SafariTalk - interview with Dereck Joubert

Dereck and Beverly Joubert are world-renowned filmmakers and conservationists who have worked in Africa's most remote and extraordinary wildlife strongholds for over 25 years. As five time Emmy-award winning filmmakers, their documentaries including Eye of the Leopard and Eternal Enemies have been watched by billions of people around the world. Further, their books and numerous magazine articles send news of Africa to international readers in over 150 countries. They are honored to have been recently appointed as National Geographic Society "Explorers in Residence".

Working with the National Geographic and based out of Botswana, the Joubert's have managed to influence policy and people's perceptions of the wild for over twenty five years. They continue with new projects all the time, honing their skills and widening that footprint of like-minded people who simply believe that every decision you make today needs to be based on a sound and well thought out "internal environmental impact assessment" of your own. "We all know roughly what is right and what is wrong. Make every decision based on that alone and we will all be in better shape."

Their most recent film, **The Last Lions** has recently been released to wide acclaim, highlighting the decline in wild lion numbers.

Martin and Osa Johnson: documentary filmmakers, pioneers, explorers, adventurers: how would you compare your lives to theirs, and do you think it is fair comment to be considered their modern day counterparts?

Ha, I wonder. Are we modern day Martin and Osa? It's a comparison made once before when someone wanted us to retrace their steps and their films in one of their old planes. I think that the age of long duration filming to get a single subject on record is just about over. Television kills that. I just looked at the latest delivery specs for a show and see that they are requesting advertising breaks every 6 to 8 minutes. That makes the attention span shorter and divorces the viewer completely from the real experience. There seems little point in spending four years following a leopard if the final presentation is a series of 6 minute episodes with pop ups and pointers to the next show all over it. But what we do is quite special to us and I often say to Beverly that only by doing that time, but enduring the mud and swamps and years on a project can we ever bring even a fragment of the essence of what is real to audiences. There are no short cuts. Martin and Osa actually lived a little easier than us! They had a hundred porters and chefs and planes and boats and and…and most notable Martin rather famously fired a .500 bullet into a rhino he got to charge the camera. But we can't judge people out of their generation.

How have your films encouraged safari tourism?

Films of places are often the first touching point for many people. When we did our first film on Linyanti I know the bookings of old Linyanti camp went from around 19% to into the 50%'s on the day, and many other regions have seen 'discovery' of their reserves, and a sustained 'filling up' of beds. But our films are not promos for camps. They celebrate the region of country, and by default if people love what they see they explore the desire to go there. Duba is a great example. We've done 3 films there and the occupancies are in the 70%. The reason the Masai Mara is really so famous is probably because of films first. But the safari business is what sustains the success of the industry as filmmakers move on to new subjects. It's a rounded partnership.

What is your response to the criticism that modern wildlife documentary films have lead to an unrealistic expectation in those coming on safari, especially first time visitors?

They do. It's impossible to expect to see everything you witness in a film that took two years to make

on a 2 day safari to a camp. I've always thought that anyone with any kind of understanding would easily understand that concept, but more and more I come across people who comment that despite the obvious time lines of lions being born, growing up and leaving the pride of a dry season a rainy season and back through an entire dry season still expect to see everything in the film happen today. It's that divorce from reality that TV also brings with it. It's hard to piece it all together if every few minutes there is another cycle of information coming at you. There is a huge leap from reality to TV and back again. I've had people vomit at a buffalo kill by lions, because of the smell of raw meat or be deeply disturbed by the intensity of seeing death. While others stand up and yell a victory and high five when the buffalo is finally killed by lions at Duba and others complain that it's too far to go from camp to the buffalo and lions (1 hour drive.) I think most people however get it - images like you see in The Last Lions take time. What we do is work as hard as we can to capture a tiny piece of that magic that is called reality and present it for the audiences to pour over, understand and take away from it what they can.

How has your approach to conservation and research changed since your first experiences in Africa?

