

Natural History on Television: fakery and ethics in wildlife documentaries

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It is now nearly 40 years since the release of the Disney film *White Wilderness*, famous for its sequence showing thousands of lemmings committing mass suicide by throwing themselves off the top of a cliff. Controversy struck when scientists explained that wild lemmings do not, in fact, behave in this way. But that was nothing to the furore when it emerged that the entire sequence had been staged. The supposedly suicidal Norwegian lemmings were in fact pushed off a cliff under a bridge in Calgary, Alberta. Their carcasses were later scooped up from the Bo River and frozen for later scenes.

White Wilderness is often held to represent the bad old days of wildlife film-making, and since then natural history has slowly moved out of the realm of the Hollywood feature film and into television, where it is seen to be in the safe hands of people such as our own David Bellamy and Richard Attenborough. From the security of the science-based, educationally-driven format, the producers are believed to be caring, principled individuals who would never countenance the atrocities and inaccuracies represented by *White Wilderness*.

So would it surprise you to discover that sequences in the high-profile, high-budget *Wildlife Special* series currently being shown on BBC1 were filmed in captivity or with hand-reared animals? Such practices are in fact more common than is often believed, and go to the heart of an ethical debate that is ruffling feathers in a usually complacent world, where wildlife film-making is championed as broadcasting's darling, its house very much in order. Produced and presented mainly by scientists or passionately committed experts, it has maintained its educational remit while simultaneously making the move into high-quality, dramatic entertainment. Not only has it survived the transition to an increasingly competitive and deregulated television market, but it seems to be flourishing. Natural history now has several dedicated satellite channels and continues to have a high profile in the schedules of terrestrial channels. Somewhere in the evening's schedules, you can be guaranteed charismatic mega-fauna, dramatic predation sequences, remarkable special effects, exquisite, high-definition photography, the latest discoveries and endless revelations. The only problem clouding the horizon would seem to be that the supply can hardly keep up with the demand.

But last year, ripples of unease were sent through this otherwise rather insular world when the *Denver Post* re-ported serious allegations against veteran wildlife film producer Marty

Stouffer that he not only faked scenes but mistreated animals. Stouffer was the producer of the long-running PBS series *Wild America*. Accusations from fellow professionals and ex-employees included claims that Stouffer had faked wild scenes with penned animals, had used tethered bait for the dramatic 'predation' sequences and had faked incidents. One supposed attack by a wild beast involved a pet mountain lion chasing its owner on skis. Ed Stewart, head of the Performing Animals Welfare Association, which runs a sanctuary for animals once they have been used in TV shows and in animal acts, claimed that Stouffer was just the tip of the iceberg in an 'ugly' industry. 'Marty Stouffer,' he stated, 'discovered the easiest prey of all were animal lovers who watched nature films.' Although PBS's own internal enquiry denied these allegations, the company nevertheless pulled the series.

In Britain, wildlife-programme makers were quick to disown this as an exception in an normally ethical milieu, although producers admitted such things had occurred in the past. Earlier this year, Mike Penny, a producer for TV's *Survival Anglia*, confessed: 'I was guilty of letting a golden eagle loose on a tethered rabbit, and a kit fox on a mouse. I regret it now, but at the time - in the Seventies - it was considered defensible.' Most insist that today such practices have largely disappeared as part of a general increase in concern for animal welfare. Yet this kind of footage still sits in the archives and could, feasibly, one day emerge at the bargain-basement end of the TV market

The BBC's Natural History Unit, which remains the biggest producer in this area, had already produced a code of ethics before the Stouffer scandal broke in the US. The Guidelines For Filming And Handling Wild Animals make it clear that no film-maker should be involved in any activity that could reasonably be considered cruel. This goes beyond the staging of the infamous 'predation sequences' - animal snuff movies, as some have called them. It also requires producers to look at the unintended consequences of filming, such as filming with night lights, which might disorientate predators or prey, making them vulnerable. Producers were told not to 'cause physical harm, cruel anxiety, consequential predation or lessened reproductive success'. The code's bottom line is that the welfare of the subject is more important than the sequence.

Mike Gunton, who drew up the BBC's code, says it was as much a response to new commercial pressures as a response to animal liberation, needed because 'the business was booming, and there was an influx of new and inexperienced producers'. The reasons for this boom were the changes brought about by multi-channel and diversified television, in which wildlife film-making has flourished. Both outlets and income have undergone a rapid expansion, bringing with it commercial pressures, particularly through programme sponsorship.

