

Interview with Patrick Evans, producer of BBC wildlife documentaries
by Alexander Wolff
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A: How did you become an animal film maker?

P: There's a great story about a Siberian native hunter who was kind of a shaman, and he understood Siberian tigers. This story inspired me, and it led ultimately to my becoming what you might call an animal filmmaker. I read that story five or six years ago; at the time I was writing articles and screenplays, about books, some travel articles, for the Times Literary Supplement and for various other UK newspapers and magazines.

A: And then you came across the fascinating book about the man from Siberia and therefore you decided to become an animal filmmaker?

P: Not quite - first I went to the Russian Far East, to write about the Siberian man. When I came back, I saw a very moving film on the BBC about bears. I had made some friends in Russia who were studying bears, and I thought it would be good to send them this film. So I wrote to the BBC producer and asked if I could have a copy. He said: yes, but let's talk about tigers. So we got talking, and that turned into my current career.

A: You wrote to him: can I get a copy of the bear film, and he responded with: what about tigers?

P: When I told him that I had been in Siberia following tigers, he got very interested, because Siberian tigers are very difficult to film. It was a good opportunity for an ambitious filmmaker such as he is, to make a film about an animal that nobody has really ever properly filmed.

A: So you had been in Siberia, and you had followed the tigers on your travels... just out of your interest?

P: I was interested in the tigers, but I was mainly writing about this Siberian hunter, who lived in the early 20th century. His name was Dersu Uzala. He's a famous figure, Akira Kurosawa made a film about him, also called Dersu Uzala. Kurosawa won an Oscar for it, for the Best Foreign Language film in 1976. It's not an amazing film, but the great thing about it is perhaps the fact that it comes from this story, and the story itself is absolutely amazing and magical.

A: Who wrote the story?

P: It's written by a Tsarist Russian army officer, who was sent to that part of Russia to take part in surveys of the area, at the start of the 20th century when Russia was at war with Japan. He needed a local guide, so he hired a hunter, and this hunter had a sort of shamanic relationship with the tiger and with other animals in the forest. And he taught him a lot, BUT, in the book, which is written as a non-fictional diary of their travels together, and of their great friendship, he presents the man as if it was one man - yet in reality there were several Dersu Uzalas, maybe two or three. And the magic of this book is that he makes it into one person, into this idealized, part-fictionalized native hunter who has a special relationship with animals, and that is part of the beauty, and that's probably what inspired me.

A: So you read the book, watched the movie and you travelled to Siberia and then you thought I wanna see those Siberian tigers?

P: When the BBC guy was saying: let's make a film about tigers, I thought this could help the friends I had made in Russia, people who are protecting and following tigers. I thought it could be good for them. I wasn't really thinking about becoming a filmmaker, I was just thinking it would be good for those people, who are often unrecognized heroic figures. That's one of the things which is important to me personally is that these people are usually doing it because it's a passion. They're not doing it for money, they're just kind of heroic people who have often got problems, bureaucratic problems or political problems or criminal factors such as poaching or logging or mining hindering their work in the countries where they work, and so they're just quite attractive people... even if they are sometimes quite strange, or quiet...they like spending a lot of time in the forests, and so they're not always necessarily very good in social situations!

A: So the BBC man said: wouldn't you be interested in making a film about Siberian tigers?

P: He realized that he needed me to do it because I had a good relationship with these people, and I spoke some Russian. We needed to do it together, so it evolved into a job and eventually into a working partnership. We have worked on lots of films now together. It's been a successful relationship.

A: And he's a director?

P: No, he is currently a series producer or executive producer, which are both senior producing roles at the BBC.

A: So up to that point you basically hadn't really been in close contact with the Siberian tigers yourself?

A: So up to that point you basically hadn't really been in close contact with the Siberian tigers yourself?

P: When I was in Russia we tracked them, but we didn't see them, And when we were filming we tracked them and saw them occasionally, which was very exciting. But they're extremely difficult to see, and it was all new. This was my first big documentary production.

A: So how does a production process normally unroll for any of these films, how do they decide which animals need to get filmed and for what reason, and then what are the next steps and then how does it all go down?