In the beginning we were bright eyed looking for adventure and romance. We found both. Our work reflected the wonder of all this. We think we were born 100 years too late. If there was a blank spot on the map we wanted to go there. We made some films and researched every aspect of Africa and then started picking up 'issues.' The more we understood the more we realized that conservation is not a blank spot on a map. It's everything, the bush, wildlife, climate, communities, poaching, hunting problems: it's... us. So we became more vocal about conservation and what we were seeing. It wasn't always popular. No one wants to hear that hunting is out of control or that government officials are shooting wildlife or about massive poaching. We spoke out against the hunting abuses we were seeing and all we got was threats from the hunting industry. We carried on gathering cases and information and speaking out more and the threats got more intense, and evolved into death threats and finally some tampering of my airplane and shots fired into our camp. It was the wild west. When we went to Chief Island, in the Okavango Delta and met a tiny 8 day old leopard and started on a journey that would last 5 years with her, we started really evaluating our place and role in all this. On one hand we really just wanted to live in the bush, stay out of trouble and live that romantic fulfilling life we plotted out for ourselves. On the other our research showed that during our 5 years with Legadema the leopard, 10,000 leopard licenses had been issued by CITES as hunting permits! We dug deeper and realized that since we were born lion numbers have dropped from 450,000 to just 20,000, leopards from 700,000 to 50,000. That romantic isolated life, we realized, was actually irresponsible once we had that knowledge. We needed to start talking about this. In 2005 we went to a lion symposium in Kasane. One scientist classically told the group: "People we do not have a lion problem." We left and said to each other: "Something has to be done to put this on everyone's agenda." Everyone in the world needs to know that big cats, that drive these eco systems, are in such serious decline and the best ambassadors they have are in denial. So we started the **Big Cats Initiative** at National Geographic. I think the transition for us was the indication that in fact, no one can afford to NOT be a conservationist today. Including us.

When you were first starting out, and no one knew the Joubert name, who helped you on the path to becoming conservationists, documentary film makers, and now, what help and advice do you give to those who are following in your footsteps?

I think a background of living the outdoors was key to both of us. Our default position is to be outside, camping, walking, not in cement buildings. My brother is a famous wildlife artist (Keith Joubert) and he and I used to do stuff as kids that really made me think…for example, we used to take a picture of an elephant and cut it in half or randomly chop it up, then pick a piece that still represented "elephant." This gave me a sense of minimalistic or abstract art even though I moved into film. So today as I am composing a shot, I look for the smallest, most effortless way to say something creative or compose

inside the frame. A leopard's eye peering through bushes says so much about life about that cat, about the ghostly nature of leopards about the character... We spent a lot of time and still do, in art museums around the world, studying the grand masters' work for composition and lighting, but that original lesson with some scissors and a picture stay with me. Keith introduced us both to the real bush, working with lions and sleeping out on the ground to find them. Years later I met David Hughes, a South African filmmaker in London. I heard of a film of his and found the tape. I watched Etosha 17 times without stopping. We met on the stairwell of Partridge films one day and he said: "Are you Dereck?" I said yes, and he said: "I think you should give up filmmaking." I was shattered and asked why, "Because I've seen your stuff. It's so good it's disturbing and I don't need the competition!" We became firm friends. To those who follow in the footsteps of filmmaking... the two stories above are indicative of a passion that we both have. It's an obsession for the life, for the filmmaking and for conservation. If you don't have something that makes you want to leap up at 4 am and get you out into your job, it is the wrong job. There is a passion and dedication deficit I see in many people today. Many people go to work because they have to. We've been very fortunate to have chosen a path that we love. So I'd say grab it with both hands. I did a little film school time half heartedly and think that the mechanics of how film works, cameras and all that formal stuff can be taught in an afternoon as basics. The hard stuff is how to focus your mind, not move your body for four hours at a time in case you scare off a young animal coming out of a hole, or going without a hot meal, music, wine... whatever you are used to for years at a time. Most of what I do is about understanding what animals will do next.

Unsustainable trophy hunting, habitat loss to human encroachment / human versus wildlife conflict, poaching: please prioritize in terms of the greatest threat to African wildlife and give your reasons why. What are your recommendations to slowing/stopping such threats?

Big Question. I'll put them in order.

1) Ignorance.
2) Greed
3) Habitat Loss
4) Hunting
5) Conflict

Ignorance is a wider universal issue that can only be solved by talking about this as often as possible in as many forums as possible. People think that shark fin soup is a good idea despite the fact that 26 million sharks a year are killed. Tiger Bones, lion bones now, lion meat in restaurants in the USA... all of this is ridiculous but only exists because most people don't know. The same goes for hunting. It's a sport, for recreation, for fun. It is not conservation. You don't go out and shoot a lion because you are a good conservationist. Hunting happens because you are selfish and want to kill something for yourself. We have to stop kidding ourselves that hunters do it for conservation. Conservation is the justification for what is basically a selfish act, and even then once you pick at it you realize that hunting is not conservation at all. If it was, once hunters knew that lions were in danger of extinction then of course they would stop. Of course everyone would support a CITES listing to ban all trade in lions. But instead the hunting lobby dug their heels in and **1)** questioned the numbers, **2)** object at all levels to any formal protection of lions by anybody. But, I am convinced that even the hunters are not informed well, and if they knew the numbers they would stop. Only some kind of seriously evil person would think it was a good idea to shoot the last lion, surely. (Hunting of big cats must stop. There are lobbies to support, The Big Cat Initiative, Defenders of the Wildlife etc)

Greed pays into this in a big way and is the second cousin to ignorance. Hunting companies not the clients themselves, protest any ban, or legislation. We petitioned the US Government to add lions to the Endangered Species Protection List. The only antis, or anti petition... SCI the official hunting body.

