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SIR DAVID ATTENBOROUGH (9.1.97)
(for BBC History Archive. (Second contribution)

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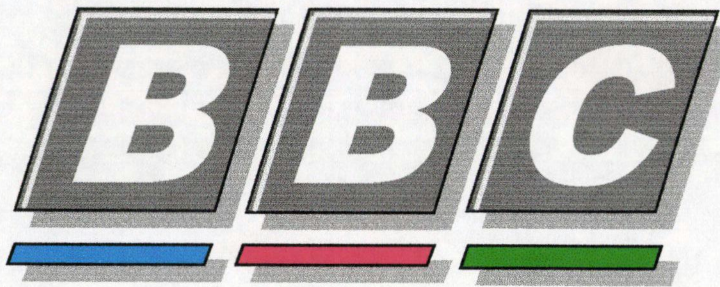

History Archive

Transcript of Video Interview

with

Sir David Attenborough

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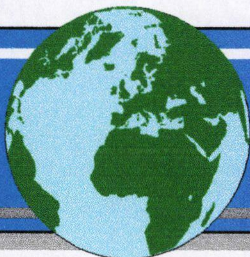

Interviewer and Producer
Frank Gillard

--- Transcript by: Heather Reynolds, Tel/Fax: 01275 333 675 ---

BBC History Archive

Transcript of Video Interview with Sir David Attenborough

FG = Frank Gillard
DA = Sir David Attenborough
……. = Interview hesitation
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FG: It's the 9th January 1997 and for the BBC History Archive Sir David Attenborough is once again facing the camera for us - this his second contribution to the Archive. The first one was concerned entirely with your BBC career and I want to pick it up there today if we may and talk about all the things that have happened since you came off the nominal pay role.

Was the initiative to go yours or the BBC's?

DA: Entirely mine. I was becoming increasingly unhappy with the kind of job I was doing - mostly because I didn't think I was really very good at it. I thought that my abilities were in making programmes and it was absolutely evident to me that there was very big change coming along, very big changes and which needed …the BBC needed, was someone who was going to deal with all these technological and financial and business things and that was where the next big job was going to be and that wasn't my .. either my interest or my abilities in my view and I wanted to back and make programmes, so I resigned.

The problem was finding the right time to resign because at that time the BBC was much more in the headlines than it is now and if you got the notion that somebody in the BBC hierarchy was about to leave while there was a row going on about something then they would say 'Ah well, he's leaving in a pet' and that wasn't the case, so it was a matter of picking a time which I duly did.

FG: And you moved into the Natural History side of programming right away did you?

DA: Yes - In my contract or rather… I didn't have a contract I suppose but I had always made it clear that while I was administrating, whether as Controller BBC 2 or Director of Programmes, I would have the right to go away every eighteen months at least. The rationalisation was that it was very good to keep in touch with actual programme making and keep in touch with the equipment and know what was happening with the best gear and so on and what was happening on the road and I thought also it would refresh me and I had one of those things scheduled in - it was a trip in the East Indies as was, that is to say Indonesia and it was going to be called 'Eastward with Attenborough', so that was clear in my diary. It was going to be two month absence, so it was a very convenient thing to say just before I left, 'Well, I'm going to resign' and I went off and did this two month programme.

FG: At what point did you link up with the Natural History Unit in Bristol?

DA: That was a Natural History Unit project, 'Eastward with Attenborough'.

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FG: Well you've been tied in with them for all these years since - is it a satisfactory arrangement?

DA: Oh yes, very. I mean, as far as I'm concerned - oddly, I'm not sure on our last conversation but when the Natural History Unit was formed, I was invited to go down and become part of it, in what capacity wasn't quite clear, to me at any rate. But I didn't because I elected to stay in London because of the children and education and all that but I've always felt that, as it were, spiritually, I was part of the Unit. I've never been on its books full-time as it were but after 'Eastward with Attenborough', **Chris Parsons** was then Head I think and they were discussing a programme policy for the Unit. It was clear that they wanted a 'face' that was going to, as it were, be a useful commodity to have around which they would pin on Natural History when they needed that particular thing and I was the sort of person ….I mean there weren't a lot of candidates but I was one obviously and they did ask me if I would do all the narrations for 'Wildlife on One', which was a 30 minute BBC1 series, as well as my own stuff for BBC2.