P: It's often pretty random. I think there are two types of nature films today: so there is the type which is like a coffee table book, you know, beautiful pictures of animals and their behaviour, narrated by somebody you never or maybe occasionally see, but it's just an off-screen voice that's telling you how amazing something is. And for me that's becoming quite a boring and outdated and disconnected form of filming, although it's still very popular, because it sells easily. I don't know if you've seen any of these big series like "Planet Earth" or "Frozen Earth", it's that kind of film. They're brilliantly done, but I think they're slightly immoral in a sense that they tend to pretend that everything is well in the world. They could show dolphins behaving in a fantastic way, and you'd think: that 's great! But actually what they don't tell you is that those dolphins are killed by people or that sort of thing. Anyway, these productions often come into being by somebody saying: ok, we sold a lot of copies of Planet Earth, what do we need to make now so we can sell a lot of copies of that? It's quite commercial. And yet it's difficult to replicate the magic. Planet Earth worked well, so well, because it was so unique, fresh, powerful and cinematic at the time. But repeating that formula time and time again and making a hit each time is not easy. The producers will decide which animals and behaviours they haven't ever seen before, and they'll try and film them, and spend a lot of money doing it, and it will take about four or five years to make.

That is one type. The type that I am involved in making is more observational documentary, often with people involved, so with a presenter usually or with some biologists or conservationists, and we try to tell the story of the people working with the animals as well, we try to tell the broader story. And for that, it's a much more complicated process. Let's just say the BBC hasn't made a film about polar bears recently, they might think: Maybe there's somebody interesting that we can find who is working with polar bears?! And then a researcher will go and look for that person or story, and if they find it, then the filmmaking starts. And it will take about a year or eighteen months, and has much less money than the big behavioural films. But even though it might have less dramatic impact, or be less lavishly filmed, it can tell you a lot more about those bears, and people, than a short sequence on polar bears in a big-budget nature series.

There are other types of films too, within these broader categories. Whatever way you look at it, all types of nature film are governed by commissioners, people at the top of organisations like the BBC, the people who decide what they want to show on the channel and I'm sure it's the same in all the other channels all around the world. These are people whose job it is to get bored very, very quickly – part of the idea being that they don't commission anything remotely boring. You have to tell them an exciting idea in about 30 seconds, or 10 seconds - or they're not interested. It's a sales pitch environment, which is the job of the senior producer. For the producer to sell something like Siberian tigers, that's easy in theory, because nobody's really made a series about Siberian tigers, or there are very few of them – it's exotic. But if that producer wants to make something about elephants in Africa, then it's going have to be pretty exceptional... because there are lots of films about them.

A: So you have to come up with a really new specific idea and take on things?

P: Yeah, and people's tastes change as well, so what you're competing against all the time with television - it's not like the cinema where people come in and they've paid their money and they sit in front of the screen for 2 hours. With television, they can change the channel and on the next channel there are naked women, and on the next channel there's football and then on the next channel is a great film, you know, "Gladiator" or something, so you're really fighting these much, much better, more attractive options the whole time. Especially naked women - that's a real problem you can be up against when showing nature films. But luckily some channels, such as BBC, and in Germany actually in particular, there is quite a strong educational need for the broadcasters to show films about other things.

A: So the BBC has a constant big budget going on for animal films?

P: I wouldn't say there's a big budget. Compared to sports, or drama or Reality TV it's quite a small budget, but yes, the BBC currently does have a budget for nature filming. And in Germany, NDR I think makes films, and maybe SWR3 and there's also an Austrian one that's owned by Red Bull – Terra Mater.

A: When I saw Planet Earth in 2010, I was really amazed what a huge production that is, and what a massive effort had gone into this and how much technical novelty came out of this.... you now they are showing the camera tools and all the equipment behind it. And they were showing the camera tools and all the technical equipment behind it. To me this was a kind of masterpiece this whole thing and what I didn't really understand is that these things are already outdated 2 years later and that there are similar big productions going on constantly. And at the same time I found really interesting that it had this self-reflexive moment in Planet Earth, where they show these extra films with the making-of and you get to meet all these people and all their failures in filming, and the animals not showing up, and the equipment breaking down, or the money running out in the crucial moment. It's made into a little extra drama, and to me this inclusion of the "making of" was something I found quite progressive, and quite new, it had this self critical dimension which I thought was good, but now I find it interesting to hear that for you that this is quite a cheesy production...?