So those in the industry fight hard to maintain the status quo despite the declining numbers because their jobs depend on it. Money stays outside of Africa largely.

Greed, South Africa once again opened up more lion bones to be traded on the open market. Tiger bones are hard to find of course so mixing in lion bones fuels that market. The greed feeds on people's ignorance: people in China have no idea if lions are in trouble or not and every time we get blocked trying to tell our story of lions, its by those who thrive on ignorant mass markets.

Habitat loss is a problem. We will reach a figure of 7 billion people on Earth this year. In 15 years it will be 8 Billion. Every time we add a billion, habitat halves, big cats halve. But, we can live smarter, while we tackle this issue. 80% of Africa is uninhabited. We can use that land if as conservationists we can pull it together. One of the new programs we are starting is called Land for Lions where we lease land in corridors between parks, to protect lion habitat. Obviously lions need prey so they get protection too and all the way down the chain. But this land is not always great for eco tourism so as a concession it may be tricky but we need to view the map of Africa again and see these vital pieces of land as reservoirs for the more visual and tourism friendly blocks, but we can't discard them in a "if it pays it stays" mentality. Making every inch of land pay for itself is a deadly mistake. (Support Land for Lions and contact me.) Via Maasailand Preservation Trust, (again I can give details), we have a program where we compensate for cattle losses and reduce the conflict. We also support Lion Guardians in Kenya and I'm actually working on technology now that we fit to a lion in each pride in high conflict regions, devices that emit a sound that is uncomfortable triggered when a matching device hung on a cow's neck sets it off. Our tests show that the one lioness will get up and move away to the lesser sound and therefore avoid contact with the cattle. So we are involved in a lot of these initiatives because I believe that we have 10 years left to fix this.

Animal rights/welfare versus wildlife conservation: can both approaches work hand in hand, or are they in your opinion, contradictory?

Definitely not a contradiction, or conflict... unless you mistakenly classify hunting as conservation. I think that animal rights and welfare proponents want one thing; a respectful level of interaction with animals and all similar life forms, most particularly the sentient ones like apes and whales etc. I think that while it may be very Buddist, (which is not a bad model actually) I do believe that wildlife conservation should be done with respect for other life. We have exactly the opposite problem today where respect for life of any kind, (even human life) is being eroded as we compete for the last resources on the planet, so the difference between conservationists and animal rightists are minor. If any I would suggest that the welfare folk want to save one animal at a time and we, (conservationists) want to preserve biodiversity. However, as lion numbers dip below 20,000 I am worried that we may be forced to start saving them one at a time as well!

With so much experience of African wildlife under your belts, is there anything left that surprises you anymore? What excites you, or ignites your enthusiasm nowadays?

We find new things every day! Every morning the mist rises in a different way casting ghost like images of elephants in three dimensions and a new bird in the area floats past us. We're excited, like new kids in the bush all the time and we've got so much still to learn and understand. We lean forward into life not rest back on some rather minor past successes. I would love to dig down deeper into the personality or character of some of the other great predators, like cheetah, polar bears and of course tigers when the time comes. I feel that understanding the top predators gives you a boost into an understanding of whole eco systems. Understand sharks and you understand marine life. Same with lions and leopards. So while we're sort of main-lined with the knowledge of African eco systems, there are layers that still make us want to dig deeper.

If you had chosen a different career path, what on earth would it have been?

I think that I might have looked at environmental law perhaps, then blown my head off at 25. Or a cave diver... who am I kidding, had I not taken this on, I have no idea: which means it was a match made in heaven. Beverly might have become a great hotelier, or chef or environmental lawyer and blown her head off at 25. In essence, we met in high school and chose a path that was 'ours' for no other specific reason that we wanted to be together forever, and chose our lives so we could spend every moment together rather than those couples in 9 to 5 jobs that see the day end with a Scotch and TV and no love and no great moments shared. Too many people live life like this and 'save up' the precious moments for a two week holiday. I think you fill life with great moments and take a holiday to go diving in Seychelles!

Above questions posed by The Game Warden. (Matt Wilkinson)

Do you consider yourself conservationists or entrepreneurs after the set-up of Great Plains conservation?

