you've done okay and we can offer you a three year contract now". I'd been going on three month contracts so I thought "that is incredible, to get offered a three year contract". So I went to Peter Goodchild at Horizon (6) and said "Look, I've just been offered a three year contract with Light Entertainment, I honestly don't want to do it. I want to be doing science documentaries" and in the back of my mind wildlife documentaries actually, and "What could you offer me?". He said, "Well, we could offer you three months" and I said "Nothing more than that?" and he said "No, three months I could offer you, so you've got to make up your mind". Well, I talked to Viv, my wife about it and she said "You've got to go with your heart, blow the money - go with your heart".

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So I went back and said “I’ll take three months with science features thank you very much”, and I went off to Horizon (6) and that was really the start of really getting into it, because I became one of their more experienced researchers. I worked with really good producers in Horizon (6), learnt a lot. The time limit on Horizons (6) was horrendous for those producers. They had to produce a 50 minute Horizon (6) in three months. They had to do three a year and it was like a sausage machine really. So the researchers were thinking up the subjects for the producer for the next one. While they were editing they’d say “Go off and get me some ideas for the next programme, tell me what I’ve got to make a programme on next”. It was almost like that. So you had a terrific hand in actually choosing what was going to be done and what were the important subjects, and that was great. And also they were so busy that they often just said “Look, you know more about this than me; go off and film it”. So suddenly, as a researcher, you were out there with the BBC’s best cameraman from Ealing, going out with these wonderful cameramen, you know who did big dramas one minute or documentaries all over the world. Really people who became very famous cameramen in the end and getting this wealth of experience. Having to say to them “Look, I’m not very experienced, therefore if I make a mistake could you put me right?” Which I’ve always found the better way. It’s not to pretend you know everything but to say, look, I know the story we want to tell, if you can help me tell it. And I learnt a lot that way, because a good cameraman or sound recordist wants to pass on their knowledge. So they’re saying “Do your close-up first” or “Do your wide angle here”, sort of “Can I suggest a shot here?”, so I learnt a lot from that and — .

*Int: I’m intrigued that obviously when you were a teenager you were really interested in stills photography. Apart from the nuts and bolts of photography, you were obviously learning about composition.*

MS: Yes, absolutely.

*Int: So why did you drop the camera side because obviously it is a different philosophy?*

MS: Yes. I think because, even more than camerawork, I was interested in communicating stories. I think that was more of a passion probably than the photography, although I very quickly learnt in those very early directing days, when I was really learning on the go, that to actually know what the cameramen were talking about. You know if he says “Look, I think we’d better to go on a prime 8ml here”, I knew what effect that was, and when they know they can’t pull the wool over your eyes as well, that’s better for the cameramen too, because they think “Well, at least he knows what it’s about”. Things like “Look, I think we need a faster stop here for this”. You know what they’re talking about and that was really useful, and also coming up with ideas for shots and so on, which are all to do with composition and wide angle or telephoto, or whatever. But I think that’s the reason, to answer your question.

## **2. Getting into the BBC Natural History Unit and working on The World About Us and Animal Magic**

*Int: Yes, because it’s interesting that you’ve had a fantastic apprenticeship, but were you constantly getting in touch with the Natural History Unit at that point?*

MS: Oh yes.

*Int: Or were you thinking actually Hertfordshire’s closer to London so I’ll keep there because it’s close by.*

MS: No. I mean during that whole period, and I worked for, what, two, two and half, nearly three years I think for *Horizon* (6), ending up as their senior researcher without a degree. Nobody ever knew that, probably nobody ever knows to this day. Everybody else had sort of PhDs [Doctor of Philosophy] and things. Anyway, that's by the by. No, all the time I actually was applying for jobs in Bristol, whenever a job in Bristol came up I applied for it. But, of course, I was applying for assistant producer jobs when I was only a researcher and I think, to begin with, I hadn't got enough experience. But obviously I didn't get boarded, in that lovely BBC term.

*Int: Was David Attenborough films still being made in London then?*

MS: They were still being made in London, yes. Well, he was Controller of Programmes when I was in London and he was making the odd programme, but he wasn't doing much wildlife stuff to be honest. I mean he was on things like *The Question of Music* (11) and things like that. He was doing programmes that didn't take him away, because he was in that high admin job.

Eventually I applied for this advert for an assistant producer job with *The World About Us* (12), which was the predecessor of *The Natural World* (1) that runs at the moment.

*Int: Who would have been series editor then?*

MS: Well, Chris Parsons in Bristol and in London, I can't remember. It was somebody Latham I think but I can't remember. So half the projects were done in London and were usually about either science or anthropology, and half the projects were done in Bristol and were about natural history. So they wanted an assistant producer to expand the role of *The World About Us* (12) in Bristol. Luckily enough I got an interview. It was quite amusing, it said on it 'must be fit to travel in far off places without any comforts' and that sort of thing, all the things I love, really great. But at the time I'd actually slipped a disc in my back and I was doing a researching and helping film a film about hill farming in Mid Wales, and I was in absolute agony. I could hardly move because of this back, this pain down my leg. I had to call Viv to come to Aberystwyth, "I can't drive the car, I can't even push the clutch because it hurts so much", to get to Bristol for this interview.

So she came down by train and I was popping paracetamol and I came for this interview and I hobbled in and tried to cover up the fact that actually I wasn't very fit to do anything at that moment. They were asking me all these questions about would I be prepared to sleep in the jungle without a tent and that sort of thing. "Oh yes, oh yes". Can I climb mountains with heavy gear and I went "Oh yes". Anyway, luckily the more serious questions I seemed able to answer okay and I went straight home, went straight into hospital to have this thing looked at. I was drugged up and lay there for three weeks, and during that time I was in hospital with this slipped disc, I was told that I'd got the job. And so — .

*Int: Who had been on the interview, can you remember?*

MS: Yes, it was Chris Parsons, it was Mick Rhodes who was head of the Unit at the time, it was Robert Reid who had been head of science department in London, so I had known him in London. A very austere, very exacting sort of scientific bloke, who you never know what he was thinking, because his expression never changed. Anyway, it was a pretty horrendous sort of thing and then somebody from personnel. I think boards in those days, part of it was whether you could actually survive this process, you know it was pretty awful.

Well, you probably had them as well.

Anyway, luckily I got through it and got the job and I was absolutely overjoyed. My family, well Viv was overjoyed because she'd done her university at Bristol, loved it and was very happy to move down to Bristol and that's what we did. I can't remember the date but it was about 36, 37 years ago, something like that.

*Int: Actually we have to mention it, that's another discussion actually but when you were in London, I don't know any other wildlife producer that's actually worked with Mohammed Ali, and we haven't got time really at the moment to go through those stories, but we'll have to book that, Alison, for another time.*

MS: Yes.

*Int: So you came here then to do work on The World About Us (12), so who would you have you been working with?*

MS: Chris Parsons.

*Int: Direct to him?*

MS: Direct to him and the first jobs were things like "Well, here's a film about condors. There's some great stuff in it, we want to buy it but it is just untransmittable as it is, make it better, make it into a better story, get some more footage, whatever. But make it into a good World About Us (12)". I think that was a sort of testing exercise. I did that, and Chris had booked David Attenborough actually to narrate it, and I'd seen him in Television Centre, like in the restaurant, going through into the waitress service bit, with the high ups like Bill Cotton and Huw Weldon. He's my hero, absolutely my hero. I'd read all his Zoo Quest (13-16) books and everything, and suddenly it came to me that I was going to meet this guy for the first time, who as a teenager I'd wanted to be.

I'd written this rough story, narration and so forth of this film [El Condor] (17), and suddenly I was in this little place with a **Steenbeck** and there was Chris coming in with David Attenborough and saying "This is Mike Salisbury". I can remember my heart beating you know, and I've heard this from other people since. I went all sweaty. Anyway, the viewing went well and he had some very good points to make and was, as you know, extremely friendly and not in anyway overpowering or in anyway throwing his weight about. I think he's very sensitive to meeting juniors for the first time, as it were, because that's what I was.

Anyway that went fine and I did a few other things - an otter film [Otter] (18) that Chris had started and I finished off for him, and one thing and another. But then when you join the Unit they did say that one of the things was that you had to go through all the different programmes that they made. So I actually then had a spell on Animal Magic (19) and had to go on a quick studio directing course. So I directed live studio for Animal Magic (19) for a term or whatever it was. That was really good fun, real adrenaline stuff, having animals in the studio and not knowing quite what they were going to do. In fact, my very first one (20), we had a hornbill from a guy called Idris Jones [Idris Hale] who ran a bird garden near Swansea. We had this hornbill that he said was absolutely tame, would do anything we wanted, and I'd been down to see him. And he brought it up and in rehearsal in the afternoon him and Johnny [Morris] were going to start the programme, and then this thing was on a different perch and then it was going to fly down to a perch right in



front of Johnny and Idris.

That was fine in rehearsal, it worked a treat, and I thought “this is my very first one, this is going to be great”. The moment came when Jackanory (21) was on, I always remember. It was Jackanory (21) before Animal Magic (19) and in the middle of Jackanory (21) – “This is London calling, Bristol are you ready in the studio there, Bristol” and the PA would say, “Yes, London we’re all standing by, Mike Salisbury directing”, “Coming to you in a minute Bristol”. You’d say “Well, camera one are you ready, camera two, yes?” Then camera one said, “Camera one aren’t you on the hornbill?” and he said “It’s flown up into the bloody roof”. This hornbill had decided to take off and London was saying “40 seconds Bristol”. I could hear this and I was saying “Camera one, please, can you try and get a shot, any camera, try and get a shot of this hornbill up in the roof”. One of them got an angle on it, camera two which was the wrong camera. I said “Camera one try and get a different shot of Johnny then”. “Ten, nine, eight, run title music”. [Hums start of title music].

There was this hornbill in the roof, but Johnny was an absolute professional and so he started with Idris and then said “Well, there’s another perch in the studio and let’s have a shot of that. There should be a hornbill on there but actually it’s flown up into the roof” and he covered it all absolutely brilliantly and just talked a bit about hornbills. The damned thing never came down. We had to then extend some other items on the programme. But I remember the adrenaline and all you did at the end of that was want to go to the bar and get pissed.

That I did every fortnight on Animal Magic (19), which was great fun and a really good grounding.

*Int: So who was the series producer on that? Was that Mike Mallin or Robin Hellier?*

MS: It was George Inger. Robin Hellier was the other director and Caroline Weaver; me and Robin Hellier and Caroline. And Robin was in overall charge of us two and we did the actual directing. But also you went out making five minute films or three minute films on things, and I found that really good as well, because you’d get somebody like Tony Soper and you’d go out and make a film about sugaring for moths or something. We did one about Gordon Benningfield (20), the wildlife artist, and various other things about seed dispersal or whatever. Getting the nub of that story told in three minutes and taking it into the cutting room with a very limited budget and time, and just saying to these rather old hands, people like Jim Crier and Betty Block who were there at the time, who’d seen it all. “The young upstarts, God, here we go again. Two rolls of film and they expect me to make a story”. And you really had to be on your guard not to be steamrollered off in a different direction because he thought there wasn’t a shot. You’d say “No Jim, I did do a close-up, honestly”. “Well, I haven’t seen a bloody close-up, typical you never give me close-ups”, and then he’d find one right at the end and you’d say “There you are, Jim, I did do a close-up”. “Oh, all right, bung it in”. That was good, it was good training that.

*Int: Would that have been black and white reversal stock in those days?*

MS: No, I think we used colour reversal, it was all colour. Yes, it was colour but it was colour reversal so it was all 50 ASA quick process. In fact, it was processed in Bristol with the new stuff. The new stuff was processed there.