P. On the one hand, I feel justified in criticizing that type of film because I think it ignores the wider problem and quite often they

spend very large amounts of money just to film a short sequence, which makes me think that's not necessarily the best way to spend that money. On the other hand, I think you're right... as the viewer is always right! I think there are two elements that I definitely agree with in what you say. The first is the self-critical thing. That is one of the charming factors of those particular "making-ofs". And in a way it's a very British thing to say: "Here we are," and "Look: we're in this foreign place and we're not winning; we're not doing very well. That's quite a British characteristic. But they're often also good little dramas encapsulating a problem, and adding a lot to the main film, and in some ways they're even more interesting than the main film, because suddenly we see the people who are behind it. And that's the point. Often what we need to really connect to nature are the people, and their problems and their characteristics. There are other aspects you mentioned that I think are true. Very worthwhile in these productions is the technical side. Because they do spend a lot of time, effort and money developing camera equipment to film things which we've never been able to film before, partly because the technology hasn't adapted yet. And that is very valuable that those bits of equipment and techniques and knowledge become available to other people to use for other sorts of things. Plus we see sides to animals we never knew about before, which are often breathtaking or hugely interesting. So that's just part of our development – which is good.

And I think there is now a tendency starting to emerge in nature filmmaking to start to want to make films which are more conservation-oriented. Especially at the end, so even if they do spend 50 minutes filming animal behaviour, I think we will now start to see people wanting to attach a 10-minute conservation message at the end. Let's say they've been filming chimpanzees, they might show the person filming or some of the problems surrounding trafficking of animals or bush meat. (Bush meat is where people are going into the jungle to kill animals to sell them at the market because it's their only source of protein.) I think there is a changing tendency in the nature filming industry towards more responsible, and possibly more boring in some ways film-making.

And yet - BBC has this whole department which is making nature films and it's been going for 50 years and in that time something like 50% of the the number of animals on earth have been wiped out. So we have been making all these films for 50 years, and the population of animals has decreased by 50% across the world. And if you watched the films, most of them, you wouldn't realize that. Not that nature filmmaking should be a "call to arms" necessarily, but it's just a shocking fact. One that we have yet to take on board as a planet – as a species.

A: How is your dialogue with the cameraman?

P: That depends entirely on what we are filming. But it is mainly just jokes and irony, because you need a good sense of humor on these things because they are quite hard to work on. In terms of professional dialogue however, if it's just filming animal behaviour, the cameraman often sits on his own in isolation in a "hide" or something like that for days and weeks on end. As a producer or director, you may only see them occasionally, or you might be working alongside or supporting them in a tent nearby - but there's not a lot of dialogue because usually they need to be quiet and watch the animals and just film them without disturbing them.

A: So the camera is running all the time?

P: There is technology now where the camera is constantly recording something, but only when you push the button then it starts recording at the last five seconds before you pushed the button. So you can be waiting for something to happen and as long as you are not asleep, you can push the button and still have what happened before you pushed the button.

For the sort of thing that I do, it's a constant dialogue based on trying to capture the essence of the animal or the person or both. The person being the presenter or it could be a biologist. And if you image the person and the animal are in the same shot then you are trying to construct a visually meaningful relationship and an emotional relationship between the person and the animal but also the person, the animal and the viewer. So you are constantly thinking of how the viewer is going to see and feel what's happening, especially if you've got a person on screen and an animal on screen. So it's all about emotion.

There's not always a presenter, sometimes it's only their voice that you hear. Or you film the presenter looking one way, and then you have to film the animal from the other direction.

A: So the presenter is always a person that has a close relationship with the animal, like a local person, or a biologist?

P: Yes, or it could just be a famous television personality who makes nature films, and whose job it is to convey the story. But with those people, a lot of them are not all that good. It's quite rare to find someone who's really good and passionate and can generate a link between the three of us. It's about getting the cameraman to feel that relationship, and the presenter or the biologist on screen has to feel really comfortable with us and with the animal, and it's kind of a triangular relationship with the viewer as a fourth person actually.