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FG: As the Controller of BBC2 and then as Director of Programmes in Television, you would have been associated with the evolution of what we used to call the 'magnum opus' concept of programming and you told us in your last interview how you had tied in on the 'Civilisation' series with ***Kenneth Clark****. It was that sort of model, was it, that led you into doing the first of your great series 'Life on Earth'?*

DA: Yes and very obviously it was clear to anybody who thought about it, it was a natural for that kind of encyclopaedic survey and it was evident to me once we had established, with 'Civilisation' and with the 'Ascent of Man', once we had established

the genre, it was absolutely clear that somebody had to do something about the natural world. Year and year and year went by and I was terrified that … I mean I knew that I was going to leave sometime and I dearly wanted to do it but if someone had come to me when I was either at BBC2 or indeed as Director of Programmes and said 'We've got this great idea - why don't we a survey of the natural world ?', there was no way in which I could have said 'No' and fortunately nobody did bring that forward.

So as soon as my resignation was announced Chris Parsons said 'Now, what about this series that we've been actually mentioning for sometime', so I said 'Yes'

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FG: I think we ought to hear a little bit from you, if we could, about the prospectus as it were about the vision of 'Life on Earth'. I remember you saying that you were not only going to do a programme about natural history but also about the history of nature.

DA: Yes, my idea when we started 'Civilisation' I think was really based on things that I remember from my youth which were 'part works', which came out and which you then bound up and put on yourself and said 'Right. Well, that's history.'

I mean for example, the great obvious example is the 'Outline of History' which was H G Wells and that came out every month or week or whatever it was in a certain number of parts and as they came out, you read them then you bound them up and you felt at the end of that 'Right. Well now, I've always been interested in history. There's a limited amount of time I can give to it but there it is and if I want to know what something is, that's where I'll look.'

It was that concept of a weekly instalment that was going to build up into a something that really told you something which was behind 'Civilisation'.

So when you wanted to do a biological thing how would you structure it?

Of course there were lots of ways of considering that but I'm a firm believer and always have been that one of the most fundamental and crucial things in any programme is a narrative, is a story, is characters whose nature you get to know quickly and you are then involved in the conflict, have a problem and come out at the other end having done something.

Of course that is the story of evolution. It is that there are fish who move into swamps and need to get on dry lands and they develop legs and then there's got to be problems about how you breathe but that leads to new problems and so that's the next programme which is going to be about reptiles.

So in that way you would survey all the animals of the world in their typical groups and at the end of it you'd have a view of the nature of creation.

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FG: Yes - and to the dimensions of the work. There were 13 Chapters, if I remember rightly?

DA: 13 and 30 - there used to be a joke in television planning, you know, that thank goodness the dear Lord above created the world in 13 week segments.

Because, of course, they were used to operating in quarters and one of the problems about programme scheduling in those days was that once you established a viewing pattern you didn't want to change it. If you did change it there would inevitably be knock-ons in other things which would then, half way through their run if they started in the middle of a quarter, would have to move from Thursdays to Saturdays or something and that was very upsetting.

So they planned everything in 13 week segments and then at the end of the quarter you might be able to do quite a big change. So we were always welcoming, as programme

planners, series that were either in 6's and you might put an odd-ball in there and two of them make a quarter, or 13 and I was keen on 13.

FG: *You couldn't do a huge project like this in much less than 13 I think.*

DA: No, you couldn't in fact.

FG: *These were 1 hour programmes were they not?*

DA: They were 50 minutes.

FG: *And they were on BBC1?*

DA: No, they were on BBC2 I think.

FG: *But of course they have been repeated since.*

And when you sat down at the beginning to plan it all was it just you or did you have a group of people with you?

DA: No, it was just me and in fact there was some schools of thought in the Natural History Unit who thought that it was a rotten idea and one producer, a senior producer in particular, said - I mean we had a meeting in which I out-lined this and this producer said 'Well this is terrible, this is old fashioned, 19th century and we'll be the laughing stock of the zoological world and now the way I see it is this.'

There came the awkward moment when I had to make it clear that this wasn't up for debate really. If I was going to do it this was how I was going to do it. Whereupon that producer said 'Well in that case I will certainly not take part in it' and I think it was a month later he changed his mind.

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FG: But you had in your mind the grand design, you knew what you were trying to do. How far could you map it out in detail at the early stages and how far did it evolve - how far did one thing lead to another, perhaps unexpectedly, as you went along?

DA: Well, it didn't lead unexpectedly as you went along because the pattern of evolution is clear. There were difficult moments, as it were, to deal with all invertebrates in 50 minutes - is it possible to deal with all invertebrates in 50 minutes or two 50 minutes or is it three?

So there were various kinds of decisions but there was no question as to what there was going to be and of course that in itself caused a lot of problems because one of the arguments of that initial debate as someone said, 'Look this is barmy - I mean you are crazy to trace the course of evolution that way. It means the first programme is going to be about 'green slime'. Green slime is not the way to start off a big series.'

I said 'Well, that's the way it happened and that's the ways it's going to start and we did and it was OK.