### **3. Life on Earth**

*Int: So actually with all that experience with documentaries and how they get put together, then you come to the Unit and you get the studio live experience but at the same time you're doing small items. So what else were you put onto to give this background of the Unit's programmes?*

MS: I think it was only Animal Magic (19) and World About Us (12) before really luckily, luckily for me. God, what a stroke of luck, that the funding and the idea and the BBC go-ahead came through for Life on Earth (22), and it was really a bit of an unknown quantity. Everybody in the Unit was talking about it – “God, they're going to do a 13-parter on wildlife, from bacteria up to man. It's amazing but is it possible?” and “Well, it's got David Attenborough in there” and everybody was talking about it.

Then these jobs were advertised for assistant producers on *Life on Earth* (22) and I went for it absolutely straightaway. I thought “God, this is going to be something special”. Those were pretty tough interviews as well with John Sparks and Richard Brock and Chris Parsons again and personnel people. I was lucky enough and managed to persuade John Sparks, in particular, that he'd like to have me on his team. So I got one of those jobs and that was, well, the best thing that ever happened to me really up to then, because three years ahead of me was this amazing series (22) to work on.

*Int: So were you working across all the series (22) as an AP [assistant producer]?*

MS No, I was working with John Sparks for four of the programmes I think. The reptile one [Victors of the Dry Land] (23), primates [Life in the Trees] (24) —.

*Int: Hunters.*

MS: Hunters and Hunted (25), primates and man [The Compulsive Communicators] (26).

*Int: I'm just thinking about the hunted programme (25) and the fact that you still see those shots of the lion hunt (26), even now being used as archive. But at the time how did you set about that filming? I'm just thinking about the actual nuts and bolts of doing it then, who you filmed it with, because it's such a classic.*

MS: It's a double edged story really because —. Well first of all I went on a recce to meet all the people who were researching lions, both in the Serengeti and in the crater and in Kenya and other places, and found that the best known lions, and the most approachable ones, were definitely in the Ngorongoro crater. So we plumped for that. I came back and said to John [Sparks] that's where we ought to go. So me and Maurice Tibbles went out, I think it was probably January, and we had shocking weather. We'd done a bit of other stuff, impalas and baboons stuff at Manyara and other places. It was quite a long trip and then we go to the crater.

In those days, the border between Kenya and Tanzania was closed so there weren't any tourists in Tanzania almost, full stop. I'd organised that we should camp down in the crater, which is unheard of now. It was just a fantastic opportunity, we were actually camping in the bottom, so you woke up at dawn and went to work, none of that hours driving down. So that was good, but the weather was absolutely awful and we had this

situation where for some reason all the lions were hunting just at dusk. So we'd stick with a pride, we'd get in a position where we thought something was absolutely going to happen. We'd get into position very carefully and then dusk would fall and then we'd hear commotion breaking out, we'd missed it. That sort of thing went on and it got very depressing and we kept getting the Land Rover stuck, if you believe that. It was a bit like filming on the Yorkshire Moors. It was cold, wet, miserable, day after day.

There was a guy filming, I think his name was Bob Campbell, for Survival down there and he had the added disadvantage as Survival was then using 50 ASA **reversal** film still. We were using Eastman Colour Negative. Not for the first time, but certainly for a big project, it's a bit like HD [high definition] now, the whole project was going to be shot on Eastman Colour Negative. There was a faster film that we could use. So me and Maurice, towards the end of the afternoon we'd put on the magazine with the faster film stop, grainy as it was. I can't even remember what number it was now but it was probably about 200 ASA and you could force it a bit more than that.

But nevertheless —. So poor old Bob Campbell from Survival, he had to stop an hour earlier than we did, but none of us got any footage. We kept meeting in the evenings and swapping stories and getting depressed. And I had to, in the end, say to Maurice “Look, I think we're wasting our money, I don't think this is going to change”. He said “Oh, I don't know, you'll find that if we go we'll get in touch with Bob Campbell and he'll say, ‘oh, you shouldn't have gone, it's happened the day after you left’”. I said “I don't think so, Maurice, I think we've got to come back at some other time”. He said “Well, on your head be it. I don't know what John Sparks would do” and I said, “Well John isn't here and I can't get in touch with him, so I've got to make the decision”. I had sleepless nights thinking. Anyway —.

So I decided to pull out and thought “I hope this is the right thing” and I remember that sick feeling coming home in the plane, thinking “What is John going to say?” “Why didn't you stick at it?” Then I thought, “Well yes, we will hear”. Anyway, John was very nice about it and said “No, if that was your call, it was your call, you had to make it”. Actually we heard that nothing did happen afterwards, so that was fine.

So with the last of the money we had on the budget, John said —. We took some advice, “If we go back in July and August” I think it was in the dry season, it wasn't meant to be the best time. “But we'll go back then and we'll take two teams. We'll get Martin Saunders and we'll get Hugh Miles”. He was excited because it was his first job for the BBC as a freelance and “You and I'll go, and we'll get two Land Rovers and we'll do it as a two team thing. This is our last chance, we haven't got a lion hunt”.

So we went out and we got to this situation where, because it was dry and the marsh had dried up, all the wildebeest and zebra were tending to go and drink and feed in this lush grass in the last bit of damp that was there, leading into the lake in the middle of the crater. And so there was a big concentration of game and one particular pride had caught on to this. So we started filming this. I think me and Martin [Saunders] got on to it first - I was working with Martin - and found that every afternoon it was happening like clockwork. This group of lionesses was doing all the classic things of fanning out and so forth.

We got so confident in the end that I said to Martin “This is going so well that there must be different shots we can get”. He said “Well, you know the shot I would love and that is the lioness coming straight to camera”. I said “Well, we'll have to position the Land Rover between her hunting and the prey won't we?” He said “Do you think we dare do that?” and I said “Well, we've got normal hunts and the others have joined in and they've got some from different angles, and we've got it normally, so why don't we try and get that shot. I don't think it'll upset the hunt”.

So anyway, the next time we saw it, we did, we drove purposely between the lioness creeping through the grass and the prey, a wildebeest, and obviously I had to position Martin facing out the door that way. He was focusing up on this lioness and she was doing this shoulders up thing through the grass. He was saying "Bloody hell. Mike. Bloody Hell." He was getting so excited he could hardly hold the camera still, it was on the door mount. "Bloody hell, Christ, I'm going to run out of focus". These two eyes were so big in frame, he had the big lens on. Then she was using the Land Rover as a hide and coming right up and then obviously she burst out. We missed the kill but we'd got this fantastic shot and we did it a couple more times with different lenses and so on. It was fantastic.

But the other thing was that we went back in the evening and we all exchanged notes as to what we'd filmed, and we could build up almost like a military map of what had got on and what shots each team had got. What Hugh [Miles] had got and what Martin had managed to film. We then said "Right, tomorrow you go for the big close-up of the chief lioness breaking off and going round the back. We'll get wider angle shots from high up on that hill, and try and get a more planned view of that phalanx of lionesses just settling down in the grass, and that'll cut in with that and that". It was almost we could plan it —.

For about three or four days we went out and got specific shots, and I think that's why that sequence is so good. Obviously, we got a good zebra kill and we got a good wildebeest kill, but I think that what you're talking about is all that classic build-up. To be honest, I don't think, I know it's always dangerous to say it's a first time, but I don't think it'd been filmed in that detail before.

*Int: Or since.*

MS: Or possibly since.

*Int: For Lion Battlefield (27), I saw every lion kill I think of all the projects and, like you said, the analytical detail that went into that programme and I was taking the shots from that.*

MS: It was fascinating.

*Int: I remember Martin Saunders rang me up and said "Were those my shots from Life on Earth (22) that I shot 17, 20 years ago?" and I said "Yes". I still think that that was one of the best lion hunt sequences.*

MS: I think the amazing thing about Life on Earth (22), and I'm sure other people have said this before and it's since continued with all Attenborough series, is that everybody was being asked to do something different, to do something that hadn't been done before. Either in the way of behaviour or in the way of how you filmed it, and a lot of things sort of fell into our laps. One of the technical things, that isn't often probably thought about, is that a lot of the long lenses being used at that time were these great big long kinoptik things, that flapped around in the wind. Perfectly okay lenses but you had to expose, in low light you'd be F5.6 for a week to get an image. The thing that changed all that was the Canon 300 lens with this new fluorite glass that let in more light. I think the first ones, F3.2 or something like that, unheard of for a long lens, and even with the two times adaptor on to make it into a 600, it didn't make it much slower.

So here you had a compact lens and they were designed, as you know for 35mm cameras. So you were getting even more magnification out of them for 60mm. But they had a lot of trouble to begin with, with



internal reflections and all that was sort of ironed out. All of the Life on Earth (22) cameraman had these lenses, which were real state of the art. That and the colour negative film of different speeds was a revelation and it changed a lot of the way that that animal behaviour was able to be filmed. The early morning stuff and the later stuff at dusk and lower light in forests, things like that.

*Int: I presume that the cameras would have been ArriBLs [Arriflex BL]?*

MS: ArriBLs, yes. Quite noisy, even STs, which are noisier still. Most of it was shot on ArriBLs, which are quite heavy, heavy old cameras to lug around, but good, solid, never broke down, amazing.

*Int: Before we leave Life on Earth (22) it must have been such a magical time in the Unit, because it was such a ground breaking series, and if you think of the top 10 documentaries of all time, Life on Earth's (22) there. The buzz must have been amazing.*

MS: There was a buzz, but funnily enough like all these things that turn out to be amazingly successful, while working on it nobody had any idea whether it was going to come off. We were all slightly nervous, particularly about the early programmes, which started with bacteria and all the little things. David's [Attenborough] insistence on doing it in a chronological way, telling the story from start to finish of how life on earth might have evolved.

So we didn't know it was going to be the success it was, so it was a big buzz when it was and when everybody was saying this has taken wildlife filming a step further. To be part of that was very exciting, obviously, and I think, yes, the Unit was on a real big role, because so much was expected then of each project. It upped the anti, it upped the standard of what should be expected of behaviour, **blue-chip** behaviour, of ways of using presenters and everything else. So, yes, I think it was exciting.

*Int: But from your career point of view, those series just soak up all of your time. Were you ever given a chance to take responsibility for a film at the same time, outside of that series or did you have to wait till afterwards?*

MS: No, not for Life on Earth (22), there just wasn't time. I mean, I think I had the best job in the world on Life on Earth (22), because I just went round the world basically, filming animal behaviour with some of the then best wildlife cameramen around. At the same time doing a zoology PhD and a botany one as well. It was like for me, I'd missed out on university, but because the series was so far-reaching, it was a total re-education about natural history for me, and it was as good as doing a degree, it really was, I learnt so much.

The other thing I think and again, it happens as you know, with Attenborough series later, is that there were so many misconceptions about behaviour that we were actually able to break. There were things that had been written in textbooks time after time, borrowed from one textbook to the rest. I mean I had, in Hunters and Hunted (25), to do all the ungulate behaviour - impalas and kudu and Thomson's gazelle and things like that. In the original script which was written by John [Sparks] and David [Attenborough], and they won't mind me saying this, I got out with Maurice [Tibbles] to film all this stuff and it was obviously wrong. I mean the animals weren't doing what was in the script. Luckily enough, I remember meeting Cynthia Moss, who was one of the real East African researchers at the time. She said "I've just written a book knocking on the head a lot of the conceptions about the way that these herbivores are behaving. It's not published yet, you can borrow a copy".

I can remember reading it and thinking “Yes, this is all here, this is what we've been seeing” and, of course, we're able to film it properly. There's no point in following that male Grant's gazelle, because he's not going to get a harem that way, it's when he stays still and marks out a territory, and he's collecting females that are passing through. That was exactly the opposite in the script. So if you'd tried to film it the way it was in the script you wouldn't have got the shots. That was exciting and that's happened in, I think, all the Attenborough series I've been involved in since. There's always some really nice moments where you are seeing things in a new light, and you can throw a bit of light on some behaviour that hasn't been seen in that way before, which is really good.

