

The night air of northern India lulls you with the light, hollow drumbeats of nightjars or the insistent popping hoots of Asian scops owls. But one night last year I was woken by the sudden sound of absolute terror: the passage of panic from wailing peacocks to hiccupping spotted deer. My torch-beam was met by a hundred silent eyes. Jackals, stiff-legged with fright, had crowded into our little compound and a line of deer had frozen against the perimeter fence. A tiger was somewhere very near. Edging the jeep out of camp, we aimed the headlights into the forest behind the deer. A huge, rattling porcupine hurtled past us across the road. Then, one by one, the deer crept to us on tiptoe, their stiletto hooves clicking on the asphalt as they picked their way towards the safety of the lights. They passed within inches of us, keeping us like an inappropriate talisman between the invisible tiger and themselves.

We knew how they felt. A few hours earlier, driving back miles from camp, we had seen a huge shape enter the forest far ahead. When we reached the spot we stopped and waited, and I did something silly. I sucked on my hand to produce a squeal that attracts curious animals. It grew dark. We heard nothing. Then suddenly it was there, right beside us, its massive head, hot and gleaming at my elbow. No warning cries in the dark for us, just the immense, astonishing presence of the tiger. Like jackals, like spotted deer, we froze. Slowly, on cushioned feet in impossible silence, the tiger moved in front of the jeep and swung away up the track. We recovered. We followed him in our lights for half an hour as he inspected the signs in the sand. We watched him sniff the trees, leaving the path now and then to lift his tail and squirt his signature on the broad sloping trunks. At last he turned away, growing smaller and disappearing into the forest.

All this, the excitement, the beauty, the terror, is the essence of "tiger". It is precisely the sort of impression that, as wildlife film-makers, we try to express in our films. But in doing so, we mislead the public. We tell the truth – but we do so in an economical way. Do we, for example, show the audience that when the tiger left the track, it was because he did not wish to cross the railway line that chops in half this particular relic of forest, and that he turned away to avoid the raucous tinny radios stabbing out from the village up the line?

The answer in most nature films is no. When we film lions gorging on a bloody zebra in the Serengeti, or a cheetah flat out after a bounding gazelle, we rarely turn the cameras on the dozen or so Hiace vans and land-rovers, packed with tourists sharing the wilderness experience with us. All over the world, we frame our pictures as carefully as the directors of costume dramas, to exclude telegraph poles and electricity pylons, cars, roads and people. No such inappropriate vestige of reality may impinge on the period-piece fantasy of the natural world we wish to purvey.

The commissioners of television programmes believe that the public watch wildlife films because they wish to be reassured that there is an unspoiled earth out there, somewhere beyond the street lighting. We the film-makers must be the intrepid explorers with the skill and patience to spend years in the wilderness to capture it for them. True wilderness, however, has mostly disappeared. Wildlife, wherever we try to film it, is rarely living an unencumbered, natural existence. Almost everywhere, it is in some way involved with man and dependent on him for its survival. Forty years ago, a pioneering German cameraman, Eugen Schuhmacher (not to be confused with the E. F. Schumacher of *Small is Beautiful*), travelled the world for a decade filming the animals that he believed were close to extinction. I still remember seeing his programmes as a child. Last year I wrote an update

Pocket tigers

The sad unseen reality behind the wildlife film

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for Sir David Attenborough to narrate on the BBC. We called the two programmes "Winners and Losers". The winners – trumpeter swans in America, the Japanese crane – were creatures that had attracted beneficial human attention, scientific, cultural and religious, and had even, like the Komodo dragon in Indonesia, become film-stars in their own right. They also mostly lived in rich countries. The losers lived in poor countries and had not adapted so well to the uses to which man puts the earth. The film ended with the Asian lion. This was the lion of the Bible and of the Roman games, which once ranged from Greece to eastern India. Now there are just 300 left, north-west of Bombay, in a single scrub forest which is ploughed and sown with maize right to its edge. Although these lions live in the wild, the earth has shrunk beneath their feet, and the rolling space that made them a viable race is now denied them. They are penned within the great conservation theme-park of planet earth.

This tragic loss of wilderness presents the wildlife film-maker with a fundamental dilemma. So long as we sustain the myth of nature, our programmes find a wide and appreciative audience. So many viewers could do a lot for conservation. But, as viewing figures adamantly prove, once we make a habit of telling the bad news our audience slinks away. Television, after all, is primarily an entertainment medium, and wildlife films fill an escapist, non-controversial slot. Of course, there are exceptions. When the BBC first broadcast *Tiger Crisis*, about the soaring rise of tiger-poaching to supply traditional medicines to the Chinese, there were 3,000 phone calls to the switchboard. But such interest

cannot be maintained in film after film, even though the crisis is continuous and affects almost every other species on earth.