For each programme I wrote about a 20 or 30 page script per programme.

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FG: But you had this chart of the whole project clearly in your mind obviously. It was a comprehensive chart that you had in mind and that's important because you were filming, were you not, all over the world?

DA Yes, I mean, it was more than a chart - I wrote 20 or 30 page scripts for all 13 programmes before we shot a foot. So that, perfectly clearly, if you were going to go to … and in the first programme, as you obviously would or are likely to, you'd have to deal with invertebrates - so you deal with corals and clearly, if you deal with corals

you go to the Great Barrier Reef - but it would be lunatic to go to the Great Barrier Reef and then get back home and I said 'What about these things with pouches hopping about. I know we should have' .... so, when you went to do corals you also did programme whatever it was, 12 I think, which dealt with kangaroos and that applied to the whole thing.

So the scripts were then dismembered into their various locations and reassembled geographically so you knew exactly what you had to do when you got to Australia.

FG: *But it must call for tremendous skill on your part because there you are doing programme 2 in New Zealand and you know that there is something else in New Zealand you're going to film for programme 11 but everybody whose done any work of this kind at all in Documentary television knows that in order to make an inset, a little item, appropriate in sequence, you've got to know what precedes it and what follows it.*

DA: And that is why it was imperative that I wrote all 13 scripts in detail before we started so that we even went to the stage of my script saying 'but on the other hand' we hadn't even shot what had gone before then and so we actually did it as much as that.

FG: *Therefore you developed a new technique altogether, didn't you?*

DA: It's kind of you to say so but if you made feature films you make feature films out of sequence all the time.

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FG: Yes, I suppose you do. I'm not sure that it's quite the same thing, still. How far did you fall back on local knowledge in the countries you were concerned with? Was there much help in that direction?

DA: The system we had was quite simple and straight forward. I wrote, as I said, a 20 or 30 page script and I wrote it with no consideration of cost or practicability or anything. I just wrote what I thought would be the best representation of reptiles or the best representation of frogs or whatever and that then went two places.

It went to one director, one of the three directors working on the series, who was going to handle that programme and it also went to a particular expert.

So that, for example, as far as the amphibian programme, went to somebody called **Bunty Graverson** in the Natural History Museum who had spent all her life living with pickled frogs in the basement of the Natural History Museum and she read it and the producer read it. He criticised it from narrative point of view, she criticised it from a scientific point of view and what she would say would be 'Well, yes you've suggested this frog here and it's opportune to represent what shall we say, vivipary, the birth of live young and you've quoted an example which is fairly hackneyed, you know' - which is hardly surprising 'cos I got it from the literature. 'Now I happen to know', says Bunty, 'that there's somebody living in Australia who has found a new one which is not yet published and who could lead you to it.' … and so on.

So that you follow up all those leads - I didn't, the production team did and then when you got to Australia you found these people and nearly always they were absolutely overjoyed. 'You've really come about my frog! - the BBC's heard about my frog ! - how wonderful, yes, I'll take you to my frog and I'll show you the best frog that I've ever had.'… and so on. And so it was a great joy.

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FG: Could they also say 'and I've got some marvellous film of it'?

DA: We said 'If you allow us to film it we'll give you a copy of the film', yes of course.

FG: They hadn't thought of filming it?

DA: Well, they need money, you know you need expertise to make film of it and it isn't the first thing on their agenda. The first thing on their agenda was to find it and very often these are people working in a provincial University, somewhere in Queensland or something and they didn't have a lot of money and it was a reasonable quid pro quo - we brought a kind of expertise and they didn't know that they wanted film until they actually looked at our film and said 'Gosh, I never realised that that was what happened.' That happened several times.

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FG: But could you commission them to film for you?

DA: No, the techniques of filming were such that you really need a professional cameraman but what we did do was to, as a result of this, was to develop a network of highly expert cameraman working in Australia, North America ….

FG: Locals?

DA: Oh yes, local people. When I say, local people, local film makers and there were people who were crying out to be used because the Networks, the Television Networks, in North America or Australia or Canada or New Zealand weren't doing natural history programmes seriously and they couldn't get the work.

The result was that the great films, the sequences that we got on Life on Earth gave these people an opportunity which they'd never had before and so you now find in however many years later it is, 20 years or so later, that the BBC Natural History Unit employs the great wildlife talents who are actually Americans and Australians and not American networks or Australian networks - they come and work for Bristol - they don't work for their own units because they don't have them.

FG: It's the Natural History Unit that has carried the name of Bristol around the world. I'm always telling them, the citizens of Bristol that they used to send out the Merchant Venturers in their gun boats, nowadays it's the television screens.
They don't accept this in Bristol of course - not as much as I'd like them to anyway. Tell me something about your life during the making of this series. There you were travelling all over the world - coming back at times ...?