#### **4. Animal Olympians and ethics**

*Int: So what came next after Life on Earth (22)?*

MS: Well, I had a spell with Jeffery Boswall, dear Jeffery Boswall, who's one of the real stalwart producers of the Unit and so well-known in wildlife filmmaking circles to this day. One of the great characters of the wildlife filmmaking world. He was making a film called Animal Olympians (28), which was to coincide with the Olympics. I can't remember which Olympics, or where. But anyway the gist of the film was that he was going to compare each event with the animal world, and see whether fleas leapt higher than high jumpers and cheetahs ran faster than human sprinters, and that sort of thing.

Being Jeffery, and he won't mind me saying this, he sort of loves to write detailed filming script and he's never satisfied with them. So he spends a lot of time writing and rewriting scripts. As a sort of keen, young, assistant producer, who'd just come off Life on Earth (22), I was all for getting out in the field and getting stuck into filming. I kept saying to Jeffery “Couldn't we start filming something, I think we're going to run out of time”. “Well, I just need to refine the script a bit” and I said “Well, I think we all to get started”. “Oh alright then.”

So I had a wonderful time, because Jeffery really spent a lot of time writing and rewriting the script, and I just went out and filmed it, whether it was written or not. So I had a really good experience and enjoyed the sort of discipline of working with Jeffery Boswall, because he's quite a taskmaster in terms of, “Well, you could shoot that on 1½ rolls, couldn't you” and this sort of thing. Then you had to come back with a sequence in what he'd calculated it would take in terms of shots at 15:1 ratio or whatever he'd decided was appropriate.

So it was good, it was a good discipline and I enjoyed it very much. But I learnt some lessons as well, because I think, as an assistant producer, I was being asked to come up with amazing sequences. He always wanted something amazing and that is quite a pressure as an assistant producer working for somebody really experienced, because you want to come back with the results. I'll never forget one of the things, really taught me a lesson, and that was that Jeffery had written in the script that he wanted a sequence with pronghorn antelopes, as actually the fastest things on four legs over a long distance. So the cheetah was the champion sprinter, the pronghorn antelope was the 400 metre and more, at top speed the fastest of the gazelle family.

I did a lot of research, found a really good place in Wyoming where there was a good number on a particular ranch area, a big ranch that was very friendly to pronghorns. So I went out with Martin Saunders to film them, and Jeffery had said he wanted some aerials, as well as ground shots. We found the ground shots extremely difficult because they were those sort of animals that they just had this way of keeping a certain distance.



These rolling plains of Wyoming, you'd see them in a beautiful spot on the skyline. We were in a vehicle with a cameraman and we'd creep over the next hill, and you thought they're going to be there, and you'd just get to within range and then you'd see them just drifting over the horizon. It was always that way and we got a few shots but I said to Martin "We're just not going to get it. We've got to get this helicopter stuff done" and so we had arranged a helicopter and we got in that. Martin rigged up his usual bungee rubber sort of spider's web with the camera tied in the middle, which worked perfectly well with the door taken off the helicopter.

We got in this thing and we got alongside a group and to be honest they were frightened by the helicopter and started running. Martin started to get some shots and he was looking through the viewfinder and getting very excited at what he was getting, and kept saying "Mike, tell him to go lower". We were going lower and lower, and I then started seeing over Martin's shoulders there was some tongues hanging out and the animals were beginning to look stressed. I said to the pilot "I think we're stressing them, we've got to pull away" and Martin was saying "No, I'm just getting some brilliant stuff" and he was on slow motion and so forth. And I said "No, we'll pull away" and at that moment this group that was running, as we pulled away, they got to a fence of I suppose the edge of that particular ranch. They started to jump over it and I said "Martin, we don't need that", so he stopped filming.

There were some stragglers at the end, who were obviously quite tired, and one of them hit the fence, and I saw just this animal going head over heels and dust coming up and so on. I felt sick inside, because I knew it was us that had caused that. We circled high up and this animal got up and trotted away in the end. Martin was all for doing some more and I said "No, enough, I don't want to do that again and I don't ever want to film from a helicopter again". It was my first real lesson in ethics, I think. It's when I decided that the end product, the end shots aren't worth it, if it causes something that is so distressing that you wouldn't want to tell the audience how you did it.

It was always, ever since, has been my rule and it's what I've always said to people working for me. "The rule is if you don't want to tell people, if you don't want to stand up in a lecture afterwards at the Women's Institute and tell people how you got that shot, because you're ashamed of how you got it, then you shouldn't do it. It doesn't matter if you can't get the shot, just do without it, but don't go over that line". That was a real lesson for me. And I was delighted —.

I've seen helicopter shots and been sickened with them and I hate seeing that shot in *Animal Olympians* (28). But I've seen shots that make me even sicker than the ones we did. There was a whole French film called —.

*Int: Savage (29).*

MS: *Savage (29)*, and it was loads of helicopter stuff, all in slow motion of frightened hippos and frightened elephants, with this French narration with this flowery voice, saying that this was something out of time immemorial. These animals had been splashing into the water absolutely frightened stiff, elephants and things.

But then with *Planet Earth (30)*, this heligimbles thing, suddenly there, on *Planet Earth (30)*, were aerials of animals taken so high that you could get the helicopter high enough to film all that stuff without affecting the animals. That's, I think, a really big step, because it's a wonderful view of things that are going on. I mean, the hunting dog sequence in *Planet Earth (30)*, out of this world, and the wolf sequence as well. Then the pattern developing of how they do it and so on. But being able to film from high enough to just let them get on with it, superb, but it's only fairly recently. It's taken over 20 years or more than 20 years to catch up the



technology, to satisfy me anyway for that particular thing.

*Int: Actually, Animal Olympians (28), I remember Jeffery [Boswall] telling me that it was seen in more countries than any other wildlife film. I think it was the best seller for BBC Worldwide at that point.*

MS: It is. It's up there in the top few, yes.

### **5. Working on Discovery of Animal Behaviour and Kingdom of the Ice Bear**

*Int: But what happened after that? Did you stay with Jeffery [Boswall] for the next ones?*

MS: No, no. No because John Sparks had this series, The Discovery of Animal Behaviour (5), he'd got some money for it. That was to be a series of six films looking at the characters - the scientists, the naturalists - who had made significant observations and discoveries from historical time up to the present, about how we observe animals and how we've learnt about what they do and why they do it. He asked me if I'd like to be a producer on that and I jumped at it because suddenly here was a programme that contained wildlife, contained actors and acting, directing actors and acting, which I hadn't done since those days on the amateur dramatics stage. And was a really good budget, high profile thing with good cameramen. It was using a lot of lighting set-ups, using dollies, using tracks, all those sort of exciting things, back to those London studio days. But also good behaviour, good wildlife, a mixture of the two, and really good stories. So, yes, it was one of lots of good things I've worked on, but it was the most enjoyable, it was fascinating.

*Int: It was made for you really, wasn't it, after hearing your background?*

MS: It was brilliant, absolutely brilliant and some of the things were really complicated. Things like the story of clever Hans, the horse that could count [A Question of Learning] (31), very complicated. We had to train a horse to do this counting with its hoof, this is the guy Von Osten from Germany. If it was a German scene we did it all in German, so we had to get lookalike actors for him, for Pavlov [Ivan Pavlov], whatever. Russian speaking, German speaking, French or whatever, and lookalikes and who could handle being with animals as well. In the case of the Von Osten, we had this scene with all these professors trying to work out whether this horse really could count or whether it couldn't.

Re-enacting all of that was a major drama scene of organising and shots and getting it all to cut together, and yet it was all based round an animal which you weren't quite sure what it was going to do. So that was fascinating.

In smaller things we had people's diaries, we had their original diaries, like I remember doing a thing about John Watson in one of the programmes called A Question of Learning (31). It was about how animals learn and whether their learning is reinforced by rewards or negative experiences or whatever. It was about nature and nurture really, about how much they learn and how much is in their genes. John Watson did a study of sooty terns on the Dry Tortugas and this was about how they found their nests in this great area of nests. He went there and we had all his diaries and papers. But it was about —. They just make a little scrape for the egg and he would then very scientifically measured out, "I moved the egg six inches from the nest scrape and then I retired and then I observed that the parent came back and actually settled on the nest scrape, even though there wasn't an egg there, and even pulled an egg into the nest scrape that wasn't there, went



through all those actions. It was only after doing this for several minutes that it noticed that the real egg was six inches away, and then either made a new scrape there or normally just pulled the egg back into its own scrape". So he proved that it was the position of the scrape and not the physical thing of her having laid an egg there that was important, and he did loads of experiments like that. We took an actor out there, dressed him in the right clothes and everything and just re-enacted. I had the diary and said, right, okay the first step-up is where he says —. Find an egg, get a ruler, and talked the actor through it and then he did it, and the bird did it. To see this thing coming to life in front of the camera as described by the scientist, the biologist in the field was great. There were lots of instants like that, so it was a fascinating series to work on.

*Int: So were you producing in those days?*

MS: Yes, I was made a producer for that and that was my first real job as a producer and it was wonderful. I owe John Sparks a lot, because he trusted me, took me on to do that, and gave me a producer role and I ran with it and luckily it worked out all right.

*Int: So at that time did you have to board for a producer job though or was it just you got the job on the series, therefore automatically became a producer?*

MS: That John just said "I think Mike's got all the bits of experience I want for this, I want him". I did have to go for an official producer board because I remember after that I did, to consolidate it, or whatever the BBC term is. I did an awful board, terrible board. I remember when Chris Parsons rang me up and said "Mike, what were you doing, that was awful. It was a terrible board, what were you thinking of?" I said "Chris, I just wasn't on form" and there was a head of Bristol, I can't remember his name, who spent the whole time looking out the window. I thought "God, I'm being really boring and it affected me". Anyway, "Well, we've given you a producer job because you've already proved you can do it, but" he said "don't ever do as bad a board as that again". So anyway I got my producer job.

*Int: So that was another, what, another two or three years then, on Discovery of Animal Behaviour (5)?*

MS: It was, yes, another three years I think, because I did three of those.

*Int: So were you working up things like Kingdom of the Ice Bear (32) at the same time then?*

MS: I was working up —. Well, The Natural World (1) had started then, so I was working up to the things for that, because I thought that would be the next stage, and Wildlife on Ones (33). I'd already actually done a couple of those. Maybe I did one at the same time as Discovery of Animal Behaviour (5). I think I did Shipwrecked (34) at the same time as Discovery of Animal Behaviour (5), alongside that, with Rodger Jackman. We did a film about life on the wreck of the Egan Lane, down in Whitesands Bay. Instead of clear water —. Most underwater films in those days had been done in the Tropics so we said, just to be cussed again, "Right we'll do one in turbid water about British things". So we had this turbid water that you couldn't really see much that was going on, but it went quite well, I think. I started one called Mr Beasley's Secret Garden (35), which was a wildlife view of a garden and all the things that were going on, with people in the background. It was a sort of pre-John Downer view of the world.

*Int: I remember it. It's been repeated a couple of times, the idea behind it.*

MS: Yes, that was good fun. Worked with Alistair McEwan for the first time, when were both very green actually. And then —.

*Int: He would have been working at London Scientific then, would he?*

MS: That's right, yes. Then I met up with Hugh Miles and he said he'd got this idea for two films in the Arctic called Arctic Summer, and it was going to be based in Greenland, because he'd done a Tony Soper thing there. A short thing, in Greenland, and he'd fell in love with it. He said "Would you be interested because I'm not going to be allowed to just do this on my own." He was a cameraman or getting renowned as a wildlife cameraman. I said "God, the Arctic is one of those places I've dreamed of going to but maybe it should be a wider thing than just Greenland". So we sat down and worked out this three part series that could be done, covering marine Arctic life and land Arctic life, and then people and science and the future of the Arctic. He thought that was really important.