Gunton continues: 'The Americans work in a very different environment from ours. There's no such thing as public-service broadcasting - even PBS has sponsorship - and there is a pressure towards producing ever-more dramatic television. We weren't worried that anyone was doing anything wrong, but we were concerned that young, inexperienced film-makers might feel under pressure to get a dramatic sequence.'

At first glance, animals on television appear to have greater protection from the wildlife paparazzi than people have from their human equivalent. But the worries are well-founded. At the Jackson Hole Wildlife Film Festival in Colorado this year, Mike Wheeler, of the highly-respected science-and-research organisation, the Audobon Society, described travelling to Hollywood to discuss new outlets for the society's quality programmes: 'A high-ranking official at Fox TV enthusiastically outlined a special he thought would be perfect for us. You guessed it: 'When animals attack' or 'When animals go berserk'. We sat there looking stunned. Then one of us managed to choke out, 'But you don't understand. We're the Audobon society.'

But even within the BBC's code of ethics there are grey areas. The document permits the staging of predation scenes if they involve invertebrates, but not vertebrates. Yet some practitioners in the field are uneasy even with these distinctions. Steve De Vere, a wildlife cameraman who has worked on numerous BBC programmes, says, 'Personally, I am not comfortable doing this. It's like vegetarianism. Where do you draw the line?' Certainly, the implication is that the lower order of species are afforded less protection. The BBC itself is well-known for its extravagant studio recreations of the exact condition in which insects and invertebrates live, even down to the temperature and humidity. But rumours persist that, elsewhere in the business, the use of high-powered studio lights often dries up and burns smaller creatures. There have also been criticisms of the practice of importing insects and amphibians from abroad for filming, and certainly questions about where these creatures end up afterwards.

The BBC code invokes the British law on the protection of wildlife, and acts as a reminder to producers that they can be prosecuted for disturbing protected species. Even Gunter thinks this leaves an ethically grey area. 'I don't see the difference between disturbing a starling's roost or a bat's.' When working in countries without animal-protection laws, producers are told to follow similar principles. But does this mean only endangered or rare species will be protected? In the end, producers have to exercise good judgment and rely on the guidance of colleagues. But while this might be effective in busy departments such as the BBC's Natural History Unit, where rule-bending is easily detected, it does not apply to films made by different producers with different ethical standards in different circumstances. Overhearing a conversation at the bar of the Wildscreen Festival in Bristol, I was forced to remind myself

that the two macho, leather-jacketed men discussing the challenges of various shots, did their work with cameras and not guns.

But the accusations in the US against Marty Stouffer for staging shots have much wider repercussions for the debate on how far film-makers should go to get a good sequence. Is it permissible to bring together animals in order to speed up or stage events - encounters between two aggressive males, for example? Do the complaints against Stouffer imply that film-makers should never use captive or penned animals, or animals in special studios, a practice that has become commonplace in the filming of creatures whose main behavioural 'highlights' take place underground? Is it never appropriate to use trained or tamed animals in wildlife films, or to stage events? And what of special effects and computer enhancement, which has increasingly been used to film creatures in one context and then set them in another? When the pressure is on for more sensational shots, what should guide decisions about inclusion and exclusion?

Polar Bear is part of BBC1's new showcase series, Wildlife Special, and it shows up how these ethical dilemmas have intensified in the new competitive climate. Filmed in incredibly arduous conditions using local experts, it presents itself as capturing a number of 'never-before filmed' sequences. In one, a bear is shown upended, diving headfirst into the snow, hunting for seal cubs. In another, a large male bear was filmed close up as he swam between ice floes. These are not 'habituated' animals - animals so used to human presence that they become oblivious - and filming in such conditions involves incredible dangers. The cameramen had several head-on encounters with suspicious, aroused bears, and on one occasion became stranded when their ice floe split and drifted out to sea. The end product, as the series editor claims, is full of firsts - culminating in the first true picture of the polar bear in action as a marine predator.