We're conservationists, (if we need to choose one description.) Great Plains is a conservation initiative really. We had no desire to set up and run camps only. For us the philosophy behind Great Plains is and always will be about how to best use what we know to enhance the conservation viability of eco systems that are really vital. Great Plains Conservation came about because of years of hearing from communities that they had rights to eco systems but were letting them go because no one wanted to help generate income for basic living in ways other than hunting or farming or financing poaching etc. We understood that any passive utilization would be a step up. We also plotted out that, as an assumption, the national parks in each country are secure, (they aren't always but, it's a basic assumption) so we need to circle those parks, identify the weak points and the more iconic parts and 'bolt' ourselves onto those parks. But so doing we strengthen the parks, secure them sometimes and add 'conservation' via viable tourism. I don't even call it eco-tourism, (which term I don't understand fully) and we call what we do - Conservation Tourism. All the directors have actually agreed to recycle any dividend back into the program, so 'entrepreneur' is definitely a bad definition of what we are.

Dereck and Beverly filming The Last Lions at Duba Plains, Botswana.

Do you think that movies like "Last lions" will make a difference in the field?

Who knows? Long term I think there is a chance it will be forgotten. But slowly it adds to a cumulative consciousness that re-enforces a single message; that lions are precious and endangered and we need to think about it. We didn't want to do a film for the cinema that scolded or smacked people around the ears to say they had to care or fix this our way. We just wanted to point out to a new audience, (we've been saying this same thing on TV for a while) that there is a massive problem and to point out the complexity and richness of what we will lose when we lose them. Ironically, figures just came in, The Last Lions has 'touched', that being people who have seen it, seen the trailer, read the reviews, seen interviews etc, 94 million people. That is a huge influence group that we hope to build on. There is a real divide though that Beverly and I are struggling with. We can reach out to millions, (Eternal Enemies has been seen by 1 billion people) but converting that into real dollars for conservation or people who change the way they behave is very difficult. We need a fund or $50M to save lions and all the top predators in Africa which in turn saves the environments they live in. That is 5 minutes in the Iraq war this year. I understand that times are tough but unless we take care of this, there will be no lions in ten years and when lions go, eco systems will collapse. Eco tourism will decline and communities will fail.

Above questions posed by Johan db.

Which of the areas that you have visited in Africa give you the most hope for the future?

Botswana is without a doubt the shining light of Africa. A stable administration that is approachable and conservation minded, 1.7 million people in a country the size of France, water, good education, fantastic wilderness areas, President Ian Khama... I'm just listing the assets here. The biggest thing is that within the safari tourism business in Botswana the low impact, low volume higher cost model, while risky in tough economic times is the model to follow. If more places in Africa could carve out versions of this I think the future would be better. I do love Namibia and southern Tanzania and I think Kenya is on the brink of taking off again because there are models being adopted that allow for a more refined and concentrated safari. By that I mean... it's really difficult to have any kind of self-building or spiritual or creative journey with 100 other vehicles jostling for space around a leopard. These are private moments. We need to protect that part of the business vehemently, while being careful to allocate space for the more impressionist youth market.

In general are you optimistic or pessimistic about the future of the regions in which you photograph?

We've been working in Botswana most of our lives. Since President Khama has taken office there have been systematic changes to limit and ultimately reduce hunting and poaching dramatically. I am optimistic that this region will do well, hopefully forever. Kenya has 42 million people draining its natural resources so it's going to take some forfeits and some really wise leadership. Rwanda has 10 million very poor but delightful people in a tiny country, and there are 730 mountain gorillas left. Sudan is tricky, Uganda, Gabon, Cameroon, Mozambique, Zambia... we know about Zimbabwe. Long term we might see break away conservation moves in any of these that turn it around, but ultimately we need to get in, even where it is difficult and secure large tracts of wild land in joint venture partnerships between governments, tourism in private hands, and communities now. 50 years from now I predict 5-10 islands of wildlife sanctuaries, and the rest in small 'display' parks. That is why we need to protect wilderness more than we protect individual animals in my opinion.

What are the best ways for the local community to benefit from conservation projects?

There are many ways but a joint venture partnership that includes some obligation of employment and

training we are finding the most effective. I'm not wild about basket weaving and carved elephant curios. I think that all that does is keep communities at a certain level and we don't pass on anything but further dependency. At Great Plains I tell the managers never to be concerned with people joining up, getting trained and then leaving for jobs outside of the industry. I think the best things we can do is actually set ourselves up as a kind of finishing school based on conservation. I'd rather have a conservation and tourism savvy bank manager nearby than a bubble of a handful of loyal camp staff. I think that we need to think more as an industry about setting gardens for vegetable growing that the older people can get involved in, (and buy locally.) We should add in business training so that if they wish to grow out of farming they can take those skills with them. It doesn't make any sense, environmentally, financially or from a community relations point of view for lodges to ship in tons of vegetables from South Africa to Botswana to serve in camps 20 km away from fertile fields. We've done an environmental audit at GP to test every single thing we do or buy, (we call it the Green Code) as a manifesto. Buying locally is key to that. Its not easy, but it all adds up. If we aren't making things better why bother waking up in the morning?