DA: Oh yes. Well, you really want to see what the 'rushes' are like. Also, you've got your own life to keep going, as it were, so yes, one came back.
I often speculate when people say why wasn't Life on Earth or something like it made years earlier. You couldn't actually make it until such time as you had reliable airlines and reliable airline schedules and people forget that 40 years ago it would be impossible to make it because you couldn't go to Borneo for a week - you know, if you got to Borneo you'd counted yourself lucky and then you speculated how on earth you'd get back and when but now there is no place on the Earth that you can't go to where you can't reach within 48 hours if you've got the money.

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FG: So you were back home, what, half the year perhaps?

DA: Yes, about that.

FG: Let's talk about your colleagues - what sort of research and production teams did you have working with you?

DA: The great man and the architect of Life on Earth was **Chris Parsons.** Chris had been Head of the Unit and this was a thing close to its heart and he is a remarkable man as you well know. He is the most self effacing and diffident of men who doesn't seem to have the flamboyance of a natural leader and if you make that assessment you make a very very great mistake. He is a splendid leader who gets affection and loyalty from people to an extraordinary degree - an amazing man and he was the boss. With him was **John Sparks** who is a flamboyant biologist, very outspoken, very vigorous and later on became Head of the Unit. **Richard Brock** who was also another long-standing producer and those three between them handled most of the work.

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FG: What about your Cameramen?

DA: Well now a cameraman - there are a whole host of cameramen. We had one crew who was with me all the time because obviously there was no point in me being at crucial zoological filming, let's say the birth of a kangaroo. I mean, there's no point in me sitting behind the back of a cameraman and saying 'Press the button', he knows perfectly well and he doesn't require me. So I only went where I had written myself in the script and there had to be very good reasons as to why I'd written myself into the script at those particular points, which I could enumerate should you so wish but anyway, so there was the crew and all my 'sync' pieces, my 'to camera' pieces were all

scheduled on long trips and **Maurice Fisher** was the cameraman and **Dicky Bird** was the recordist and we were a very good unit, we had a lot of fun.

FG: I wondered to what extent since you knew, for example, that a birth was going to take place, a kangaroo birth. Would you actually leave the cameraman there and just simply say 'Hang on' for day after day after day till it happens?

DA: That's what I mean by saying it's much more predictable than you suppose - you can predict a marsupial birth to within six hours.

FG: Can you - so you could be there yourself.

DA: I wasn't there anyway. There were a group of specialist cameramen round the World and we said, 'Look this is what we need, we need, this and this and this'. Some of those things are so clear cut that you can just go out and get them 'for us please'. For others, it will need a bit of setting up with the scientists and so one of the directors will come out and do it and one of the directors would go to Australia and film all the stuff for his sequence but also one of the other producers would say 'Look, while you're there can you get this and that and the other for me.'
So it was a team effort.

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FG: Shooting 16mm film in colour?

DA: Yes - they were shooting 16mm colour. One of the factors that lead to the genesis of the whole genre and Civilisation was that it was to have used colour and so colour was the great thing and we certainly … no, as a matter of fact your question is pertinent because at the time we didn't, on Civilisation we didn't … the technology was such, colour technology was such that we didn't dare shoot Civilisation on 16.

We shot it on 35 and one of the great advances in the early years of colour was special studies that were made of telecine, colour telecine as to how you could really get reliable results with proper resolution and proper colour balance and that was a major achievement, much unsung. I mean the whole of the colour business has been dealt with earlier but by the time we came to do Life on Earth, 16mm colour was … we only used 16mm.

FG: A pretty hard life for the cameramen - humping equipment into inaccessible places?

DA: Yes, poor chaps… but of course cameramen are used to that, they're war correspondents ….you of all people should know. Humping cameras around while wars are going on is rather worse than doing it while kangaroos are giving birth.

FG: Yes but we get more personal recognition than the cameramen do.

DA: That is true because you were a Correspondent and you did your own recording but cameramen are the unsung heroes and it has been a long practice of mine which just recently we have been able to do something about - that cameramen should receive more credit but the nature of the cameraman is of course that he is behind the camera and thus invisible as people like me are in front of it.

FG: Did they have to cultivate new capabilities - for instance, underwater filming?

DA: Yes but quite a lot of them worked the other way around. Quite a lot of them - some of them are really expert cameramen. Underwater cameramen, for example, started off underwater first and became cameramen second. That's why you become a

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cameraman really, it seems to me, is that you don't actually want to spend your tine sitting behind a desk and that you do want to get out there where the action is and most of the cameramen were very keen to work on it.

FG: Is there much danger for you and them?