However, another first in the film - the sequence showing the birth of the polar bear cubs - was actually filmed in a zoo. Keith Scholey, the series editor, explains its inclusion: 'Some people might think that this is bad or deceitful. But, actually, there were issues of animal welfare here. Technically, we could have located the den of a wild polar bear and used an endoscopic camera. But scientists advised us that even this would cause disruption. They considered that it would be preferable to film a captive bear.'

Eventually, a pregnant bear was found in a Belgian zoo. A Perspex den was constructed and, after a series of technical 'hiccups', including having to re-paint the den, the female bear adopted it. The sequence was finally filmed using infra-red light with a remote camera, and makes an extraordinary sequence. Both cubs subsequently died, but Scholey insists it had nothing to do with the filming; it is extremely rare for polar bears to breed successfully in

captivity. Scholey points out that the ethics here are much more complex than would first appear. 'Even some of the films that involve no interference or staging of events are done entirely with habituated animals that carry on their wild behaviour as if the humans weren't there. But another group of people might say that this was just as much a distortion. Are these animals more 'wild'? Who knows truly what effect our presence has on the animals.' No one is trying to deceive here. Wildlife programme-makers are notorious for being over-interested in their techniques, and this series is no exception. A full account of the filming of the birth of the cubs can be found in the BBC book accompanying the series.

But for the casual viewer, it still comes as a surprise - more, a disappointment - to learn that the sequence purporting to portray a unique picture of an animal in its wild environment was actually filmed in a zoo. Steve De Vere gives this as another reason for his reluctance to film animals in captivity: 'I worry that if the people who watch knew, they would be disappointed. They think they are watching wildlife not zoolife.'

Alistair Fothergill, head of the BBC's Natural History Unit in Bristol, is clear that the overarching principle that guides the interweaving of such sequences is that 'what happens in the programmes must be scientifically accurate and must be what happens in nature'. The guidelines echo this: use scientists at all times and portray only authentic, natural behaviour of animals. Yet the unit is reluctant to carry disclaimers on the films indicating where captive animals have been used. Is this perhaps through concern that it would raise doubts where none existed previously? Would audiences then come to doubt the authenticity of the shots in all future programmes?

And beyond this is the question of why such difficult shots, which require staging, are necessary at all. Would this sequence have been necessary had the programme not been driven by this quest for the new? Probably not. But when the pressure is on to look at hot subjects in new ways, the temptations increase to stage events that are not accessible to observational techniques. The BBC's new series exemplifies the way these ethical dilemmas are becoming more marked in the new competitive market for natural-history film-making. Unlike many of the strands of natural history on TV, these programmes are destined for the larger audience of BBC1, not BBC2, and expect to win up to ten million viewers. In spite of their large budgets (often as much as pounds 600,000), they are potentially huge earners in sales to foreign channels and the video market.

Internationally, sales of wildlife videos are BBC Worldwide Ltd's biggest earner. Such sales themselves limit the aesthetics. The programmes have to be carried by their visuals, so that only the commentary need be changed for sales to foreign territories. They are also expected to have a shelf-life of at least five years, which limits the possibility of an argument-driven

programme, where issues of environment or immediate pressures facing a particular species are reduced. This favours programmes that deal with the lifestyle of a single animal or place.

Such commercial constraints also limit the subject. The popular subjects are the highly charismatic animals - predators or mega-fauna. No one is under any illusion that there's a list of top animals - lions, elephants, large mammals. And the specialist channels have increased this pressure. Discovery Channel, for example, has special shark weeks; and there appears to be an almost endless appetite for the sensational or the scary. *Nightmares Of Nature*, co-produced by the BBC and National Geographic, was a typical compromise to this pressure last year. And with this increased competition, the challenge really is to do something new with the subject.

Another BBC Wildlife Special shows just how much artifice has entered the TV portrayal of 'nature'. The approach embodied in John Downer's film *Eagles*, to be shown on December 17, is now another distinct school in natural-history film-making. This is a highly stylised and edited production, emphasising the cleverness of the shot and original perspectives. *Eagles* opens with a shot from a micro-camera mounted on the back of a falconry eagle. It includes sequences where an eagle drops a tortoise to smash it on rocks below - a sequence, I was told, variously, shot using empty tortoise shells or fake shells and intercut with a point-of-view shot filmed from a remote-controlled helicopter-mounted camera. Other complex sequences were shot with 'imprinted' birds, a technique that takes advantage of the fact that birds hand-reared by humans will follow them anywhere, including beside microlight aircraft, along Perspex tunnels or behind cars. These last two allow a film-editor to later insert an appropriate background.