A: How do you construct these emotions that you're trying to convey?

P: It's very simple. So if we come back to Dersu Uzala, it is a diary, a linear story, in which this soldier met this Siberian trapper, where they went to the forest together and slowly a friendship emerged and he learned all sorts of things about the animals and especially about the tiger, and then it ends quite tragically really for his friend, the trapper. In today's nature films, you can't really have a tragic ending – for a BBC nature film, that wouldn't really go down very well. Instead you tend to have this A to B structure with all sorts of ups and downs in the middle and what you're looking for all the time is where you might be on this emotional journey that you are telling. Even though you haven't edited it you haven't made it into a film yet, when you are

filming, you can think what this means, what this moment with the animal or with the person or with both of them, what this can mean for us and how special it is, and what it's about.

A: So the ups and downs are scripted even though you cannot really foresee them?

P: They are scripted beforehand. Let's say you are making a film about a man who is working with black bears let's say, in northern America. And you know that he has a good relationship with these bears but you know that in September the hunting season starts and people are going to start shooting these bears, but he's following them through the forest, so it's going to become dangerous and he is going to lose some of his bears; maybe his favourite bear will be shot. And so you think, well let's definitely plan to go and film in September because that's a really important moment, but let's also film in April or May, when we'll see this bear having a brand new cub. So we fall in love with this cub, but then towards the end of the film, September's going to come, and that's a big threat and who's going to live through it? Then you hope that the bear you have been filming is going to survive. Because obviously you want a happy ending. So you script the thing as: this is what will probably happen, but because it's documentary you just have to follow what does happen.

A: So that kind of drama is something you can find almost anywhere?

P: Yeah you have to. You need that level of drama to tell these kinds of films. I don't know if it's more or less dramatic than Reality TV, where every day there's all kind of drama going on; that's much more addictive and kind of instant gratification for the viewer. So again you're competing against much more dynamic forms of drama because in nature it's all quite slow and after all it is just an animal that it's happening to and most viewers don't really care. It's only serious animal lovers that really care. Nonetheless you can anticipate and you must look for all these types of drama when you are thinking about what you are going to film and what you're going to film next.

You want your story to really be powerful, be true and to really try to portray as much as possible: some kind of simple truth about a dramatic moment in the lives of a certain group of animals and people that you can present in the form of a one hour film or a two hour film. It's just basic filmmaking, but it has to be as good as possible, but of course it has to be true to science and you also don't want to piss off the biologists and conservationists who are working with these animals by saying something that is not true. So you kind of have to dance around that a little bit sometimes because TV requires less boring truths than scientists would like to tell you.

A: Like, say?

P: For example, let's say you're following some wolves, the scientists might say, "we found through a series of measurements that this family of 6 wolves has a territory of 20 thousand hectares, which varied in direct correlation over our 4 year study period based to numbers of moose, based on surveys conducted by the Canadian government." Whereas what we as filmmakers are concerned with is a wolf that we've given a name to, and its journey in somewhat anthropomorphized terms. Not all scientists will like the fact that the filmmakers have given the wolf a name, which we do because obviously we want the viewer to feel connected to that wolf, but scientists would call that wolf something else like wolf number 142, so it's just managing everybody in that situation.

A: Is there something like experimental animal filmmaking?

P: I hope so! I don't know. I am sure that there is probably... that is a very good concept, but... I don't know. I am sure somebody is doing something like that.

A: I am asking about specific types of photography or camera use that is happening in these films, because sometimes they invent new techniques and new lenses, they can do things they have never done before, but at the same time I wonder how much it challenges the conventional picture?

P: I think you are absolutely right. The problem is of course... that television is more or less the only market for wildlife films - there's not really a cinema market - there is the internet of course, but that's kind of free. As with experimental cinema, it is difficult to try to stretch the boundaries of what's acceptable in something that a viewer will turn up to watch.

If you think about experimental cinema, something that's maybe out of focus or you can't really see what the animal is, or you can hear it but you can't see it, or things like that. There are aspects of that in documentary filmmaking and I think you're right, that the technology really is incredible and is expanding constantly and is always delivering new concepts and new ways of looking at the animal. But it is quite traditional in its structures.