That was sort of put up to John Sparks who'd then taken over as head of the Unit and I, at the same time, got a call from London, from Drama Department in London, said they'd watched all The Discovery of Animal Behaviour (5). They had a vacancy as a drama director to do the next series of Bergerac (36), and would I like to go and, not direct them all, but there would be two directors, would you like to be one of the directors on Bergerac (36), which at the time was a really popular drama series shot in Jersey, if you remember? I had this terrible dilemma. It's another of these turning points. It was like the three month, three years thing earlier. Do I want to go down that line? Do I want to become a drama director? Do I want to end up in feature films or is that what I really want to do?

I thought about it for a bit. I said "I've got to think". At the same time John Sparks said Kingdom of the Ice Bear (32) could go ahead. Hugh said "Are you on this or not", and I thought about it for a bit and said "Yes, it's got to be the Arctic, I can't throw that opportunity up". Again, it's one of the best decisions I ever made, because that was a defining series as far as I was concerned. It was one of the best things I ever did. To work, a, with Hugh Miles, who everybody said was going to be incredibly difficult to work with because he had very high standards and so forth. But he was one of the best wildlife cameramen in the world at that time, who I'd worked with before and got on well with and really admired. It was a place I wanted to go to and we knew it would be tough, but I was just ready for something really tough.

*Int: And it paid dividends. I remember, I'd just joined the Unit I think when that was going out and that was one of the series that counted. I know that everybody was just talking about that one.*

MS: Yes, it was amazingly successful.

*Int: The reaction —. In fact I can remember going to a talk and Hugh showed the emergence of the cubs from the incubation hole, this was before the programme went out, and he got a standing ovation. Just showed the rushes of that and, actually maybe worthwhile just discussing that, because it's just a well-known piece of footage but people don't know about the sound. [Laughs]*

MS: [Laughs] I'm always asked that one.



*Int: Oh do you?*

Ms: Yes, this is the mother bear bringing the cub out for the first time. I'd just like to put one thing straight is, that I think Hugh filmed it really well, and I say we because it was an expedition thing and the whole series was very much done as a two-parter. I actually did all the sound recording, although even in those days we weren't really meant to, it was still very much a union thing. But anyway that's besides the point.

We never said that was the first time it had been filmed. I think it was the best it had been filmed, up to date, but it wasn't the first, because we'd seen a Russian film, an old 35mm film, filmed on Wrangel Island by a Russian scientist. Very wobbly but fantastic images. We asked if we could go to Wrangel Island and were told "Niet", not a chance, so that was out.

We then saw a Norwegian film, filmed by a Swedish cameraman whose name escapes me unfortunately. A really nice guy who went with a scientific expedition to Svalbard, and went to a particular island where there's a lot of bears, dig their dens in close proximity. They'd filmed a sort of half-reasonable sequence of it but it was mainly about the scientists and their going in and out.

So we weren't the first and when Planet Earth (30) came up with all this publicity about being the first time ever filmed, it had been filmed several times. But it was a great thing to do and it was obviously an essential sequence for us, because it was going to be the climax of the polar bear film, the first film. We went to Svalbard in February, the sun came up for the first time as we were unloading our gear, it was incredibly cold. We had already met Berger Ahmanson and Rasmus Hansen, two Norwegians who were going to come with us and knew the area. One of them was a polar bear scientist.

Anyway, to cut a long story short we travelled around Svalbard, we had all sorts of adventures with bad ice and one thing and another. We had these skidoos and sleds loaded up with all our stuff. We camped out on the sea ice. I've never been so cold in my life, it was awful, but it was beautiful at the same time, to be out in that pristine wilderness. We had several bits of bad luck. We set up on one den that we'd noticed and it must have been a female who went through a false pregnancy, and she came out and she hadn't got any cubs. Rasmus went to look in the den and there were no cubs and so on.

But right at the end of an eight week trip and we'd been totally out of touch with everybody really, we found this den and set up. We had to be down on the sea ice and we made one of our igloo hides, a sort of half an igloo, not very well, but it acted as a hide. This female, one day, came out for a bit and slid down and Hugh got some shots. Obviously, at night we went back to this dreadful little dripping hut that we were staying in. I think it was the second morning, we went back and we'd got these polar bear scarers. We'd borrowed them from the Norwegian army. You lit the top of them —.

*Int: Flare?*

MS: No they were anti-personnel bangers, really loud and they were for their exercises. We had these and we went into the hide, crept in there, and the female had been out during the night and she'd come into the back of our half igloo. She'd eaten some of these bangers. She'd eaten a whole lot of other stuff that we'd left lying around. Then instead of going back out the door she'd just walked through the other wall and all the blocks had fallen down. [Laughs]. We had set to, but we wondered what her stomach must be like with all the gunpowder inside. But anyway, she didn't seem to suffer.

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



Anyway, eventually, after a very long, cold wait in which one day Hugh [Miles] got really bad hypothermia, even though he was sitting with a sleeping bag on and things. It was minus 20, 25 every day, really cold. We got those wonderful shots of the cubs coming out and there were three cubs and it was all very exciting. We knew we'd got a very special sequence and it was an amazingly exciting time, and it was just before we really were running out of food and fuel and everything. We would have had to give up, so it was one of those last minute bits of luck. But now you want to know how we did the sound. [Laughs].

*Int: We can deal with that in a moment.*

*Int: So Hugh was waiting for that emergence for how long? You would have been there for 10 days or what?*

MS: I think it all happened in about five days. They usually hang around longer round the den, but because it was right on the edge of the sea ice and there were lots of big males around, plodding around, and the cubs are in great danger from those big males. I think she left the area quicker and also it was quite a late den by then, because we'd almost given up hope. It was a late emergence and she was really thin. She'd been in there for three or four months and she was really thin and hungry. So she went off across the sea ice much earlier than we thought.

*Int: For a lot of people they don't realise, well there wasn't then, the **telephoto** equivalent for sound, the lens for the sound. So you aren't going to be able to get close enough to a starving mother polar bear to get some of the sound to go with it.*

MS: No. I mean we knew that we had to get footprints and things. We did what we could. I mean I did the sound recording. We had a gun mic and we had a nagra and we did all the atmospheres, and we did what we could. But as you rightly say, what you can see at the end of a 600 or 800 lens you can't get close to for that, so we had to do that in the dubbing theatre. When people ask me at lectures how did you get the sound I say "Well, we got the basic sound in the field but then we had to enhance it in the dubbing theatre". Enhancing meant getting a bag of custard powder, getting some money bags from the bank and filling them with custard powder, for footprints, [demonstrates action and makes sound], with the custard powder. It made a perfect, crisp, snow walking sound and obviously littler ones for the cubs. But the cubs, of course, are coming out of the den and calling their mother and I have to admit that that was me. If you watch that sequence, you'll see a little cub going out and going "raah, raah" [makes sound of polar bear cub calling].

*Int: I've seen that in so many films.*

MS: And that is me, I'm sorry, the secret's out.

*Int: No it's great. Excellent.*



## **6. Bats Need Friends and Unearthing the Mole**

*Int: So what happened after that, because that was a fantastic success, that series, and in a way you cemented your place as one of the main producers in the Unit at that point. So what was the next thing you were wanting to go for, because you mentioned Wildlife on One (33) earlier on and I can remember Unearthing the Mole (37).*

MS: It was mainly Natural Worlds (1). I did a Wildlife on One (33) and kept choosing really difficult subjects like moles and bats. Bats that fly in the dark and moles that live underground. I don't know why, it was stupid really. So, did a film with Bob Stebbings, a scientist, called Bats Need Friends (38). The cameraman was a guy called Peter Smithson, a lovely guy who lives up in Yorkshire, and who was just brilliant at building enormous sets for things like bats. Obviously you have to have a licence and all that sort of thing. But he built whole houses, replicated bat roosts and things, in areas that they were totally able to free fly and could even catch insects and things but were netted in. So they got used to you being there and you could actually begin to get some really good behaviour sequences. Pipistrelles, long-eared bats and Daubentons we did, in that way.

He built a tunnel that runs under Fountains Abbey and we got some shots of these Daubentons that do come out at Fountains Abbey and fly along this stone tunnel that has a stream running through it. But he rebuilt that stream up in his smallholding in Yorkshire and we had these tame Daubenton bats, and they just loved flying up and down this thing. So you could do the wide angles at Fountains Abbey and then get really good close-ups and things of the bats.

That was a really interesting film because Bob Stebbings was running right through it and people's fears about bats. We included people from the public and so forth, so it was a people-animal story. So I've always been interested in the relationship between people and particularly misconceptions people have about bats being scary and so forth, and trying to put that right. And later on I did a film about wolves [The Wildlife Specials: Wolf] (39), trying to do the same thing, stamp out those misconceptions. So it's something I've always been interested in.

*Int: Well, I can't remember who told me, they said "I think Mike Salisbury's gone too far this time. He's making a film about moles" and I thought to myself, "Yes, the filmic grammar of an animal, usually with your wide shots, and it's underground". I thought "How are you going to bring this off?" I remember watching it and thinking "That was a complete revelation to me" and at the end of the film I thought "That was amazing". But I don't know how you sold it.*

MS: That was Wildlife on One (33) luckily, so it was only, what, 25 minutes or something. It would be difficult to make anything longer. But again it was with Peter Smithson and obviously we did a lot about mole habitat and what you see from the surface. But you had to then relate that to what was going on underground, and the only way you could solve that really, was having captive moles in sets that they got used to being in and so forth.

Nobody was really studying moles so people were telling us that it wasn't possible. Peter Smithson never took no for an answer and said "No, I think it is possible as long as they're treated right and as long as they're fed on worms which is what they want to eat, and not try to feed them on artificial stuff". So a lot of keeping them was actually going out collecting worms, which I helped him a lot with. Tedious, going out at night, spraying people's lawns and then going around with a bucket collecting earthworms.



He had these moles in big 45 gallon drums of earth and they would come up to the surface when he came in the room, and they became totally habituated and friendly. It meant that we could, like if you wanted a shot of them coming towards you in a tunnel or going away, Peter Smithson invented this amazing tunnel that you had a static camera. You had a tunnel that was made out of rubber tubing with glue on the inside and that had earth stuck on it so you couldn't see the join. But actually it was cut in two, but it pulled on a pulley system away from the camera, so it could come towards the camera. But then, as it came to the camera, it went beside it like that and, with the right focal length lens, you couldn't see the split at the top or the bottom, it was just right.

So our friendly moles, who enjoyed being handled and they were enjoying themselves, he put them in the tunnel and they would either run towards the camera or run back. Me and Peter working together, one would wind the handle to make the tunnel come towards the camera or go away from it. Obviously if the mole was running away from the camera you had to bring it this way, if it was coming towards the camera you had to wind it the other way. So it basically looked like you were following the mole, either up the tunnel or down the tunnel and it worked brilliantly.

Obviously you could let it then find worms that were dangling through holes in the roof and you could get how it hunted for worms. We had half a bicycle wheel as well, which had a tunnel inside out, as it were, built on the rim which was like a circular tunnel, cup shaped, that the mole could run along. Again a static camera with the mole running along. You just turned the bicycle wheel at the right speed. The mole's running, but the camera's staying in the same place and the background is moving.

*Int: Absolutely wonderful stuff.*

MS: To get shots like that, that was just general movement shots and then, in carefully built sets with little holes for cameras to see through, we got nesting behaviour and male territorial behaviour and all that sort of underground stuff. But it was a film done totally in sets really, the mole stuff, except for some external stuff with them dispersing and swimming and things that they do.