What are your thoughts on the Road in the Serengeti?

It's a mess. This could be the biggest disaster to hit East African eco systems besides out of control human population growth. We've actively stayed away from offering an opinion because it is complex and I don't fully understand the government's side of things. I also think that the government of Tanzania and its people have done incredible work over many generations to host the largest migration of land herbivores on the planet. So we do need to extend credit to that. If a highway is built, there are some serious potential repercussions. Any major construction immediately wipes out predators. Just consider Tsavo. But non-conservationists living in tents as road crews will poach and kill anything that is dangerous. That's stage one. A major obstruction of the wildebeest, zebra and eland migration so close to the top of their migration, (into the Mara) runs the risk of turning them south. The danger in this is economic, (Kenya's Mara) and ecological. Not only does the Mara system rely on the heavy 'flash' grazing of the migration to self-manage the grasses but the arrival of the wildebeest also send the massive Maasai cattle buildup, (now around 100,000) in the eco system away, (to avoid transmission of diseases). Without the wildebeest, the cattle build up could elevate to levels that could very seriously impact on the entire eco system and make it collapse. At the same time, there is a second wildebeest migration that comes from the north Loita Plains, and the mingling of these two creates a genetic infusion that might be vital to both. This highway runs the risk of disrupting that. In addition, as phase three, roads often attract fires and open it up for greater poaching. A fire at the wrong time will definitely stop the migration short. There have been a lot of papers on this and alternatives are being tossed around but I think it is something to watch closely. What we can't do is swoop in from a western perspective and dictate that it can't happen - all we can do is present the facts and hope that they will make the right decision.

What do you see as the role of tourism in conserving Africa's wildlife and habitat?

Tourism is vital. Tourism to Africa generates about $80 Billion a year, and that is a substantial injection of capital into any system, so it is being taken more seriously each year by African governments. We've got the market, we have the voice, we do need to control our methods so we don't turn a positive of this market into environmental disaster, (just fly over some areas and see the spaghetti roads everywhere) and we should very definitely make sure that as much of that $80B a year stays in the African economic system because without uplifting Africa, we cannot have shared values and all conservation depends on healthy, fairly wealthy communities that share common values.

Have you had to alter your approach to filming to coincide with the preferences and tastes of your viewing public?

No. We work on the basis that we are 'scouts' in many ways, bringing to the public or audiences the way we see things from years of field time. If we adjust that in a way to what people want to hear, (or not hear) then we fail and just become providers of pretty pictures. All our films have a conservation message and core. That isn't always popular but it's important to who we are and what we do this for. Sometimes it's a debate with a network or broadcaster about what the public can stomach, but 9 times out of 10 we win the battle based on the argument that audiences are generally more intelligent than TV executives give them to be, and it's our mutual responsibility to deliver the truth or as close to reality as the medium allows, (delivering a 3 year story in one hour.).

Have you kept in contact with James 007 from Duba Plains?

Yes, James is a dear friend and is still a guide at Duba Plains. He now works for us at Great Plains, since we bought Duba a year ago. He's doing well.

Above questions posed by Atravelynn.

Imagine that for some reason you cannot shoot your next film or documentary in Botswana. Where else in Africa would you chose for a new project and why?

We've always looked at the Mara in Kenya with some disdain in many ways because we see so much of it on television. I think there are more wildebeest encapsulated on film than there are in the migration and it is so easy to film there. Yet when we were in the Mara last month I must say that the visuals, the energy around the migration that frankly I am not sure I get when I see it on television, is astounding! It may be a project for us one day. It looks so easy because it is just so spectacular! I'd also like to disappear into Tanzania, Katavi maybe for a few years.

Above question posed by Paco – Africawild.

Do you ever need an apprentice on any of your trips?

We seldom take anyone along simply because mostly we live there, so its not a trip, it's a lifestyle, and because unlike a normal shoot, as you might imagine the BBC does on a huge series like Planet Earth, we are kind of the Navy SEALS of filmmaking, getting out there, sleeping in our vehicle or on the ground, being mobile, so having to manage people who are there to help us is tricky. In the past we've had assistants, and in at least two cases they have come to us and begged to be flown out. The romance soon fades if you are alone, (Beverly and I have an advantage in that we are still a couple no matter where we are,) and it fades when you get no sleep, tsetses and mosquitoes make your life hell. It's not for everyone.