DA: There shouldn't be - it is not the job of any broadcasting organisation to send its staff into unnecessary danger. In war time you do and in war circumstances you do but if you are filming sharks you ought not to say 'Well there's a sort of ten to one chance that I might get bitten.' I mean you should make sure there is no chance of you getting bitten.

FG: You can do that can you?

DA: Yes, sure you can - you can do it in different ways - you can do it either by putting yourself in a cage or by using a remote camera - all kinds of things.

FG: I suppose it is only an institution like the BBC that has assured finance that can possibly do this kind of thing?

DA: Oh, that is for sure because the whole project was a three year project and what organisation is it who's going to say 'We're going to start investing in this and there will be no return at all for three years.'

No other broadcasting organisations I know would take on a project of that length of time.

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FG: Anywhere in the World

DA: Well I don't know of them - they certainly haven't.

FG: Technical developments and improvements as your time went on doing this work?

DA: One of the great worries of doing a thing which is on a three year project is that you devise some kind of technical advance which is going to get you a whole lot of pictures in your first six months and then you know it's gone through the labs. And you know people have been seeing it in viewing theatres and you know that people are going around saying 'Did you see what they managed to get from down a mole's tunnel', or something and you're terrified that that something has to sit on a shelf in the cutting room for two years before .. and you think somebody's going to work out how you did it and they're going to go on the screen first - not that the audience cares all that much but you care.

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FG: You avoided that?

DA: Yes.

FG: How? You kept it under lock and key?

DA: I don't think there is a lot of keen competitors, really - outside the BBC anyway.

FG: Your photograph surrounded by gorillas is something that has appeared in magazines and books all over the World - I'm constantly coming across it. Tell us about that situation?

DA: Well, it was **John Sparks** who suggested it was possible - I didn't think it would be. There was one programme which was about the Primates, about monkeys and apes and one of the key things in human evolution is the ability for the thumb and the forefinger to come together, to oppose as they say and if you can oppose you can grasp something, if you grasp something you can make tools and if you make tools …that's the theory. So the question about the oppose, the thumb and forefinger, was the point we wanted to make.

I thought we could have done it with chimps and John said 'No, there is this strange woman, **Diane Fossey** who has habituated some gorillas who you can get close to and there's just a chance that if she would agree for us to come that you might be able to crawl up and with a gorilla sitting in the background talk about it - and to my great surprise she did agree.

The whole Diane Fossey saga and her feuds with the local people is another story which had repercussions on us at the end. But when we went, cutting a long story short, we eventually got ourselves into the situation …Diane was very ill and didn't come out with us. We got ourselves into the situation where there were the gorillas and I go off. John says 'Go off and tell us this stuff about the thumb and forefinger' and I crawled up and there is this huge male gorilla in the background and I turned round to talk to the camera to give him this thumb and forefinger story when I felt a weight lying by my feet and I looked down and there were two baby gorillas undoing my shoelaces.

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Well, I couldn't really talk about the thumb and forefinger while that was going on and so I stopped and I hadn't even started and then I felt a tap on my shoulder and I turned round and there was a huge female gorilla and she put her hand on me and put her hand on my head and turned round and looked at my face and this went on for, it seemed to me, an age and it was paradise - it was such a privileged delight.

I couldn't believe it was possible and eventually they left and I crawled back and I said to John 'Wasn't that fantastic, what were the shots like' and he said 'Yes, we did take one or two shots' and I said 'What do you mean you took one or two shots?'

He said 'Well I was waiting for you to this stuff about the thumb and forefinger but we only had half a magazine and I didn't want to start early 'cos you'd run out in the middle and …. I said 'You mean to say that you didn't get her putting her hand on my head…..' 'No, what happened' he said 'was that **Martin Saunders** the cameraman, after a bit said, why don't we take one or two shots just to give the boys a laugh in the cutting room, so I took a few bits' and that is what was saved and that was that sequence which was put together from really little bits and pieces but it could have been a twenty minute mind blowing thing.

Well, we eventually left and on the way back there were rifle shots and bullets started whistling over our head and we were held up by Government troops and searched. Martin Saunders had the wit to take the camera out and put the exposed film somewhere where it didn't seem …… to pretend that we'd been shooting something else 'cos he thought the film would be confiscated. I was taken to the jail and told to sit out in the sun in a barbed wire enclosure while men with rifles guarded me and I was in jail for I think about eight hours or something before the American Consul, whatever he was, or perhaps he was an Ambassador to Rwanda managed to do things

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to get me out and it was because of the feud with Diane and various other conservation issues that we had been shot at.

Eventually we did get out - it's quite a long story as to how we did got out but we did get out and we got the film and it was, as you say, one of the things that Life on Earth is remembered for.