*Int: Well, I used the same kit. We actually took it to America to film star-nosed moles about 15 years later.*

MS: Just briefly mentioning Through Animal Eyes (40) was another thing I was really quite proud of at the time, because it was an attempt, a very early attempt I might say, at trying to see the world through different types of animal's vision. It's something that had always fascinated me. Watching swifts catch insects, how do they see that quickly, and it turns out they have flicker vision that is going at miles higher rate than ourselves, so they can see tiny moving things much quicker and that sort of thing. How do frogs see the world? How do crustaceans with their loads of square facets and how do insects, dragonflies see the world, and that sort of thing.

That was really good fun doing that. I did it with a scientist called John Lithgow at Bristol University, who was the real expert on animal vision at the time. It went down very well because it was something a bit different. It was all shot on video, as well and all edited on video, editing on VHS, would you believe it. So if you changed your mind on something more than about three times you couldn't see it in the end, you had to retransfer it all. A dreadful system compared to today. But it was interesting, because a lot of the effects were video effects. There was a BBC engineer called Paul Townsend, a really clever guy, who helped get some of the effects and tried to turn what the scientists know into visual ideas and so forth. So it was ultraviolet vision



and so forth.

*Int: That was the first time I'd seen those things and it was a long way before Supersense (41). But I remember you did ultraviolet of honey bees and you had the hexagon.*

MS: Yes, it was. John Downer did absolute marvels on building on that idea later and did smell and sight and everything else. So he took it further than I would have ever dreamed of, but it was a nice thing. It won the British Advancement for Science, Best Science Programme of the Year, for communicating science which I thought was really nice. That was good for the Unit, that it was considered scientific enough to be considered for that sort of thing. So, yes, I was pleased with that.

## **7. Unions and the BBC**

*Int: Before we go on to more of the David Attenborough type series. You touched on something just a moment ago which I thought was really interesting about the unions and what it was like to work in the Unit then, and what you could and couldn't do. Because actually things have changed drastically, haven't they, over the years, and just picking up on something that Michael Saunders had said. That he had to make a stand in order to not have an assistant on Life on Earth (22).*

MS: Yes. He was one of the pioneers of breaking the rules for wildlife filmmaking and he was unpopular actually with the Bristol Film Unit. Some of the old stalwart cameramen didn't like it, they thought it would be the beginning of the end. But it isn't, of course, because you still need an assistant for complicated drama shoots or lighting shoots or whatever. So it wasn't as bad as they thought.

But certainly, when I first joined the Unit, you had to be incredibly careful what you did and what you didn't do. We had to be a little bit, well, break the rules really, with people like Martin Saunders and Hugh Maynard, because we were sending them out without assistants, on their own. Sometimes it was done without making a big fuss about it, because there were questions being asked. Certainly recording Kingdom of the Ice Bear (32) there was no way we could have afforded to have a sound recordist on those expeditions. I mean there was no way we could have done it, so we had to do it ourselves.

Hugh Miles had got sanction for doing it, because he was a cameraman/sound recordist and he'd been sanctioned by the unions that that was okay. So they had not to know that I was doing it, because I was on the production side. So when I was identifying roles I had to either pretend I was Hugh Miles or that I was a local Canadian sound recordist. So I often identified as some fictitious Canadian sound recordist. I know that sort of sounds bad, but some of the rules were stupid. But yet on the drama shoot, like Discovery of Animal Behaviour (5), because that was a drama. We had lighting, we had TVOs, we had all the drama crews and timing was of the essence, and you couldn't go over time or you'd go into overtime, and all these things. It was very little give or take. However friendly you were with the crew and things it was, "Yes, sorry, it's time now". "Do you want the overtime or not" and it was all done by the watch. So you really had to be —.

I know that a lot of it was to protect people's jobs and things, and that was very much appreciated, but it was too rigid for natural history filming. Which is why all these independent cameramen were beginning to do so well and why BBC cameramen, to a certain extent, were beginning to get left behind on documentaries and wildlife stuff and things. So it was good that they eventually saw the sense and relaxed.

## **8. Working on his first David Attenborough series**

*Int: Well, going back then to your career after Animal Eyes (40) and that and getting towards the David [Attenborough] series. The first one would have been with the Vanished Lives (42)?*

MS: Yes. It's the only one I've ever been told to do.

*Int: How did it come about?*

MS: I'd got quite used to being a producer then, and choosing my own things and going off and doing them, and having a great time. Then suddenly John Sparks, head of the Unit then, said "Mike, want you to come and see me". I went to see him and he said "I know you won't like this, but I'm asking you to do something. David Attenborough wants to do a series about fossils and I'd like you to series produce it". I said "John, I'm not a series producer and I don't like fossils". He said "Yes, I thought that's what your reaction would be". So I said "John, you know me, I like animals, I like moving things, I'm really getting to grips with really understanding all the best ways to film animal behaviour and **blue-chip** natural history. I don't want to do a thing about fossils". He said "Look Mike, you've had a bloody good innings, you've been doing everything you want to do. I'm asking you now, I need you to do this and I'd like you to really consider it seriously. I'd like you to meet David Attenborough and let him tell you what the series is about".

Well, that's fatal, isn't it? You know how persuasive David is and you know how keen he is on fossils. Well, he could get anybody enthused about bits of stones. After a couple of hours with David and him showing me all his collection and what they meant, and bits of inflected amber and one thing and another, and how he could make it really exciting. Meeting all these people around the world who are digging up dinosaurs and things, really good. I said "Yes, all right, I'm sold on it".

The other producer was Neil Nightingale, who was an assistant producer actually, and then was made producer for that. So the pair of us set about doing this four part series with David on fossils, and how you could tell from them about past lives, and about whole behaviours, about whole habitats sometimes, and so on. The techniques for getting them out of the ground and cleaning them up and so forth.

We decided very early on that it would be a good idea to use David in a slightly different way. Not the traditional way, but to have him talking to the palaeontologist, joining in digs, to be very active, participatory and not just a presenter. So that, I think, was a good decision in the end because it did make it a bit different and it livened the thing up, because it wasn't an easy series to make. But, my God, some of those fossils in Germany and America and places we saw them were amazing and I thoroughly enjoyed it.

Again, one of these subjects that you wouldn't think would go down well with the public but really did, and got a terrific enthusiastic response from the public when they did go out. I mean a lot of that was to do, obviously, with David's charisma and so forth, but they just liked the subject matter.

Heard of one little boy, just a very quick story - the parents rang in and said our little boy, we thought he was bored, went out halfway through the programme. We went out afterwards and he was on the rockery breaking up the rockery with his dad's hammer. We said "You've got one enthusiast at least."

*Int: Great.*



*Int: Going back to Vanished Lives (42) with David, that is quite a responsibility I'd imagine, to be series producer of a David Attenborough series. Generally a very good experience?*

MS: Yes, it was a good experience, because in a way it didn't seem that onerous, this business of being a series producer. I mean you have to make decisions when you're a producer, okay, you're just making slightly bigger ones. But the fact is that David makes it so easy to work with. It doesn't seem like a big deal, he never makes anything seem like the end of the world if it doesn't work. He has that sort of slightly light-hearted way of looking at things. He does keep in mind, I think, that thing, well, it is only television and if it hasn't gone right, let's have a laugh and try again tomorrow sort of thing. He doesn't let it get him down, the business of making programmes does he? And that's because it comes with a terrific self-confidence. So working with him I think you get into this similar frame of mind - this isn't a great big deal. Everybody's going to work really hard and we want the highest standards we can get, but we'll just do our best and try and make the right decisions, and hope that it turns out okay, and it generally does.

*Int: That is a unique gift, I think, that being able to keep perspective when all of these things are happening. Well, actually we'll probably pick up on that a bit later on when we're talking about producing. I think that's really important.*

## **9. Series Editor for The Natural World**

*Int: So after the fossil series (42) there was an opening, The Natural World (1) series needed a head. Was that something you were forced into, like the last one?*

MS: My arm was twisted a bit, yes. Andrew Neil was running the Natural World (1) series at the time, then he went on to be head of the Unit and he said, "Mike, I think everybody has to do a spell at this sort of thing, whether you want or not and now is a good a time as any" and "do think about it" and so forth. So, yes, I thought about and I thought "Well okay, maybe it's just the time in my career where it would be good to see a lot of other people's work, to see if I can be encouraging to other people. See if there are new people coming along that need a bit of encouragement".

Also, I wasn't particularly happy with the way the Natural World (1) was either, as a long running series at the time. I thought it could do better and because I was one of the producers that would be going back to the Natural World (1), I thought "Well okay, if I'm not happy with it and I'm not going back to it, why don't have a little spell at running it". So I applied for the job and much to my surprise got it really, so there we go, and did that for three years.

*Int: Were there any particular highlights?*

MS: I think the highlights for me were those moments where I took a bit of a risk. People like Mark Linfield going off to the Congo and making a film about lowland gorillas (43) and everybody said it was impossible. You say "No, go on, let's give it a try" and things like that. It wasn't necessarily desperately popular, but I really wanted the Natural World (1) to do two things more than it had been doing: one was to tackle conservation issues, which I didn't think it had been doing seriously enough, and the other was to have some films that included people and wildlife. Because there were beginning to be sort criticisms that a lot of our programming at the Natural History Unit just showed animals in pristine wilderness and so forth, and never

showed how they related to the people.

I'd already done things like Mr Beasley's Secret Garden (35) and a few films like that, the bat film, where I'd sort of brought people into it. It was a thing I was interested in, so I thought "Well, if I'm interested in it" and you were given a very free hand as editor of the Natural World (1). I chose the programmes and commissioned them and nobody really asked me what I was doing at all. I had a wonderful freedom. I had a budget from the BBC and then I just had to persuade WNET in New York to take a certain number of the films, and I had a good relationship with them. They'd known me well from being a producer and so forth.

So it was good. It was blooming hard work I have to say, to try to keep on top. I think I counted once. Towards the end of the second year I had about 32 programmes on the go, where you were trying to watch people's rushes, people out in the field, making films, wanting feedback - how was it going? what was it looking like? So you'd have to watch a lot of rushes. I used to try and get in the viewing theatre and watch people's rushes as they came in, and then get in touch with people and say whether I thought it was going in the right direction or not.

*Int: Because that's actually quite a risk, if you think is not only your cussedness, as you'd call it, pushing into areas which were quite difficult topics to cover. But also with people who were fairly new to the game, who had all the passion and enthusiasm but needed direction, and so you were the person to do that.*

MS: Yes. I enjoyed viewings and things because I think I'd had so many bad experiences with viewings I was determined to try and see if there was a way of helping people make better films in the cutting room, without making the business of turning up for a viewing, or the boss is turning up for a viewing, being the worse thing in the world. That sometimes actually you saw something that you thought "Oh my God, this really needs a lot of work" but there's no point in ruining people's confidence at that stage.

You've got to be a way of actually picking out the good bits first and then saying "There's a fair way to go here, fellas, because I don't really understand the story after the first 10 minutes. Can we sit down and work this out together and so forth and so on". And always used to say "Look, I'm going to have an opinion, because that's what I'm here for, that's what I'm paid for, but I'm not a God. It's not the be all and end all. I'm going to have a view and I'm going to give it to you and I'm going to say give this a try, why don't you try swapping those sequences over, why don't you try a totally different storyline through there and why don't you drop that altogether, whatever. Give it a try. If you give it a try and then you say "Oh God, I don't know what Mike was talking about", I don't mind, as long as you give it a try. But you don't have to do what I say, just use it as a way of thinking about it a bit more because I can tell you that I think the audience will be muddled at that point, I don't think they'll understand what you're trying to say".