Downer insists he stayed well within the ethical codes and guidelines. He has, he says, never used live animals to set up a predation sequence and would avoid at all costs putting unnecessary stress on animals, hence his use, at certain points, of falconry birds. 'The core of this film is classic wild behaviour. I just use a much wider variety of techniques because I believe viewers should be more involved with the animals.' The outcome is certainly different.

Normally, when an observational film-maker edits a hunt or predation sequence, they intercut sequences shot at different times but usually from the same camera angle. Downer, however, uses several different cameras and viewpoints, the aim being to 'intensify the drama, so involving the audience more'.

'If a film-maker takes the position that they will never interfere with nature to get their sequence, it really limits what you can show the audience. Observational film-makers take a very easy route. They're doing what everyone wants to be doing. There's nothing better than sitting on a Land-Rover day after day watching the animals. But these tend to be habituated animals. That takes a lot of time and not all animals will tolerate it anyway. At the end, you might get a film that gives insight into an animal, but you might not. You might miss all sides of it.'

Downer argues that 'there is more than one way of representing the natural world'. He is, he says, looking to intensify drama and involvement, and argues that filming animals such as moles and harvest mice requires constructed sets to get any real new insight into behaviour: 'The film-makers who work in this way put in so much effort. They build beautiful sets with beautiful lighting. I don't like the attitude that one type of film-making is better than the other, or a purer representation of nature. They are just different approaches. But I know whose putting in the most effort - the one constructing the mole run.'

The mole is a rather unfortunate example. A new series, National Geographic's Wild Tales, currently showing on Channel 4, was trailed by a dramatic wildlife sequence that began with a mole flying into shot across the top of the camera. Other mole programmes have included scenes of vicious fights between male moles, usually solitary animals. It is hard not to wonder precisely how these shots were achieved. When driven both by the need for novelty and the quest for artistic originality, the temptations to stage and exploit become greater.

John Sparks, former head of the BBC's Natural History Unit, is clear about this process: 'A lot of natural-history programmes are getting more and more contrived. Whether or not they get found out depends on how well they do it.'

For some, this is a very emotive issue. Martin Colbeck is generally held to be one of the world's leading wildlife cameramen. He's well known for his exquisite films *Echo Of The Elephants* and *Echo The Second Generation*, and has recently won prizes for a film about the Bonobo, or pygmy, chimpanzees. All were filmed over several years and involved no constructed or set-up shots. 'It's a sensitive subject, but ethics are involved. Some of the highly constructed films seem to be determined more by the imagination of the film-maker - perhaps they are more interested in the image, in what would be dramatic - than the wildlife, letting the behaviour determine what you film.'

Martin originally started work in a studio in London, producing sequences of insects and small mammals in controlled circumstances. 'But it wasn't where I wanted to be. I wanted to be outside with wild animals.' When he went freelance five years ago, he took a decision never again to film in controlled circumstances. 'I have manipulated behaviour to get a sequence. I don't feel comfy with it. When I worked with an artificial set on a film about prairie dogs, there was some pressure to produce a predation sequence. But I couldn't do it. It would have meant setting up a dog I was fond of.'

Colbeck has pioneered what has been called 'animal soap operas'. He prefers to describe them as 'letting the animals tell the stories', following both what is happening to animals and their reactions to events. Accused of anthropomorphism, he is dismissive: 'It's not a question any more, for me, about whether animals have emotions. I know they do - I've seen stuff unequivocally expressing emotions. In the film about pygmy chimpanzees, my central character, an orphan, was attacked and had his finger badly bitten. After the attack, he just lies there looking very sorry for himself. And then, one by one, his peers come up to him and gently pick up his finger, examining it. He was looking for sympathy and he got it. And when I was filming the elephants of Amboseli, I came to know them extremely well. I could tell from day to day if they were feeling upset or bored or mischievous.'

This produces a different kind of film: the behavioural sequences are understood in terms of what has happened to those animals and their groups previously. This is much less of a thesis and more of a story, and Colbeck believes that these insights are contributing to a new understanding of animals. 'The boundaries between humans and animals are breaking down as a result of these long-term studies showing that animals have emotions. And wildlife photographers have made a contribution to that. We often end up spending longer unbroken time with the animals than even the scientists.'