Above question posed by Jeff Sink - alaskakd.

I have read on National Geographic's web site that you favor low-volume, high-cost wildlife tourism in Africa. How would you justify this to people who wish to go on safari but cannot afford expensive camps or lodges? Is there a risk that Africans will be priced out of the safari market?

We do favor that style of tourism. It doesn't have to be the only tourism though, and we've always said there needs to be a mosaic of uses. Ultimately it's a virtual balance sheet... the dollar value stays constant, so is it a few people paying a lot, or hundreds of people paying very little and what impact do those two models have on the environment and the communities? In some cases, (Gorilla viewing for example) mass cheaper tourism will have too great an impact on the very resource, (Gorillas, or wetlands etc) so one has to modify the way we use things. Look, we have 7 billion people today. We simply cannot accommodate the levels of interested people who wish to go on a safari. But... there are other ways to do this. I see a time of virtual safaris, and more technology driven and interactive safaris that can resemble the real safari and satisfy a great deal of the need. This also isolated the people who live closest to the reserve or wildlife resource and in Great Plains as in Wilderness for example we have programs that reach out to the communities nearest us and actually sponsor visits or camp stays, especially with kids. The mosaic of uses though is key to this. I personally see the safari experience as a private one where there is peace and tranquility not buses.

Given that Relentless Enemies portrays a near-daily conflict between lions and buffalo in the Duba Plains area, why is it that The Last Lions presents its "star" lioness as the only representative of her species in that same area?

Hm, it doesn't actually. In The Last Lions we look at an isolated lioness for a brief time on the island and it very clearly shows other lions of the Tsavo pride during the phase that she was being hunted down. The final act picks up where she and the pride are united and they continue as a pride. About 70% of the film deals with this conflict between them and during that time she is not the only representative of her species. The rest of the time she has her cubs, so still not the only lion. But more broadly, we wanted to carve out as a story line, the struggles that one lioness goes through, in particular when she has cubs as a representative of ALL lions and by so doing show that lions have personalities, they have rivalry, they are intelligent, they learn strategies and communication, they make compromises, (for having cubs and rivals) and they can adapt, all the qualities that should make them one of the most successful species on the planet. The film is designed to then lead to the question "So why aren't they?" And the only answer is "Because of us."

Last, are you working on any films or books currently?

We are cutting a film right now on a young male leopard. The Last Lions is a fairly dark film in places, especially when a now famous scene about an injured cat is playing out. So something within our souls sought balance and the new film, tentatively called The Painted Cat, it deals with a young male who is…less than perfect in his ability to climb trees or hold it all together. He often falls or stumbles and he has given us many laughs so this film is a lighter look at big cats…with a warning that we only have 50,000 left and they are being shot at a rate of 2000 a year.

We're also raising funding for a massive project where we fly to all the last lion populations in Africa, catalogue them, sample DNA, speak to conservationists and basically get a full analysis of where we are and what problems we have to solve.

Above questions posed by Marks.

Following up on the Duba questions from Marks, what are your specific plans for the future management of Duba Plains? Many who have been there were quite happy with the existing comfort level, and do not want to see it become yet another "premier" camp.

Duba is one of those gems in the world isn't it? Since we took over we've spent about P2M, ($350K) on fixing it up, making sure that the things that count, linen, food, vehicles are in great shape. I designed a high-rise vehicle that we tested for the season and it's a great success so we'll be rolling more of those in now. Going forward I'd like to concentrate on the things that make the experience exceptional. So, we'd like Duba to become the 'centre of the universe' for lion work or experiences, by adding the most complete lion reference library, having lion experts visit from time to time for a week or so or building in other 'specialized' activities around predators. This possibly twinned with our Mara camp should be the two places in the world to visit to get a crash course, or an intensive ongoing look at predators of Africa.

Vehicles equipped for all day safaris, a house boat so we can get to the far islands follow lions there and then slowly boat back while having lunch. Duba is much more than lions and buffalo actually, with some of the finest elephant viewing in Botswana as well. The camp itself is steadily being revamped and we want to change the main area before we look at the tents. I have designed a new tent, but Duba is different to Zarafa as an experience. The tents don't need to be as large maybe and I am not sure guests who come to Duba will spend much time in a private pool for example. No film that we do is the same as the last, so no camp will be either. That would be boring for us to build and for any traveler moving between our camps, so it won't be a Zarafa. I do think that the situation at Duba is more conducive to staying out the whole day, so the value is in that side of the experience more.

Above question posed by Pangolin.