For example, at the moment, we are hoping to be able to use a thermal camera to film gorillas at night. This is a military camera and there are only two of them in the world. It has been developed by the military to help to identify "targets," from a helicopter at a distance of about 30 kilometers. You can get facial identification of a person at that distance, at night with military technology, without the person knowing there is even a helicopter anywhere near them. So this camera also now exists for filmmaking professionals, although as I say, there are only two of them, and it is very expensive to use, so most people wouldn't use it, and of course there is no real application for it for filming people, because we don't need to film people at night in that way because there's nothing new we can learn, or there are cheaper ways of doing it.

But for animals it's very useful because a lot of animals are nocturnal, so you can see what they're doing in ways that you never

But for animals it's very special because a lot of animals are nocturnal, so you can see what they're doing in ways that you never could before. So this is very exciting technology for nature filmmakers. We're hoping to be able to try and film gorillas which have never been filmed properly at night before, in Congo. And the images it delivers are extremely high quality, and they're very beautiful and unusual, so they are like a black and white image, obviously, with the white coming from the heat of the body of the gorilla, although you can manipulate it a lot. But they are very beautiful, revelatory images.

However, you are exactly right in that even though those images will be very surprising, and will show lots of things that people have never seen before about that animal, meaning they are very valuable in lots of ways, nevertheless I think they are still quite conventional.

A: You mean the animal is always in the centre of the picture?

P: It's not experimental, it's not playing with our sense of our relationship to those animals; it's still presenting them in traditional forms, ways that we can recognize. But ways that you're thinking of, in terms of experimental animal filmmaking, is a far more radical subversion of that genre, perhaps with different goals. I don't know what the goals would be; I think every experimental animal filmmaker would do things differently maybe, but one person could decide to transform the way we looked at animals, and that would be interesting. But the chances of them getting it onto television are slim... unless they spent 30 years doing it and were discovered to be a genius.

A: So in a sense the way animals have been filmed has remained the same since the beginning, and there isn't really a change of how these pictures are? Even though in the rest of TV I would say the camera techniques have become much more experimental and questioning the picture, and this has translated into TV formats like reality TV and others, whereas it seems that animal filmmaking has stayed more conventional?

P: Occasionally you might have a shot that's deliberately out of focus or a shot which is constructed in order to generate a feeling of beauty, whereby you may not have the animal in the centre of the shot. It may be a landscape or something which is counter-intuitively framed by the cameraman to make us think slightly differently about it, but largely it is all very traditional.

One of the first nature films that was made was about the cuckoo: it was in the 1920s in England and it was an amateur ornithologist who made it, and he wanted to know the secret of how and why the cuckoo lays its egg in a different bird's nest, and so he constructed a big "hide" and he got into it, and with a film camera, a black-and-white clockwork camera, he captured for the first time ever, and completely opened up the secret of the cuckoo for the first time, showing this cuckoo flying in, landing and flying out again with an egg from the nest. She stole an egg from the nest at the same time as laying an egg in the nest and this was the first time anyone had realized this is what was happening and he proved it.

But the point is that even though that was highly challenging, ambitious and experimental in many ways, because why would anyone bother to do that?, it tells you everything you need to know about nature filmmaking. You are trying to find out secrets that are fascinating and have some relevance to human beings in their connection to the natural world, to try and document them, and it is very difficult. But that's the root of it basically, and that is probably why it is traditional, because it is mysterious in itself and so we are trying to reveal those mysteries as much as possible.

A: So you think this is why people like to watch animal films?

P: Why do they like them? I think they like them because they find them relaxing. Sometimes, if it's just beautiful images passing on the screen, it's more relaxing than watching Big Brother, or than watching a war film or watching some drama you could see any other day of the week, so sometimes it's relaxing. And sometimes I think it's to engage their brains in a subject, which they feel they would like to know about. They might feel like wolves in northern Russia, that would be something they would like to see, because they don't know about northern Russia, they've never seen northern Russia, and wolves, of course, that's going to be dangerous. The viewer thinks: Maybe I hate wolves, or maybe I don't hate wolves; I'm excited to see them. So I think once you've hooked people with those two ideas: exciting wolf and northern Russia, a place they haven't seen before, then they're willing to be entertained and educated for an hour and so I think those two things: either relaxing or engaging their brain with something they feel could be more interesting than normal boring television (with the exception of naked women, etc.).