That was my view on viewings. I felt very strongly about that because I'd had some horrid experiences with viewings where you were made to feel absolutely awful, as if you'd wasted your time and that this film was going to be a total disaster. Actually they never turn out to be a total disaster, there's always ways you can improve them and get them better. So that was one thing. I enjoyed that, I actually enjoyed viewings.

*Int: Well, I know lots of people who said that their career and changing moments were in those viewings with you, when you gave them that extra bit of encouragement which just saw them over a difficult patch.*

MS: I'm glad about that.

*Int: So it worked. Why I mention that is the fact that with your pedigree up until that point and the fact that you were then self-commissioning, you weren't actually out making the films yourself. The logical progression in some respects would be to go on and become head of the Unit.*

MS: I had a little taster of that because as editor of the Natural World (1), when the head is away on leave or something, you have to step into their shoes and take some of that on. I didn't really, don't, want to do this, because so much of it was to do with fending off London. So much was to do with corporate affairs and some of it really boring, to be honest. Having to get all these policy decisions you're meant to get across and then pass onto the staff and things. Really, I saw that it was a very unenviable job, because here you were as an ex-filmmaker and most of your time was spent looking at great big tomes of paper and corporate policy, and things like that. And worrying about not just individual budgets for films, but overall budgets for the Unit, and arguing about this and that, and buildings and all these things that really didn't interest me in the slightest.

No, I could see very clearly that I didn't want to make that next step, thank you very much.

*Int: So that's just one step too far away from the storytelling.*

MS: Editor of Natural World (1) is a great job, but anything higher than that, no thank you.

## **10. The Private Life of Plants**

*Int: So you then made a decision to go back and do the next David [Attenborough] series.*

MS: Yes. At the end of three years I was getting a little bit of stick. The controller changed, I can't remember who came in, the Controller of BBC2, and said we wanted to make it more popular, wanted more pure animal films and so forth and so on. So some of the films about damming the high Loire [La Loire Sauvage] (44) and things like that were not seen to be mainstream enough, and they wanted to go back to pretty well a menu of completely **blue-chip** films. That was the moment when I said "Well, if that's the case, I'm very interested in **blue-chip** films and have always have been. It'll have been my main love but I don't think it's what the Unit should be totally doing". I think this other side of things is very important.

So I said "Right, I've done three years and that's quite long enough".

*Int: It's like a prison sentence.*

MS: Yes, and I'd already got this idea which I'd been beginning to work up with Keith Scholey because he'd done Prisoners of the Sun (45) with a lot of backing from me, which I thought was a terrific series. We'd thought about plants a lot in that, and their role in the ecosystem. Keith and myself had been talking about an idea about ecology, with plants as the basis of life. We wrote up a good treatment actually for a series. But Andrew Neil then saw it and said to us, "Well, I'm sorry but David Attenborough has just said he's interested in doing plants as well, and I can't have two series on plants. So you're going to have to go and talk to David".

We went up and had a meeting with him at his house and we realised that a lot of the things we were on common ground with. It was just that we'd sort of gone wider. We wanted to show the use of plants and we wanted to show a little bit wider ecological look at plants. He wanted it to be a typical Attenborough series about the behaviour of the things and about what their role in nature was, and detailed stuff like that. So we thought, well, we're prepared to drop our bit of the ideas in order to get David Attenborough, which meant we'd get a budget anyway, whereas it was looking a bit unlikely otherwise. So that's how *The Private Life of Plants* (46) came about.

*Int: And once again they said would you series produce.*

MS: Yes, and I very willingly and excitedly said yes, because again it's something I'd been interested in for a long time, through my old mum actually, because she was a great plant person, so it went back. I had an uncle who'd been director of Kew as well, Edward Salisbury, who I'd sort of met up with and been enthused by.

It was really exciting because suddenly we were faced with this subject and everybody was being so negative about it. You'd say we're doing a series of six programmes about plants – “What? Plants? They don't do anything”. “Yes, they do really, they behave in all the same ways as animals but in their own timescale and that's what we've got to come to terms with, that's what it's going to be about”.

So, of course, we started looking into time-lapse – it's obviously going to be the way that we're going to have to tell the story. We realised very early on that time-lapse up to that time had been, some of it had been very good, but very static, very one shot time-lapse. It just really occurred to us that the only way of bringing this to life was to be able to copy in time-lapse how you would film animals. So that, in its simplest, if there's a vine climbing up a tree you want a shot of it from the top of the tree coming up towards the camera. You want a tracking shot of it as it climbs. You want a close-up of its tip going around, you want a wide angle. Then you want to see it suddenly deciding to go along a branch. If that had been a beetle you'd do all those shots to make a sequence.

So it's a very simple idea really, but then the difficult thing was, well, there isn't the gear around to do it because if you were thinking of a tracking shot, tracking along, say, with a bramble growing through a wood. The camera's got to go at the right speed along the track following, say, the tip of it, but over a period of a fortnight. So between each shutter opening it's got to move a thousandth of an inch or something, the same speed as the plant. You've got to know the speed the plant's going to go and you've got to try and organise the camera to go along.

So people like Neil Lucas, Les Bowsher and all sorts of clever people came on board to help, see ways we could tackle all those problems. It all ended up with this little computer box which had control of the cameras, shutter openings, light, flashes if necessary. Then these tracks which were adapted from commercial tracks, making precision engineering stuff, where it had to be very fine movements along the track, to drill little holes in exact places, or something like that. The BBC workshops, with Neil Lucas overseeing it, adapted all these commercial things to work with cameras and all be computer controlled. Also, we knew we had to take some of it out in the field, so it all had to work outdoors as well, off 12 volt batteries and things.

That was one thing and the other thing we knew we'd have to use **jib** shots a lot, and tracking shots through flowers, and lovely **jib** shots around trees and cacti and things like that. So there's got to be a lot of camera



movement to make up for the fact that the plants themselves, by their nature, sort of stay relatively still. Then a lot of high speed, because things like seed pods bursting and things like that. You're going into ultra slow motion as well. So it threw up a lot of really interesting technical problems.

*Int: I think it's still classed as probably the most ground breaking of David's series I think, in terms that it's also a filmmaker's series. So many people have said "What programmes do you think are the best that we've ever produced?" and Plants (46) is always mentioned.*

MS: I read an interview in a newspaper and they said "What's your favourite programme?" or something, and they said "Private Life of Plants (46), because it just opened my eyes to something I hadn't realised before".

*Int: Once again, I love your cussedness, "What's Salisbury doing this time?", "You're never going to make a series there". But it's out of those seemingly terrible technological challenges that new stuff comes forward.*

MS: You heard the story about the financing of it, didn't you?

*Int: No.*

MS: Didn't you? It was quite funny because we desperately needed co-production money and we were having a real job actually getting anybody interested, because of that reaction. I'd been over to Japan trying to get the Japanese interested and they were absolutely po-faced. "No, we'll see what it looks like and then we might." So, in the end, Turner Broadcasting had had a big success with *The Trials of Life* (47) with David. So they were an obvious candidate, but up till then they'd said, "No, we're not interested". Anyway David went over for a breakfast meeting. I think he was doing a speech at Smithsonian or something. We set up this breakfast meeting with him and Ted Turner. Jane Fonda was there, who was married to Ted at the time, and there was this guy, who's name I forget who, was his finance director guy. Anyway, so Ted said to David "Well, David, we've had a great success with *The Trials of Life* (47), what do you want to do next?" and David said "Well, I want to do this six part series about plants actually". "Plants?" The usual reaction. "I don't see how you're going to do that David" and then David did his spiel about them behaving in the same way, and movement and time, going to do all this. Ted was saying "That sounds a bit more interesting". But I think David said this finance director was kicking Ted Turner under the table. "Well how much do you need, David?" and David said "Well, Mike Salisbury tells me we need 4 million dollars" or whatever it was and this guy was kicking him under the table.

Then Jane pipes up, "Oh Ted, I think you've got to do it, I love flowers, I think you've got to do it". "Oh, really dear, okay then". This guy was absolutely blanching apparently and it was as simple as that and it was, "Okay David, you've got your \$4 million, get on with it". So that's why Turner did it.

But after we'd started filming and this finance director left, and two ladies took over who were very sharp cookies. They'd been in Hollywood and so forth, and they rang me up and said "I have to tell you, Mike, we are deeply concerned with this project. Yes, we just can't see that you can make these six films, we think we're wasting our money and the whole place has got deep concerns. Ted won't hear of us dropping it but we really are trying to persuade him to drop this". I said "You can't, we're relying on your money to make this and it's really going well and we're getting some results that you'd be amazed with" and so forth. "Well, we're not sure about this", and I said, "Well, can we show you something". They said "We're coming over to Cannes" or one of these damn things and "Okay, we'll take a day out to come down to Bristol and look at

some stuff”.

And they came down and Tim Shepherd had done quite a lot of the bramble sequence. He'd started on the *Nepenthes*, the pitcher plant leaves turning into these magnificent jugs. Richard Kirby had been out doing a field shot of bluebells growing, tracking round them and doing even a pull focus in time-lapse and things. Some quite really good stuff. We showed them that and they were just flabbergasted. They said “Right, we see what you mean, this is fantastic. Okay, you’ve got your money”.

*Int: Any chance of a bit more?*

MS: Yes. So they went off happy and after that they were so supportive, it was wonderful, it was great. They just had to see something, they couldn’t imagine it, so that was nice.

### **11. Best and worst bits**

*Int: Obviously, again, that was the second series [The Private Life of Plants] (46) in your career following the David Attenborough series. I saw it written down that “Mike Salisbury has been entrusted with the BBC's crown jewels for longer than anybody else”. I think that was a great line.*

MS: I think that was a Harriet Nimmo, Wildscreen thing there. I'm not sure about that.

*Int: I was just wondering, rather than going through all the series, with time and everything, I was just wondering in terms of those moments that you look back on, maybe did a talk or you've got some schoolchildren. What kind of parts of your career do you pick up on? What's your favourite stories or the times where you think, because there's been so many times already, when you've said I've been so proud of that? What has been the proudest moment?*

MS: Well, it's difficult to say, but I think at the end of every Attenborough series that I've been lucky and privileged enough to work on, following that the Life of Birds (48) and Life of Mammals (49) and recently the invertebrate one, Life in the Undergrowth (50). I think it's actually the moment when the whole team has completed the project and that moment when you're actually showing your wares, your three years work as most of them take, to the public. I mean luckily enough I think every time so far, thanks to David's popularity to the greatest extent, and I suppose the fact that you and I and all the producers who've worked on them, have managed to get the footage that just gives it that little extra something over other series that aren't so well funded, or haven't been able to go that far.

I think they've all had a terrific reaction with the public and people are talking about them in the pub and that sort of thing, and saying that they've learnt something. That they'll never look at birds in the same way or they'll never look at plants in the same way, or we thought rodents were boring until we saw a whole programme on them in Life of Mammals (49), just things with big sharp teeth in the front, but actually didn't realise they were so interesting. And particularly with this last one, Life in the Undergrowth (50), that you worked on as well, having people who've hated spiders actually writing in and saying “You've cured my arachnophobia because I can see that they are actually really interesting and that the whole insect world is fascinating”. Those are the proudest moments I think.



Also, those Attenborough series have all been terrific fun and that's partly down to having brilliant teams. I've been very lucky that I've been able to almost handpick teams, sort of insisted on it in a way, trying to not have any egotists working on the team. Nobody that thinks that they're bigger than the end result. So it's always been a terrific experience I think.

*Int: I think, sparing your blushes again, obviously selecting people is one thing.*

MS: It's a big, big part of it.