FG: Yes indeed. I've no doubt your whole story is one of triumphs and disappointments - did you have big disappointments too?

DA: Not a great number of real disappointments. There were a number of things we didn't get. I wrote in that we would see a Duck Billed Platypus laying an egg and the egg then hatching and a little furry thing crawling out of an egg - which would be a wonderful thing to do but everyone said it was impossible.

So we said 'Fine, well we will offer a bursary to a university research department who can set up a breeding scheme for a Duck Billed Platypus. We will pay for the whole thing providing we can film it at the end' and no research team in Australia was forthcoming because they all said it was impossible. And it still hasn't been done to this day and no Duck Billed Platypus has bred in filmable circumstances and I don't think any has actually even been conceived in captivity though one or two have given birth but unpredictably as it were because they didn't know when copulation was.

FG: Did you have problems of assembly and writing at the end of it all. When you got the material was it…

DA: It all went together like a dream.

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FG: Did it?

DA: It was remarkable really - I hadn't and I don't think anybody had really made a natural history programme which was going to have material from all the continents of the Earth and shot completely out of order and put together like a jigsaw puzzle or at any rate like a string of beads on a thread and to know whether it would make a coherent necklace - or would it have great lumps in it or discontinuities or whatever but we stuck to the script very closely and it worked like a charm.

FG: That's what I call professionalism

And from first to last, from the very beginning to the end, how long?

DA: Three years - I would have to look it up but it's about three years.

FG: Yes, a big effort, tremendous - and now the audience reaction because after all you were presenting this as a serious study, were you not?

I mean this wasn't just pets, pretty little things, this was a serious study you were demanding a degree of concentration and attention from your audience.

DA: That's quite true. The audience reaction was phenomenal really - it got huge audiences - do you know I can't really remember whether it was repeated - I think it was repeated on the week but whether it was on 2 or 1 or I or 2, I can't now remember but it got huge audiences.

People watched it twice, people talked to me about really important zoological issues which were xxx undergraduate work, were the subjects for a PhD.

I mean a taxi driver would say to me 'It's all very well this altruism about ..exactly why do termites… why do these working termites look after the queen' and what you were saying about evolution and so on.

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I got into and still get into a certain amount of trouble by people saying 'You don't give God credit' and I say 'Well, that isn't what science is about - giving credit for these kind of notional …you may be absolutely right but I'm dealing with facts that are observable facts.'

FG: The book was it a best seller?

DA: The book sold a million copies quite soon.

FG: Just like that?

DA: Yes, just like that. I think it was on the top of the best sellers for something like a year and then it became even more…. it caused such a sensation that Readers Digest, who was then .. the books were run by a very remarkable chap.
He said 'Now there's room for an extra illustrated edition and within the year we produced another sort of bumper deluxe edition with all kinds of additional things on to it which was selling at the same time and it and the original edition were numbers one and two in the best sellers list for quite some months. It was very remarkable.

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FG: A great tribute. Did you feel that Life on Earth gave us a stimulus to world wide study of wildlife?

DA: Well, now and it's 20 years later and I am still doing the same kind of thing and going round zoology departments and universities round the World and professors come up and say 'The reason I've got this Professorship was that I saw Life on Earth' and all kinds of people say that all the time - and zoologists and scientists - and it's 20 years on and the series is still used in science courses round the World as part of the lectures.

FG: And do you use it yourself as part of your lectures when you go round the universities?

DA: No.

FG: No, you don't. I thought you might perhaps illustrate what you were saying about...

DA: Well I … been other things more recently really.

FG: Yes, that's true, I was going to go on to them - when you did the Living Planet.

DA: The first programme could… the first series of Life of Earth… there were three 'E's' really. The first was fundamentally about the story of evolution, not the mechanism which is a different thing but the story of evolution.

The second was about the environment and ecology - that is to say the Living Planet so that it looks … instead of looking at all frogs of the World it looked at all deserts of the World. Not the animal group but the kind of environment which would, wherever the desert was, it would cause animals and plants, whether in South America or Australia or Africa, to react in a similar way and produce convergent evolution - that was the Living Planet.

And then the third one after that was much the most difficult and much the most gamble really in terms of suggesting it was going to be about behaviour - etholigy as it's known.

So ecology and evolution, ecology and ethology and that was a very risky thing to do really because you can be pretty sure you're going to get a shot of a Duck Billed Platypus but you can't be sure that you'd get a Duck Billed Platypus either giving birth

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or indeed courting or any of these other things and the behavioural series, the Trials of Life, depended upon behaviour. There was going to be courting behaviour, mating behaviour, feeding behaviour, aggressive behaviour and so on.

FG: That was the Trials of Life?

DA: Trials of Life.