A: But aren't people always entertained by the same kind of stuff? E.g. when I watched "Planet Earth" I remember being so fascinated with the scene where the hungry lions are attacking an elephant at night... it's an incredible scene! Don't you think it's common that people are preferring this to let's say, watching fishes mating or something alike...?

P: In general terms, bigger animals are more exciting and when you have a combination of events, something that's totally unusual, dramatic, horrifying, but amazing at the same time, that's just pure drama, that's fascinating. That's why people watch Youtube videos of cats attacking much bigger dogs or something like that.

A: Do you think there's a different pace in filmmaking nowadays than 20 years ago? Or is there generally a need to be more thrilling because people have already seen so much, or are there always new generations of consumers coming out anyways so it's not really an issue...?

P: I think there are always new generations, and I think also it's an industry, so much like Hollywood or any kind of television I guess. Once that industry exists, it seeks subjects to keep existing because it just needs to exist, it's an economy, it's an industry which seeks to sustain itself. But I think the idea that you have to innovate the whole time, it's both true but it's also a myth in the sense that we have seen a lot of those things before and of course the new techniques and new stories have to be more amazing

sense that we have seen a lot of those things before and of course the new techniques and new stories have to be more amazing, but are they even more amazing? For example, the scene of the elephant being hunted at night by all these lions jumping on it; In a way you can't get anything more amazing than that. How can you say to somebody, "Give me 5 million pounds and I'm gonna go make a 10-part series and we're gonna see lions hunting crocodiles," and they'll say, "Well I've already seen the lions hunting the elephant and I can't imagine they're gonna hunt the crocodiles and it's gonna be more interesting." In other words, it's normal to think you're innovating or advancing everything the whole time, changing the pace, making it faster or more dramatic, but perhaps it's just the same stuff. It's just done by new people or somewhere else different animals. Which works – because the world is endlessly novel, and fascinating.

A: Is there a kind of editing of the amount of brutality in the animal world? Because I saw a film, where people, maybe in Afghanistan, where they do a black bear fighting against pit bulls as kind of public entertainment and it was filmed by an artist, Sigmar Polke, in the 70s when he was in Afghanistan, and I watched this and found it so brutal. Is the animal world much more brutal and a lot of it has to get edited out because people want to see a world more harmonious than their own?

P: You're absolutely right. A lot of it is edited out. You couldn't see that film by Sigmar Polke because someone higher up would say, "Oh no, because there are children going to be watching this. This will be shown at 8 o'clock at night. We can't have that." And that's why in the lion hunting the elephant, we don't cut to scenes of the lion opening up the elephant's belly and pulling out its insides and then the hyenas coming in and then the elephant rotting. You could go on for days and you could film it and you do, you film everything when you are there, but it is portrayed as more harmonious than it is. But it's also portrayed that way to create a natural dramatic trend that people can follow before they get hooked into some voyeuristic urge to watch something bloody, which is what we do on Youtube instead...

A: What is the impact on your personality to be watching animals all the time? Do you think that has an impact on your relationship to people?

P: I think it does. Obviously when you meet people and you say that you film animals, quite often people don't quite know how to engage with it. It's quite difficult perhaps for me to engage with people who engage more with people. But in fact my job is mainly people-orientated. Even if I spend a period of 3 weeks following foxes every day, I will usually be with a person, or with a group of people, and my main focus as well as the fox will be those people. What does it do to me? I don't know...

Cameramen who film things like Planet Earth and maybe also the producers of those sorts of films and the biologists, they seem to be more interested in animals than they are in people. I think a lot of people escape to those kinds of professions because they feel they can trust animals more than people, maybe? I don't know. Why does someone become a biologist protecting panthers? Or why does someone want to make a film watching a giraffe from a car for six weeks? Maybe they feel it is more peaceful, and more disconnected from the busy world of cities or whatever other life they might have, or see other people having at home. It is certainly adventurous.