*Int: But there's a history of teams that haven't gelled in the Unit. But consistently your teams are motivated and, as I said right at the beginning, you are so respected by everybody. I'm just wondering on a day-to-day basis, apart from the selection of people, what do you think is key or is it just something which is second nature to you?*

MS: Well, I've never found it onerous running a team. I've always said to people, new series producers who ask advice about running teams for wildlife series, is that really simply all you are somebody who enables people to do their job. I think it's that keeping everybody together, making sure that people know that it is a team and that you're not actually an individual who is just going to get glory on their own or success on their own. That the whole thing is like a football team or anything else. You can have all the stars you like, but unless everybody's working together you won't get an end result. So, enabling people to do their job.

I've always remembered that the best moments for me, when I learnt the most, was when people gave me responsibility. Said in those early days, "Mike, I'm not available, do you think you could go out and try and film that bit of stuff you've researched?" And you take a deep breath and say "Yes, I'll do my best" and you have a moment of trepidation, but you do it. Maybe you make a few mistakes, but then you listen to somebody telling you what those mistakes might be, and you learn from that and so on. But I've always been really grateful to people who've given me breaks, allowed me to make some decisions.

I think sometimes teams go a little bit wrong and it can be in industry or anything else, if the boss is too dictatorial, wants everything to be down to them, wants every idea to come from them and that sort of thing. So you don't get creativity unless you let people have an atmosphere. They don't want to feel a fool if they say an idea that is foolish. But you want to encourage them to be able to come out with things and so forth.

I think it's also just having fun. I hope that working on the teams I've run has been fun, that it's not all furrow-browed all the time and so forth.

*Int: No, I think everybody would say everybody works very hard, they're all committed. Actually, again, it's the atmosphere to have fun alongside it.*

MS: But also, I think you need as a team leader in anything, you need to have real flappy ears and eyes, that you need to notice when little frissons are beginning to happen. You need to take people aside and just say "I've noticed in the last couple of days you've been looking a bit anxious, is there anything up?" They say, "Well, I'm getting fed up with being told by so and so that I've got to clear my desk" or something, or little things that are getting people down. You say "Okay, well let's get you both together and let's talk about it". If you can nip those things in the bud —.

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*Int: It's the little nudges on the tiller before it goes bad.*

MS: Also, taking the nasty bits away from people who don't need to know about them really, when you get that call that says "Hey, we're going to reduce your budget by 10 percent whether you like it or not". Not to make all the rest of the team worried about it, just go and sort it out and see what you can do, but without appearing that the end of the earth's happened. Anyway, getting a long way off wildlife filmmaking.

*Int: No, it isn't. I think this is all valuable stuff. Actually it does lead us on to the fact that you were talking about the best moments. The worst moments, are they around budgets being cut halfway through?*

MS: Working to a budget is very stressful sometimes, isn't it, or it can get very stressful. Budgets and time constraints, that blooming transmission slot, somebody wants to move it up. That can be very stressful if you let it be. What I've found over the years is that it's very good policy not to get too worked up about that sort of news straightaway because often, a few days later, they've either forgotten all about it or they've changed their minds again. So if you work yourself up into a flather and nearly had a heart attack, actually it was all for nought because they've decided they don't want to put the transmission date of the programme forward by a fortnight after all, it can go back to where it was. So you would have wasted all that anxiety and so I think that's worth remembering.

But I suppose budgets, time limits, all those sorts of things can get a bit stressful at times and that's the downside of the job. But it's a very small downside, mind you, I think it's getting worse. I'm quite glad I was a producer when I was and had a bit more freedom than now I think. They've brought in a thing called producer's choice which just said "Here you are, you're a responsible producer, you've got this money to spend on a programme, go and spend it wisely in whatever way you deem fit, and we'll judge it at the end, whether the result was worth it or not. You can make one mistake and maybe two, do it three times and you're out".

That's, I think, what the sort of freedom that broadcasting needs in a way, if you're going to get people trying new things and so forth. It's noticeable with television. I think it's recently been less easy for people to start, could be comedy shows or anything that have a bit of a rocky start, but actually show a bit of potential. If they're allowed to have another go and refine it a bit, it's going to be a success, and a lot of the things that are household, well-known series like *Fools and Horses* (51) and things, have a really rocky start. But the BBC was the one place where you were allowed to have some rocky moments and then try very hard to put it right, then if it didn't come right then fair enough. That all helps creativity I think, that sort of thing.

## **12. Current trends**

*Int: What do you think about today, the new programmes? Obviously Planet Earth (30) was the big one where you're talking about creativity. Can you name some trends where wildlife films are going that you're encouraged and pleased by?*

MS: Well, I think there's some really good programmes around. I've watched the last few *Natural Worlds* (1) and I've really enjoyed them. The Hawaii one [*Hawaii, Message in the Waves*] (52) that Becky Hosking and Tim Green made, I thought was really fresh and different, editing in a different way. Last week's crocodile one [*Invasion of the Crocodiles*] (53) which was actually an independent film I thought was a great use of a very



good, charismatic scientist looking at saltwater crocs and the problems and so forth. You get Charlie Hamilton-James, wonderful **blue-chip**, straight down the line otter behaviour and things, superb.

Then there's the presenter stuff that I'm sometimes less encouraged by. I think there is a little bit of a tendency to encourage the presenters to be more important than the subject matter. By that I mean the business of getting up a tree to look at a gibbon becomes more important than actually what the gibbon's doing up there, or the view you can get of it by being there. That is a trend that I've noticed, that in some programmes trying to make the presenter into some sort of macho hero or heroine. I think that's a pity sometimes, because you've got good biologists, good presenters being, in my eyes, made to look like sort of rather foolish adventurers sometimes, and rather silly about the dangers and things. Whereas actually you want more time to be spent looking at the animals.

I mean Steve Irwin bless his soul, may he rest in peace, was a little bit prone to that in Australia. Making a big deal out of some things that weren't a big deal and also making dangers artificially in a way. That's a trend I don't like particularly.

*Int: Do you think that's because the budgets are getting lower, therefore they're trying to find cheaper ways of padding out the behaviour?*

MS: Possibly, but I think it's more to do with an attitude. It's more to do with saying "How do you want your presenters to appear?" I think it's a little bit to do with dumbing down slightly and I hate using that word, because it makes me sound like an old codger, which I am, of course. I don't want to say that I don't want presenting to be fun and to have some humour, and to have some adventurous things and to have some moments when you think, "My God, I wouldn't like to do that myself". I mean David Attenborough's done that. He's slipped around in guano in caves and had some hairy moments in things. But generally speaking that is only when he's been trying to look at something closer or get a better view or something, and he doesn't make a great big deal about it. It's just part of the job and it doesn't make it any more boring. So I think it is a bit of an attitude thing really.

### **13. Current and future projects**

*Int: Well, I suppose my next question really is going to say you're working on a Portuguese cork forest film at the moment. When that's finished is there still a film that you desperately would like to make? You've made the wolves film [The Wildlife Specials: Wolf] (39) that you wanted to make and to show the plight there in Eastern Europe. Is there still other ideas which you are passionate about, if you had a unlimited budget shall we say?*

MS: On a limited budget?

*Int: No, unlimited budget.*

MS: Well, I would still love to make this three part series, and I think it would take three parts to do it properly, on water. Again it's a bit like plants, it might sound very dull, but when you think of this extraordinary substance that can form a droplet falling out of a cloud. It can go into a gas, it can go into a solid, as ice, it has all these properties. I mean it is the most extraordinary substance on earth, but it is also absolutely



essential to life. It's the elixir of life but it also shapes the world. It erodes, it forms rivulets and streams and gulleys and gorges and deltas. It supports an amazing amount of life in all those different forms, in lakes and rivers and swamps and everything.

I think freshwater life hasn't actually been done enough. I mean we've had an awful lot of marine underwater life, but there's a lot more to do. But it's also the make-up of the bodies of all living things. So plants would fall over without the turgidity of water in their cells and we'd all shrivel and die and so forth. So it's both supporting life inside and outside and I think a lot could be done with that.

Then the final thing is, I think, man has been very clever in manipulating water to his use, sort of making deserts flower, over centuries and centuries. A lot of the major building projects of the Romans were to get water to places where it wasn't, by building aqueducts and pipes, and all this sort of thing. There are whole cultures based around the use of water, like in Yemen, from the top of the mountain to the bottom, all used in different ways to grow different things.

So a lot of human culture and existence is based around water, and I think it'll be the next reason people have fights and wars, because it's getting so that there's not enough water in some places and too much in others. I think there are countries pinching water from one another. Countries that live upstream are actually stopping water going down to countries downstream, and there are going to be fights about that.

So I think with all those three things, I think you could make a fascinating series but I don't think I've ever sold it well enough or something.

*Int: I'll commission a six parter.*

MS: So, that's an unfulfilled thing that I'd like to do, and I'd like to go to Antarctica. But then so many films have been made there now that I'm a bit late on the draw, because I love polar things. My best place in the world's the Arctic and I haven't been to Antarctica, how dreadful, and I know you have. Life in the Freezer (54) was one of my favourite series and I would have loved to have either had something to do with that or go down there and do something.

*Int: There's another one coming out, so apply for that one. Actually that was my next question. Apart from the ones that you've worked on, what other films have you thought "I wish I'd made that"?*

MS: One of the first times I felt that —. God. Well, okay, two things. One was David Hughes's film about the Namib Desert [Namib: Strange Creatures of the Skeleton Coast] (55). That for me was another of those moments where I thought this is where it's at, this is the standard that I must aim for, that all producers must aim for. Because that was the most beautifully filmed, beautifully observed film about desert wildlife and how it works, and some superb behaviour. Filmed by a scientist, David Hughes, who is a very good biologist; but a superb photographer and technician and a wonderful eye for composition and picture. Such a simple film about a place that you wouldn't imagine could hold your attention for 50 minutes because it was a Natural World (1) but it really did and it told the story in such a good way. The visuals were so superb and the behaviour. Just the quality of the shots and the variety of shots and so forth. I thought it was just brilliant.

*Int: No, I agree.*

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MS: Sparse commentary which I love, sparse music, lovely sound, just everything a film should be. Before that, I loved Mick Rhodes's film about Oxford Scientific Films [Horizon: The Making of a Natural History Film] (56) and always remembered that, and I'm trying to remember what it was. He made it as a Horizon (6) but it was about Oxford Scientific Films and the way they had overcome all those difficulties of filming. I remember the alder wasp drilling into the log and how they'd got shots of the moment it laid eggs inside the log, and that sort of thing. Because I've always been interested in insects, I remember thinking "One day I want to do something that uses all those techniques, to open up this world that is often hidden because it's either tiny or goes on in secret places".

So doing Life in the Undergrowth (50) with you and David [Attenborough] and Stephen [Dunleavy] and everybody was a dream come true really.

*Int: So how about—* I can guess your first person. *Inspiration comes from not only the films, the end product, but also the people in the industry and you've talked a lot of about David.*

MS: Well obviously yes, there's no point in going on and on about David. He's a great friend and has been a superb person to work with and a real inspiration, because he's so professional, as well as being such a nice man and so such fun to be with. A very amazing combination.

I suppose I've got to say Hugh Miles, because what we went through in the Arctic and it seems we did achieve quite a lot as well, and then we wrote a book together (57) and so forth. That was a very special period. If there's any filmmaker I'd like to be if I wasn't me, it would be Hugh Miles, because he's not only a superb cameraman, a superb technician but he's also a very good producer, very good at coming out with ideas. He's a good storyteller. He edits his own films now, he does just about everything. I don't know if you know he's a brilliant horn player, he's a very good musician, so he could probably do his own soundtrack, music track, as well, if he wanted to. So, yes, he's somebody I admire a lot.