My question involves efforts to preserve lions in Africa. I am a shareholder in a 32250 hectare private wilderness reserve in southern Botswana that is dedicated to restoring all the animals indigenous to the area. We are finishing the necessary studies to reintroduce lions on this reserve. Can you recommend any publications or individuals that would help us make this project successful? Do you feel that reserves such as ours play a helpful role in preserving the big cats?

Well done for taking the bold step as a consortium to reintroduce cats. It's not an easy task and not without criticism. Translocating cats and reintroducing is often seen as foolish because they wander straight back, there is criticism of genetic mixing into an area and sentiments run high when people see failures. I don't subscribe to any of this. We need to see cats like lions repopulating as many different habitats as possible. I'd suggest getting in touch with me directly and we can help with some introductions. Tico Mc Nutt and I work together in the Big Cats Initiative that Beverly and I founded at National Geographic. He is local in Botswana, as is Paul Funston and a number of other good researchers. I'd recommend that you introduce them fast, with as few people and no media present, don't get attached just do it. I think you should check the source population so you don’t populate with genetics that can escape and really mix in with wild populations nearby. Lastly I would suggest two additional conservation moves at the same time: first I would set aside some cash for compensation should any of your lions get out and kill cattle. Don't even get into the position where you have to shoot your own lions because of conflict. I would also do whatever you can to start the process of increasing your land. 32,000 ha is great. If we are to really make an impact, I'd suggest looking at corridors, associated lands increasing that to 100,000 in the near future, or you will be managing your lion population soon and after all that effort, again, you don't want to be culling lions in a micro-management way. What we have learned from Darwin and Wallace is that the smaller the island the greater the chance and more rapid the rate of extinction. Your lions proportionately are more vulnerable in a smaller reserve.

Above question posed by BotswanaBuff.

Not really a question, but, more a request - please consider making your next documentary about the 3 cheetah brothers that traverse the Kwando/Selinda concessions.

Really? Cheetah are cats that we've kind of skirted around working with but we also think it is time. We did the same with leopards, avoiding them because we felt that so much had been done on leopards until at some point we decided that we wanted to delve deeper. It was interesting that at the time we pitched it as an idea to National Geographic but they said: "What more is there to be done on leopards?" All Leopard films had been shot at night we took a different tack. Thankfully we went ahead and brought in Eye of the Leopard.

The Nat Geo documentary "Blood Brothers" focused on the prior cheetah coalition and it was pretty uninspiring. I'm certain you both will be able to do much better work, if the project is on the horizon.

Thank you, so much but it is in the hands of nature though. Making films is hard. The Blood Brothers film, (I have not seen it) may be as good as it gets in that area.

Above questions posed by Hari - madaboutcheetah.

While working in northern Botswana in the 80's and early 90's you have firsthand experienced the destructive impact of lion trophy hunting and have addressed this in your book "Hunting with the Moon". Why has it taken more than 20 years to get lion hunting stopped in Botswana and what are the reasons from your point of view that the hunting lobby is still successful in keeping lion trophy hunting open in several African countries?

Peter, you are right, we first started rumbling about this in the 80s. At first we were guests of the hunters in Botswana, living in their concessions. Our only friends were hunters. Then when we started seeing the ethics, and abuses, I approached them and started voicing a concern. They laughed it off. I then wrote something and submitted it to their hunting body. Still they all said something along the lines of 'It is the way it is. We never abuse the situation.' Next I wrote a paper to government accusing the industry of being ethically bankrupt. That was the last time we stayed overnight in any hunter's house! Doors shut down, death threats, the whole usual methods of intimidation but intimidation doesn't work on everyone. Some people just plod on. There is an incredibly strong hunting lobby. There were even letters back and forth from the highest level of influence in the USA at the time that Botswana first banned lion hunting, so it's not surprising that it took some time to solidify the understanding and steel against that kind of onslaught. Thankfully Botswana takes its charter of independence seriously! Fast forward to this year when leopards have also been banned making Botswana the first country in 34 years to ban all big cat hunting.

Hunting is all politics. Generally people who can afford to support the hunting industry are politically connected and probably of an old guard that are less invested in the future, (deep down) and wealthy. But slowly as the figures come in and as more and more scientific work is published, (Packer et al) and (Palazy et al) more recently stating firmly that hunting damages lion populations, more and more of this discussion is coming out in the open.

Above question posed by PeterGermany.

What is your view on community involvement, how can it happen for real? How can we make sure the profits from lodges stay in Africa and benefit all people that live in the surrounding area? (I have no facts but a feeling that a lot of the money goes abroad to foreign investors.)