For me personally I think I am trying to connect with the people I am working with and trying to make their lives better, in some way, in some small way usually. If it has made me more focused on anything, it is maybe more on how to use television money to put it to some sort of social good, which helps animals as well, but mainly helps people. Maybe that's quite serious. I don't know if I like that kind of characteristic.

A: You mean it makes you more serious?

P: Well, yeah. To be able to do that strategically, you have to be quite obsessed with the details of planning and money and the structure of the whole thing as well as the story. You've also got to think about the logistics work and the money, so maybe it makes me more serious.

A: What has been the most exciting moment in the whole animal filmmaking that you can remember?

P: Really the most exciting thing and perhaps the funniest in some ways, is being charged by a silverback gorilla, which is extremely frightening. Big male gorillas weigh three times as much as we do. They are eight times as strong. They have got very long and brown looking teeth and when they scream it is extremely loud and when they charge at you, standing up beating their chest. It is absolutely terrifying, but it's also funny, because after a few seconds they calm down usually, and nobody dies and then you sort of laugh about it and think, what was that about? And then the gorilla looks at you as if to say, "you were annoying me, but it's ok now." Probably we were annoying him, getting too close. Me and the cameraman and Congolese gorilla trackers. And then the gorilla suddenly just looks at you as if nothing's happened, and goes back to eating. It's difficult to decide what that moment is, what the decision in the gorilla's mind is: "These people...I'm tolerating them, they've been filming me for about two hours...I am tolerating them, but now they've just stepped over the line, so I'm going to show them." That flash of anger, which in humans isn't usually so dramatic, but in gorillas is extremely dramatic and the most frightening thing so far that I have seen, but luckily also harmless.

It happens in less than a second, so he might be 20 metres away, but then immediately he's right in front of you. Running up to you, screaming, beating his chest and we're backing away. The instinct is to crouch down and back off, and he keeps on coming, keeps on coming, but then eventually he relaxes, for some reason, and it's ok, and then everyone goes back to normal. We start filming again, he starts eating again.

If the cameraman is very brave, then he captures it and it will go into the film. But there will certainly be a lot of audible noise from the microphones. There were 5 of us. So he could have attacked any one of us, but he didn't

from the microphones. There were 5 of us. So he could have attacked any one of us, but he didn't.

A: Do you have guns when you're filming?

P: No, no guns. The only time I've had a gun and maybe the more frightening situation, but it's more frightening that it exists, was in a tent in the Arctic at the time of year when polar bears are on the sea ice. When the ice melts, there's nothing for them to eat out there, so they have to swim back to the shore and look for any food they can find. We were camping very close to the shore on a big Arctic island and all the ice was gone. And every day we were producing attractive smells cooking food in our tent, and nothing ever happened. But we did sleep with a shotgun loaded with extremely powerful cartridges right next to our heads, because if a polar bear came into the tent, we would have to shoot it. There's no decision, once it's that close, the advice you get from experts is that you just have to kill it. Because the bear would kill you. Because polar bears are not frightened of people at all. So it wasn't very easy to sleep in this place, because if you sleep you could very easily just wake up too late. That was the only time we had a gun as a defence.

A: Generally I think it's quite a beautiful practice ... these moments in remote places, living in a tent and focusing on an animal...experiencing the nature from within...it sounds like a nice way to live!

P: Oh it's a great way to live, for the people who do that, it is extremely privileged way to work and live. You see very beautiful things and you see the world in a different way because of it. And often it's very inspiring and gives a lot of hope for people and the world, and animals although they are often in trouble, but yes, it is extremely nice way to spend your time as well.

I think it helps to look at animals to learn about ourselves. Partly because animals have very different ways of behaving to us, and that can remind us of our own characteristics, which are similar. Or it can show us something new which could perhaps encourage us to change our behaviour. Or to think about our behaviour in a new way.

So I think you're right, I think animals can give us new things, and I think it is necessary for us to look at animals. I'm not saying we should force people to look at animals, but I think a lot of people feel a natural need to do that. Most people don't, but a lot of people do and that's a good thing I think.