FG: Yes - and now you are engaged in, what, the Private Life of Birds is it?

DA: Yes. We folded into those big series two smaller ones or three smaller ones really. I did one on the reaction of the Mediterranean to humanity, the ecology of the Mediterranean which was called The First Eden. Then another one entirely about fossils and then most recently I did a series on Plants which really did need to be done and now I'm doing one entirely on Birds.

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FG: The Private Life of Plants seems relatively an unpromising project. It didn't turn out to be of course. It set the world alight, in a way. It was the time-lapse photography I suppose that made it possible was it. Tell us a bit about that?

DA: Well it was simply that ….well here now one had made these three big series and every time it was an animal that was centre stage and you don't have to be a biologist to realise that all animal life is dependant upon plants - plants are the basis of all life and here we were doing programmes which gave the impression that plants were just, as it were, put on Earth to be fodder for some animal to chew up or weave into a bit of cloth or build his house with.

When you come to think of it plants have all the problems which animals have in terms of finding food and getting rid of the offspring and mating and so on - and so I felt it

was really irresponsible not to do it and so we got in cahoots with **Mike Salisbury** and **Keith Scoling** and **Neil Nightingale** to see how we might be able to do it and we decided that there were things to be done with time-lapse photography that hadn't yet been done. In terms of linking computers to them so that you'd be able to do tracking and zooming over a period of hours or days or weeks.

We could be able to be tracking along with a tendril and so on and I got cold feet at one stage and I said 'I really don't think this is going to …30 minutes is as long as people will take this' and I think it was Mike Salisbury who said 'Come on lads pull yourself together boy - if 50 is what you believe in, 50 minutes is what it should be!' - and so 50 minutes it was and I think it was eight programmes - and they did very well.

FG: When you were doing this work from start to finish, all the way through, did you have a completely freehand over policy? What I'm really asking you was there pressure at all to popularise - not at all?

DA: I can't ever say that as a producer - ever, did someone from above come and tell me to push me in one direction or the other - not once. I trust that while I was Controller and so on I didn't do that to a producer. I might have done it in terms of cost and said 'Look, you've got to stick to your budget, old boy, this is as much as we can afford.' That certainly, but I have never told a producer and no Controller has ever told me that I'm being too abstruse and it seems to me if you are a BBC producer you knew that in the marrow of your bones - you didn't need someone to come along and tell you that.

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FG: This really is what distinguishes the BBC and the whole world wide scene in my opinion. I remember so well, I think I may have told you this before, in 1954 when I was in America being then in charge of BBC in Bristol, nominally, here at home. Before I went, being besought by ***Desmond Hawking*** *who said 'For goodness sake do find some wild life operations in the United States that we can get in touch with and share programmes with and I remember chasing up a man, a professor, in Boston, I forget which university he was at but he had been running a series which everybody talked about and I said 'Well, what are you going to do for the next series?'*
He said 'I'm not going to do any more. Unless you come close to death every three minutes they are not interested' - and that was the attitude was it not? You had to popularise.
What about the attitude of the real academic life, the real academic people to this kind of work, to this kind of kind of exposure?

DA: They were, to a man, overjoyed. I was truly astonished and I think it was at the end of Life on Earth. I think the Chairman was **Michael Swann** who was, of course, himself a very distinguished biologist and he wrote some very encouraging letters to me about the scientific respectability of the project but the real extraordinary accolade came and I'm so taken aback by it that I almost daren't mention it even now. But I was made a Fellow of the Royal Society, the most distinguished scientific society in the entire World. One which practicing scientists would give their right arms to be made a Fellow of. It is the highest possible honour that science can bestow in this Country and that it should come because of making a television series, is something I treasure highly.

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FG: Well I think the BBC was jolly lucky to have you, really, to lead this kind of drive, I do honestly.

What about the accusation sometimes made about these programmes that they are set up - that they are staged. Did you have to resort to that sort of thing very much?

DA: Oh yes, of course. You see it depends a lot on what you're talking about.

I mean if the scripts says that we wish to see the courtship of scorpions - well, you can trot across the Sahara from now until Doomsday and you'll not see it.

What you do is go out to the Sahara and you turn over stones and you find a scorpion, a male scorpion - you put it in a match box and then you find a female scorpion - you put that in a match box and then you make a little arena with some device, like perspex or something which prevents the scorpions from escaping. You put one in and then you put the other in and you film what happens.

Now is that set-up? yes, that's a set-up but is it invalid? No, it's not invalid and it only becomes invalid if you say 'Well, what I'm going to do now is to give you my true and honest diary of what happened when I trudged across the Sahara - good Lord I happened to come across these scorpions!'