Colbeck is by no means the only cameraman to have taken this route. Another top photographer, Hugh Miles, has just won a top prize at Jackson Hole for a his film about pumas in Chile. To make this film, Miles lived for two years in the Andes, only occasionally in the company of another cameraman, who would provide the shots that show how Miles's own footage was achieved. The end product is as much about the process of tracking, habituating and filming this elusive beast as it is about its life-cycle.

This school of film-making is not without its own ethical dilemmas. In his film, Miles himself ponders the dangers in having acclimatised a wild beast to human presence, especially as her territory bordered the edge of a national park, beyond which poaching is endemic. Keith Scholey, series editor for the BBC's Wildlife Special series, says: 'Habituation is fine if there's stability and control in a country, if there are established national parks with

effective anti-poaching laws. But it's a real problem in countries like Zaire. If animals become acclimatised to vehicles, they can be removed more easily. The tigers poached first from around the national park in India were the ones the tourists knew because they were most habituated to humans. But there is a balance. If there weren't the floods of tourists, then the animals would not necessarily get the protection afforded them as revenue earners.'

What ultimately frames any discussions about the vulnerability of individual animals used in the films is a wider question about the vulnerability of nature itself. For many, the debate on how to portray the wild goes beyond issues such as staging or trick effects to considering how to describe nature in a way that moves people to protect it. This is ethics in a broad sense: what responsibilities do film-makers have towards the subject matter they exploit for entertainment, and their careers, when that subject matter - nature - is so vulnerable? 'Are we to go on endlessly producing more and more living edens when they are disappearing faster than we can edit the films?' asks Jeffrey Bosswall, who worked for the BBC's Natural History Unit as a producer for 30 years and is presently the 'world's first and only academic teacher of wildlife TV'.

On this subject, many of the practitioners are less confident that they have done their job well. While the spectacular programmes of individual animals and species have flourished, programmes dealing with conservation have slipped in the schedules, and environmental issues have been pushed to the margins of an excessive emphasis on the endearing (fluffy-bunny films) or the terrifying (predators and nightmares). As Keith Scholey says, 'the BBC's Natural History Unit has done well on wildlife, which is an important first step because you have to draw people in, to make them feel it is worth caring about. But if we've failed, it's in not making good enough films about conservation.'

It's no coincidence that new ways of combining environmental issues with natural history are coming from independent producers. Petra Regent, series editor for Survival Anglia, says that she is less worried about the mistreatment of animals - which she thinks is rare - than about the false expectations created about nature. 'This is more insidious. Programme makers like to claim their programmes create a love for nature, which leads to an interest in conservation. But I think they may be creating false impression. Especially in Britain, people may go and be disappointed about a less spectacular nature. There's a danger they may not think it is deserving of protection.'

Fothergill insists that this spectacularisation of nature creates the love of nature that is needed to make people care about conservation. When asked what natural-history film-makers give back to the field that they so profitably till, he gives exactly this answer. Yet for some on the front line, this is not enough. Martin Saunders is one of the longest-serving wildlife

cameramen, and has worked on the major David Attenborough series - his was the incredible footage in Life On Earth when a mountain gorilla came and peered into the camera. But recently, he's been giving time freely to work on an independent production. The Living Planet series Endangered will plough back a percentage of its profits into educational projects in the communities living closest to the endangered species, and in whose hands their survival ultimately rests. 'Wildlife has given me a good living,' says Saunders, 'and being so close to certain animals is a privilege. I want to put something back in.'

The push towards added drama in wildlife films means that they now share many of the dilemmas of human docu-dramas. But there are important differences. The international market for documentaries about anything other than crooks and Nazis is slight, so the predilections of the both the US market and the lucrative video market do not so directly affect content. Also, human subjects can fight back: they can complain; they can also be pilloried in the press; they can even, like the couple from this summer's TV sensation, Driving School, become minor celebrities for a while. All of this imposes a rough-and-ready discipline on the makers of human-based documentaries. But animals have no such defence. Animals don't appear on Right To Reply. So the ultimate guarantors of the ethics of wildlife film-making are the film-makers themselves.

In the hands of cameramen such as Martin Saunders, this special bond of trust is safe. But for how long?