



Creating the Nation's first BioPark

National Zoological Park · Smithsonian Institution · Washington, D.C. 20008-2598

Letter From the Desk of David Challinor  
September 1996

The fascination triggered in many people by watching the excellent nature films available both on cassettes and on regularly scheduled television is reflected in their popularity. The viewer marvels at the seemingly impossible-to-photograph sequences such as a ferret crawling down a prairie dog hole or the frenzied efforts of termite workers deep in a colony to save their queen from the probing tongue of a hungry aardvark. Most viewers are seldom concerned with how the photographer was able to achieve such amazing footage, but we assume that it generally takes hard work and often considerable luck. Fortunately, when filming is done carefully and professionally, it does not seem to alter the behavior of the subject animal significantly.

Contemporary nature photographers enjoy access to elegant, state-of-the-art equipment that permits shooting sequences in dark narrow confines that would have been impossible a few decades ago. The facilities at the BBC's natural history unit in Bristol, UK or those of the Oxford Scientific Films are both exceptionally competent to record aquatic insect predators stalking and catching their prey, or the nest building activity of the spiny stickleback (a small fish). The availability of experts in technical filming and in animal behavior, combined with an increasingly sophisticated audience, precludes a practice common 60 years ago where the director of a Johnny Weismuller Tarzan film would merely order a large group of "wild animals" from the local studio animal supplier for his jungle shots. I remember as a boy being upset at seeing Asian elephants and giant South American anteaters in an African jungle sequence. Furthermore, the viewers of today's nature films are mercifully spared carefully staged studio "fights" of large animals that were the sine qua non of every Frank "Bring 'em Back Alive" Buck movie.

We seem to have progressed in our accurate portrayal of natural history sequences, but as the demand is still strong for such films, we as viewers must be alert while watching unusual animal action sequences. For example, I recently switched the TV channel to the middle of a film showing a remarkable close-up of a large mountain lion. It was moving purposefully along a stream in what appeared to be the U.S. southwest. My first reaction was how did the photographer ever get that close to such an elusive cat. Furthermore, the camera followed the lion up a draw to where it encountered a small group of desert mountain sheep on a ridge. The lion unsuccessfully chased one of the ewes, and I marveled at the technical aspects of shooting the chase sequence.



I have probably become too skeptical to accept blindly whatever I see on the screen or read in the newspapers, so I intently observed the animals involved. The lion seemed clearly to be well fed, but it was not as grossly overweight as the Siberian tiger in the Exxon TV commercials, whose flabby flanks jiggled grotesquely as it galloped across the screen. The mountain lion and its background did not seem distorted as it would have if photographed with a telephoto lens. Finally, its coat seemed unusually without blemish, in contrast to the coats of two wild lion carcasses I saw when I lived in west Texas. I concluded that this animal was a hand-raised one, trained well enough to accompany its handler and accustomed to the sight and sound of a photo/video camera. The whole sequence might have been shot in a large area with a hidden fence built specifically for such a film. Although an expensive approach to wildlife filming, the value of this trained lion and the opportunity for realistic close-up action shots might have made the investment worthwhile. What bothered me, however, was that I did not remember any acknowledgement of the staging of the sequences shown on the screen.

Am I being too demanding of honest presentations, or should I merely put such highjinks in the same category as promises made in political campaign speeches? The mute acceptance by the viewing public of what I felt was dishonest reporting was frequently evident in NBC's coverage of the Olympics. At no time was the viewer told whether the footage of an event or race was "live" or previously filmed. Does the public care? Evidently not.

Last 15 April 1996 The New York Times published an article on the making of nature films and investigated the techniques of one producer. First, the investigators learned that large sums of money can be involved, a million dollars or more. The National Geographic Society's television subsidiary, for example, contracted with NBC to produce five nature programs. However, in contrast with their popularity, nature specials are relatively inexpensive to produce compared to having high salaried actors perform. Also, these nature films enjoy a good resale opportunity abroad, both because of their appeal and the low cost of adaptation. All that has to be changed is the language of the voice-over.

To protect their image, reputable networks and TV producers have set strict standards. The BBC, for example, used to not show a vertebrate eating a vertebrate, a policy appreciated by many lay viewers. The Discovery Channel will not show any staged action, although actual footage may be edited to enhance the scene's drama. The National Geographic, according to one of its spokespersons, has fewer rules but said they rely principally on the honesty and integrity of the photographers and scientists

with whom they work. The networks and producers mentioned above have been relatively free from accusations of cruelty to animals or staged events. One popular producer, however, acknowledged that "The 'pictorial essays' which I create are always true and yet they are not always real." This Delphic statement is not only confusing but leaves me uneasy.

There are many cases in which complicated animal behavior is best shot in a laboratory, and I have no objection at all to this being done, as long as it is made clear to the audience. For example, not long ago an elegant sequence was photographed of a fish-eating bat catching and eating a fish. The action happens so quickly that the photographer set up the scene in a lab and recorded the fish catch in slow motion. The bat entered the screen from the right, adjusted for the parallax caused by the inch of water above the fish, dropped his right hind foot behind the fish and hooked it with its long foot claws, scooped up the fish, bent its head down over its stomach and grabbed the fish in its mouth. The action was too quick to be followed by the human eye, but the slow motion camera recorded it all.

I encourage the use of every new filming technique as long as they are freely acknowledged in natural history productions. In serious fiction and fantasy films, the issue of truth in depiction is not relevant. For example, The New York Times article referred to earlier reported that in the film Jurassic Park, scenes of running dinosaurs were actually produced from BBC footage of running ostriches and the birds were computer-enhanced to appear as dinosaurs. As the film was clearly fantasy, such electronic tricks can scarcely be criticized.

I will doubtless continue my addiction to nature films, made all the more enjoyable for me because I have by now actually been to so many of the sites portrayed. The industry has fortunately accepted new standards of content since the days of Frank Buck. Viewers can enjoy the thrill of a trip to the Arctic tundra or the East African plains without leaving home. I admire the patience and skill of the dedicated photographers, who are generally in the business because of their passion for natural history. The next time you watch an animal sequence on the television, try to imagine what the photographer must have done to take the shot you are seeing. Can you figure how they got so close to a particularly elusive animal? The making of such films can be just as interesting as the sequences displayed. Watch them all with a skeptical eye, however, and you too may add to your enjoyment by matching wits with the producer/photographer. We enjoy being fooled, but understanding the trick being played on us can be an even more exhilarating experience.

David Challinor  
202/673-4705  
202/673-4607 FAX