Now that's a lie, that's a distortion but if you wish to explain why scorpions have to dance in that kind of way, which is a valid zoological concept then, it seems to me, you are totally justified in doing it that way.

But once you get to bigger animals then the problems become greater and it's very difficult for you to set up - say, a wildebeest being killed by a lion. Certainly it's very difficult to do it in a way which either would be convincing but also which would be tolerable, morally - and so you don't.

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What you then do is to work out how lions do stalk and how they hunt and work out how you predict that and then set up yourselves in certain circumstances so that you can see it when you think you know where they are likely to make a kill.

Which is what **John Sparks** did for the first … I mean now, filming a wildebeest being hunted by lions is common but in Life on Earth that sequence was a revolutionary sequence and it was got because John and again **Martin Saunders** saw that the lions in the Ngorra Ngorra crater regularly used a certain patch to stalk in and were reckoning to trap wildebeest, ambush wildebeest, where they came round a particular angle of the marsh and there's an old termite hill, the remains of - if you put the Landrover there you just get enough elevation to see it and once John realised that, he sat and was able to film wildebeest being caught by a lion and the resulting sequence was magical and it was very powerful.

FG: Did you have much recourse to zoos and aquariums?

DA: Some, I mean, because in a sense that the Life on Earth was, as it were, an encyclopaedia and had a catalogue quality to it that you needed to see the Giant Salamander of Japan. Now you only needed, in the script that I had, you needed a ten second, fifteen second shot of what a Giant Japanese Salamander looked like.

It would have been absurd to go trekking all the way to Japan and probably not find the thing anyway, except after weeks of searching when there was one sitting in a perfectly good aquarium in Regents Park - so if you wanted a shot of the Giant Japanese Salamander that's what you took.

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FG: Yes, you feel that's fully justified?

DA: Yes because I'm not saying ….my policy on Life on Earth was to make a catalogue of amphibians in that particular programme and the fact that it was in a tank is neither here or there.

FG: Is there a recognised code of ethics?

DA: There is certainly a recognition that there are ethical factors but the trouble is that it is extremely difficult to codify because on the one hand - nobody, not many people are going to be concerned if you dig an earthworm up and you give it to a fish even though it is a living creature but a little more will say, if you take a grasshopper and remove one of its legs so it can't hop away and put that in front of a lizard they may get a bit …. but eventually you get ….people would give a dead day old chick to an owl, for example - because that's what they feed on, that's what you feed birds on but what about mammals? A rat, maybe but a goat … so you've got a ….. it's not easy.

In fact it's very difficult.

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FG: It's not cut and dried, is it? I saw it once defined under three headings. I mean, one of them was Animal Welfare, the second one was Scientific Integrity, I think the third one was, sort of, Editorial Honesty, if I can put it that way.

DA: Scientific Integrity and Editorial Honesty are absolutely true and absolutely correct. You mustn't make an animal appear to do something which it doesn't actually do and you mustn't tell a lie in the sense that you said, as I said earlier that 'We

encountered this on our track through this unknown jungle' when you've filmed it in a zoo - that's a lie.

But the other thing is the welfare of the animal concerned and not causing undue pain or torture or cruelty.

FG: Do you feel that wildlife activities, wildlife filming in general - I'm not just confining it now to the BBC but to what you know about what the practices are across the World - that it's too much inclined towards the large mammal, the charismatic animal.

DA: Not in this Country - after all only a year or so ago there was a series entirely on insects called the Alien Empire and good for them but there aren't many other Countries that deal with natural history across the whole spectrum of the animal world to a degree that the BBC does.

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FG: Yes and of course the commercial companies in this Country do it too, don't they?

DA: Yes they do because .. well, it's the old thing, the BBC in the past gave standards that the commercial companies felt they had to acknowledge and to some extent imitate and equally the BBC felt that the ITV showed standards about audience attraction and popularity which we had to pay account of - so it was a trade off.

FG: And are people coming along to take your place?

DA: Oh yes - there are. Well I have a suspicion that my place won't be taken because I think that the World, as World television grows you don't necessarily want someone coming out and speaking in language or in English or Spanish or German or

anything else round a boulder to explain these things and that the personalised narrator will probably disappear.

FG: Yes, possible. Is there any sort of training offered to aspirants? Do universities have courses?

DA: There are university courses run by an old Bristol Natural History Unit man, **Geoffrey Boswell**, which I think is the only course in the World in Derby of teaching people about natural history programme making.

The presentation bit? There isn't a regulation course, no. That's a sink or swim occupation.

FG: Well, congratulations on your marvellous career, really your contribution to broadening our interests about the world around us is quite unique, utterly outstanding and we're all very proud of you.

This has been a fascinating hours conversation too- thank you very much.

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End of Interview

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