There is a moral discomfort involved in pitching your tent on the slopes of the world's crises. You notice it in charity workers when they become aware that the emotive image of disaster used to pluck money from our pockets for the cause will also underwrite their salaries. You may even find it among the smooth consultants employed by the United Nations, scoffing in expensive hotels as they slither around the developing world relieving poverty. The wildlife film-maker too is in a moral bind. Put simply: he makes his living out of nature; nature is disappearing. If he says too much about that, he loses his audience. If he does not, he loses his subject.

Film-makers have evaded this dilemma by concentrating on the wonder of nature. Sir David Attenborough, for instance, believes that it is his task simply to persuade the public that animals are interesting and beautiful. His revelations will then make people susceptible to the harder conservation messages purveyed by campaigning bodies like Greenpeace and Friends of the Earth. So far, this policy – of using entertainment to open the eyes and leaving it to politicians and philosophers to make people act and think – has been quite effective. Popular awareness of animals and their plight has, after all, increased exponentially during the forty years since Schuhmacher.

Indeed, wildlife is one of the few areas of television (sport is perhaps another) which are truly revelatory. The film-makers' creative use and development of technology – time-lapse, slow motion and macro – have helped show us things

we could never see in real life. The technical watershed was probably marked by the film of the private life of the alder wood wasp, made by Gerald Thompson in the 1960s. He went on to found Oxford Scientific Films with a group of Oxford scientists, photographers and engineers who built their own lenses for close-up work and found imaginative ways of lighting fragile subjects like invertebrates, so they would not be cooked. Their subsequent work, on the sex-life of flowers and the lifecycle of the stickleback, have attained mythic stature, but they bequeathed one unfortunate legacy. They showed that the quality of the stories that could be told in the controlled conditions of the studio was so good that films shot exclusively in the wild could not easily compete. The result has been more and more sequences shot on sets under lights and a consequent blurring of what is "real" and what is staged.

The definition of truth in nature films is not quite such a moveable feast as it is, for instance, in travel writing. Travel writers appear to share no rules controlling the proportion of fact, embellishment and downright lies in their work. Wildlife film-makers, on the other hand, seem to have developed a collegiate view, amounting to a code of conduct, that any scene can be staged provided it depicts a scientifically observable fact. This distinguishes contemporary work from the bad old days of Disney, when scorpions danced and lemmings threw themselves off record-turntables disguised as cliffs in defiance of truth. There are other provisos too: that cruelty should be eschewed and the commentary should not tell an outright lie, stating specifically, for example, that an animal on screen is wild when it is not.

One way of returning to a more absolute form of truth is the live broadcast. Video cameras have been trained on an African waterhole, a badger's sett, a sparrowhawk's nest or dawn scenes across the world, so that broadcasters can tune in and out at will. But most nature films are entertainments, based on truth but not "true". They are cut and assembled just like dramas, from disparate shots, sometimes filmed months and miles apart. Just as film-stars have body doubles, so the fox that enters the rabbit hole may not be the same one that eats the rabbit; it may even have been filmed in a different continent. The demands of the story-line, the increasingly sophisticated expectations of the viewers and the move towards controlled conditions all divide the film-maker from the reality of crisis which, in any case, he is not entirely at liberty to disclose.

At the turn of the century, there were probably 100,000 tigers in India and its bordering forests. Now there are fewer than 4,000. Never again on earth will we see tigers living as they were meant to live, in the heart of a darkness impenetrable to man, part of a vast tiger community that spanned a continent. What we have left, however astonishing they may be to see, are pocket tigers, tiny populations isolated for ever from each other in little forested islands surrounded by deserts of humanity. This is the pattern of all the earth's wildernesses. The Serengeti is ravaged by distemper carried among the huge populations of domestic dogs that throng its border. Even the once inviolable ice masses of Antarctica are chipping and fraying, whole territories splitting off like broken teeth.

The loss of wilderness is a truth so sad, so overwhelming that, to reflect reality, it would need to be the subject of every wildlife film. That, of course, would be neither entertaining nor ultimately dramatic. So it seems that as film-makers we are doomed either to fail our audience or to fail our cause.

Stephen Mills is a past chairman of the International Association of Wildlife Film-makers. He wrote the award-winning *Tiger Crisis* for the BBC.



Filming cheetah for the BBC wildlife programme *Big Cat Diary*