But I've had a brilliant career. I mean all the people I've mentioned, from Jeffery Boswall and Tony Soper and John Sparks, Richard Brock, Chris Parsons to a big extent, he's a big mentor of mine and big supporter and I learnt a lot from him. A lot of people with really high standards, high ideals, and when you work with them you pick up on some of that, I think, and you think "Well, I don't want my standards to drop below what they've expected of me". That's something that keeps you going really, because it can be tough sometimes, making wildlife films. There's moments when day after day goes by and you don't get anything and the weather's dreary and the food's dreary, and you're being bitten to death and all the nasty bits of it really, that you forget about. But at the time you think "I really would rather be at home". Then you think "No, unless we really persevere we're not going to get this special moment, so let's get on with it and stop moaning", you say to yourself.

So those people have been great all the way through my career.

*Int: What about those moments of being away from home as you just said? Some of these trips when you were in the Arctic, I would presume would be three, four months at a time, maybe a bit more.*

MS: We tried to make them never more than two months actually and we actually tried to build that into the budget because we thought, a, we'd probably end up with a, divorces and, b, both me and Hugh had

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youngish children growing up. My youngest, Ellie, used to say, which made me realise how long these spells were of going away, she used to say “When are you going back dad?” It was sort of not “When are you coming home?” but “When are you going back?”, because I spent more time away than at home, and that was quite difficult.

My God, communications have improved so much. A telex was the fastest thing around then and we had really lousy radio links. We did have radios and you put them up and tried to get in touch with some base somewhere or other. But to get them to then pass a message through to England and then pass it through to your wife to say you were still alive was very, very difficult to do. So it was better no news is good news and just say “I’m sorry, you’re not going to hear from me for a while”. Very tough on those left behind. And a difficult thing to learn, I think you come back from these trips and your kids are all excited to tell you about their things. They’re not the slightest bit worried about the adventures you’ve had, I mean not the slightest bit. It’s just you’re back and they want to show the paper model they’ve just made the afternoon before in class or whatever. In fact, they don’t want you upsetting the routine that they’ve got in without you either. People have often asked me that. I’ve said “Don’t expect, just be in the background, just gradually join in things and make yourself useful. Don’t expect anybody to be interested because that’s the worse thing. Don’t go into a sulk because nobody for two days has asked you what it’s like being close to a lion. Then eventually they’ll ask you. After a week they’ll say, “Hey dad, what was it like being with those lions?” and then you can tell them, and then they’re fascinated and they’ll want to know.

*Int: I’m getting such an idea of the way you understand the psychology of the people you work with, the families and how you can keep everybody on side and inspire people. Can you think of any other job that you’d ever want to do, apart from being a mechanic or take lawnmowers to pieces?*

MS: I enjoyed being a mechanic. I still enjoy taking things to bits and making them work, that’s just something in my nature, I think, and it’s been very useful to me at times. But, no, I can’t think of any other job. I mean, to have a job that includes your hobbies, like photography and natural history, and things that you love doing, like writing and communicating, and working with like-minded people. And going around the world meeting the best biologists, the most knowledgeable people in their subjects, whether it be botany or invertebrates or mammals or whatever. Well, what an incredible privilege, and being paid for it as well. I mean not very much at the beginning, I have to tell you, but it’s brilliant.

No, I wouldn’t have asked for anything different at all.

#### **14. The current industry**

*Int: With the industry changing would you still encourage people, if somebody came to you tomorrow and said, “Mike, I’m really keen”?*

MS: Yes, I would, because the industry’s changing, but it’s not all bad, the changes are not all bad, and the wheel goes round. You get moments when it all seems doom and gloom, because nobody’s commissioning that sort of programme and that’s the sort of thing you’d like to make. But fashions change and it’ll all come round again. So I don’t think it’s too depressing. In fact, I think it’s a trade, a career that we do hopefully have quite a say in, in telling people, a, how the natural world works, the intricacies of it, the connectiveness of every living bit of it —.



But we also, luckily now —. It was a real struggle to get conservation-based programmes onto the air when I was running the Natural World (1). Really, really difficult and, as I said, I was told to stop it in the end. But they are more acceptable now, people do want to hear a little bit more about what they can do to perhaps make things better. Or they want to hear about the problems of plastic in Hawaii. I mean Becky's [Hosking] just turned the whole of Modbury, in Devon, to a non new plastic using town through having a really good wildlife film [Hawaii, Message in the Waves] (52) that also showed some harrowing scenes of albatrosses feeding their chicks with regurgitated plastic. How poignant can that be?

People do want to know these things now I think. So there's a whole range of programming that I think is opening up again. So there are exciting things to do, I think. No, I wouldn't encourage people not to go into it. If they're passionate about communicating science and the natural world, give it a go.

*Int: I love your positiveness and optimism. That's exactly why you take people with you, I think, in your teams. There'll be challenges, it's not going to be problems, it's challenges, if you like, and we can get them done.*

*Int: You've always had that knack of knowing which battles to fight and which ones not to. As you said, you just think that sometimes people speak it and then a week later it won't be a problem anymore. With Life of Birds (48) when David [Attenborough] —. There was a trend to try BBC1 things, why did you decide that was a battle to face?*

MS: Because it seemed in that occasion that there were serious implications; that they were going to try and mess up what we were doing. And in a way, I wanted to protect David from that as well. We'd all set out to do a classic David Attenborough series, for better or worse, and you can't sort of BBC1 David Attenborough. He is on BBC1 and people enjoy and like him, and as long you're filming in the most modern way you can, you're using anything to enhance that and any ideas that come along for better editing or better story telling, of course you use. But you can't actually make an Attenborough series different from the way he likes to do it. So I think there was a case in point where I had to dig my heels in and just say "No, this is the way we've decided to do it and this is the way it's going to be. Just hold your fire, just be patient, wait till we've finished and by the time it's got all its music on and its proper narration and its gloss and everything, I think you'll find that it is BBC1". This was an early judgement, that it didn't have quite enough excitement and zing and so on. To be fair on the person involved in that, who was head of the Unit at the time, they did at the end come along and say "I was wrong. I'm glad you stuck to your guns because it is a classic Attenborough series. It's gone down well on BBC1, it's fine, it didn't need zapping up in an artificial way. So, fine."

*Int: So it would have veered towards that use of presenters you were talking about earlier, where the method was overpowering the behaviour?*

MS: That was what they wanted. They wanted a more macho Attenborough, swinging through the jungle, and it's not his style and won't ever be. He doesn't want to take that role. He's only there to interpret the wildlife or to interpret the plants, or to interpret the natural history and the science, to make it easier for people to understand. That's the only way he feels he has a role. He doesn't want to be there as the adventurer, that's a different sort of programme altogether.

*Int: I'm glad you stuck up for the series, I must admit.*

## **15. Most dangerous and embarrassing moments**

*Int: Well, going back and picking up on a few things we missed then. What about the most dangerous or most embarrassing moment?*

MS: This is the concluding thing that everybody is asked at the end of lectures and things – “What was your most dangerous moment?” I mean I can say without a shadow of doubt it was in the Arctic and you'd think “Oh well, that was by being close to polar bears”. I think me and Hugh [Hugh Miles] counted that we'd had 52 relatively close encounters with polar bears, over the two years. Some slightly too close for what you would think was comfort, but actually not really feeling very threatened at any time.

But it was in the Arctic and it was when we were 25 miles out from land on the sea ice, camping on the ice edge, trying to film narwhal and beluga at the ice edge. The ice edge was facing Greenland, an open bit of sea towards Greenland, and a storm blew up, blowing straight onto the ice, and these waves starting coming. Literally, you looked at the edge of the ice and you could see the whole ice was moving in the way the waves were. We were camped about I suppose a mile from the ice edge, because you have to be really careful on the ice edge, because big bits are breaking away all the time. You keep looking behind you to make sure a crack isn't developing.

Then the ice started breaking up and there were spurts of water coming out, and we were right out there. We were with two Inuit guys and we said “This is getting a bit dangerous isn't it?”, and they said “It's fine while the wind is this way on because all the ice has been pressed together, and even though it's rocking up and down. But,” they said “if the wind changes or drops we're out of here quickly”.

So we went back to the tent and we hunkered down in the tent. This blizzard was blowing and it was dreadful. Then the tent started going up and down and we thought this is getting a little bit too close for comfort. We went to have a look and a crack went just in front of the tent door, and that was the moment even the Inuit guys said “Ah. This is time to move”. So we very quickly packed up the two tents, bunged them on the sleds, and one of the skidoos wouldn't start, one of the snowmobiles wouldn't start. They'd got a great big lump of ice in the carburettor. Well, that's where the mechanical bit comes in. I took this carburettor to bits, got this lump of snow out, trying to find why there was no fuel going into the engine, saw this thing, took this lump of snow out, got it back together. It started and with the ice beginning to go up and down like this, we got the hell out of there, and went about 5 miles inland until nothing was happening. Then set up tents again, rode out this storm, another day and a half I think.

Then went back to the ice edge when it was all calm and lovely, to see if we could film again, and the new ice edge was that crack just outside the tent. So if we'd had the guts, we could have actually stayed in those tents and we'd have woken up in the morning and there would have just been sea in front of us. We could have filmed the belugas outside the tent. But it was quite a hairy moment actually.

*Int: A classic. How about the most embarrassing one then?*

MS: Well, I've had a few embarrassing moments, but another one was in the Arctic and it was to do with breaking ice again, oddly enough. There was this group of families camped near a place called Iglulik on this island, and they were walrus hunters. On their quota, they had two more to kill on their quota. I was with Martin Saunders actually and we'd arranged that we could go out with them, and that the chief hunter guy



would take us off and let us film walrus. Because if there were more than two, they only could kill two, so we could film the others.

So we'd been waiting in this camp for quite a while and nothing seemed to be happening. We kept saying "Aren't you going out?", "It's not quite right yet". Somehow or other, suddenly they decided that it was time to go. So we got the call from our tent, "Right, time to go". Then, everything having happened very slowly, then everything happened very quickly. The guys were in the canoes, these freighter canoes with outboards, piling stuff in, getting in. All the women and children gathered as well on the beach thing and there's what's called edge fast ice. It's just a bit of ice on the beach it just stays, sort of plateaus of ice off the beach, and the canoes were moored up against them. All the guys decided to have a last minute pee and I thought. "That's a good idea" as well.

They were standing on the edge of this ice flow, looking out to sea, and the women were behind on the beach, and they all had a pee and I was standing there with them. They finished before me and I was just shaking off, as it were, and the edge of this ice broke that I was standing on and deposited me, it was only about two foot of water. It was just the last thing I wanted before going out for a day long trip out to sea. So I was floundering around, trying to get back out on this ice edge and, of course, the crown jewels hadn't been put away. I was scrambling up this ice flow, trying to get back onto the beach and all these women were just busting themselves.

*Int: Well, it was cold Mike in your defence.*

MS: They were all joking about it and for them it was just the biggest laugh. The white man does it again, can't even have a pee without embarrassing himself.

*Int: Classic. Mike, I know that's just a couple of stories and I could talk for two hours with your stories. I think you've got to write a book actually, to kind of log all of these things. It's been three hours. Has it been three hours? But one of the things that has come across has been the fact that you've had this fantastic apprenticeship to begin with. Not only with wildlife photography, but in life in general and the way you look at life, this positiveness and optimism, and how you - not persuade that's the wrong word - but you get people to go along with you and this happens all the way through, and how you're encouraging and you give people free rein and responsibility. I think that in three hours you do get a great idea why you are so respected and why you have produced fantastic films.*

*No, it has come across and I hope it hasn't been a chore for you. It's been great for us. I reckon we could do another three hours actually. But thanks very, very much indeed, that was great.*

MS: Not at all, a pleasure.

**END**

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## 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

**Jib:** A boom device with a camera on one end, and a counterweight and camera controls on the other

**Reversal:** Film type which gives a positive image when projected.

**Steenbeck:** Type of flatbed editing machine.

**Telephoto:** Of or relating to a photographic lens or lens system used to produce a large image of a distant object

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