Community involvement is essential and the right thing to do. In short, sick, poorly educated desperate people are very poor conservationists. They are in survival mode and as much the environment doesn't play a role in your life. So uplifting everyone is good for everyone. But we must deal with people respectfully, listen to what they need and want, and if necessary modify that so we aren't putting in highways through the Serengeti for example and walk this journey together. I am not aware of community funding going off shore to investors, but if it is the case I'm sure it's a minor part of the equation given the scale of what is to be done to help communities. Not least of the concerns is HIV and AIDS. So Great Plains and National Geographic via the Big Cats Initiative have sponsored a booklet that will go to over 2,000 schools, villages community centers etc that teach about HVI/AIDs but do it out of kindness, and link it to a project we call Big Cats caring for Communities that care for big cats."

I feel that this is really important to stop poaching, minimize cattle/wildlife conflicts and human encroachment. Local people need to feel involved and benefit from wildlife, but how can you really

achieve it?

It's a sort of extension on the last question I know but one of the issues we have to confront is that many programs make it better for people on a local level, so people living closest to nature and game reserves, and the potential unintended consequence is that in time we create or foster an increase in population of people and wealth, (which is often transferred to cattle as a currency) around these precious natural reserves and cutting them off from one another and corridor potential. So the simple hand out system may secure land short term and give some up-liftment short term but we do need to guard against this backfiring. The best safeguard is education and investing in skills that could take those communities into a real world economy as active and equal participants not just at local level. Theoretically if this were a designed model we would want as few people as possible living around wildlife and as many people as we had living in high-rises with the smallest land footprint on the planet. New York for example might well be the most green way for humans to live. But there are emotions, real people with ancestral rights to land and largely, despite the fact that most poachers come from those communities it's those people, the Maasai for example who have done, (on average over time) the best job of living with and protecting wildlife. That needs to be respected and they need to be thanked for that within the context that today is not yesterday and when we say 'we' have a problem it means all of us. The sooner we are engaging with well-educated communities the easier this conversation will be.

How do you handle corruption, and do you feel it is a major problem for conservation?

Tom, we don't handle corruption. Anyone at any level in Great Plains, or in our film lives, who gives a bribe even to get through a roadblock is fired. Its naïve I know but I am of the firm belief that if we are even vaguely a part of the problem then we can never fix this. We spoke to President Paul Kagame of Rwanda and asked him the same question. He said that he has infused Rwanda with one truth, that corruption is the biggest obstacle on the journey from poverty to prosperity of a nation. It will ruin conservation and it will ruin civil order and society. I don’t know the answer on how to stop it but by not playing the game.

Above questions posed by Tom – Basto.

Speaking of "premier" camps, which are an important part of the Great Plains concept, don't you fear that their (somewhat unnecessary and over the top) Luxury may render them further and further removed from the bush, and in turn alienate regular safari goers who are after a more authentic safari experience? Or is it something that you have considered into the equation and accepted?

When we started Great Plains Conservation we were very specific about the market we wanted to reach. This is a value sensitive guest we wanted to attract not a price sensitive one for one reason…we have just a few beds, we will never be a Wilderness Safaris but we do want to pick our shots very carefully, one of those targets is the traveler with the largest influence to go away and spread the word about our conservation ethos. It's a fundamental of what we hope to achieve. It's not elitist it's just where we think we can be most effective. By the same token we feel that we can be very good at the higher end and also very good at the adventure side of things because that is what we, as partners, like to do. So canoeing the Selinda Spillway, horse riding from Chyulu Hills to Amboseli, diving in Seychelles is what we think we know. Anything in the middle is difficult for us. I love sleeping on the ground under the stars and I also enjoy walking into a romantic Zarafa tent... but I can't stand sleeping on a poor bed with a mozzie net with holes in it and bad curtains in some camp pretending to be a house. For me the high end Zarafa style experience is great value. When you walk in the tent, it's impressive and people are blown away by the fact that we give them Canon cameras and a great lens to use while they are there. We are announcing that each camp and each tent will have a brand new set of Swarovski binoculars, and should anyone want to buy them, the profits will go to the Big Cat Initiative. Each is added value because I think that a great safari is not only a once in a lifetime experience but it is a romantic visit to an almost forgotten world and time. So we have a few policies that make sure that we can make it an experience of great value, (like those cameras and binos etc) but most of all we feel that the greatest gift anyone can give today is their time. So our 'contract' with anyone giving us that precious gift is simply that we don't waste it! Average or shoddy is a waste of time.

Now we also have a more pragmatic side to this. To create a business model that allows for no more than 32 people a night to stay in 136,000 ha of wild land, with the set lease fees and staffing levels we need to patrol and look after that land, engage in conservation and community projects necessitates that we go towards the higher cost level.

Great Plains' camps are not 'luxury.' I don't even like the word. It reeks of gold taps and frivolous things, (as you say 'over the top.') Zarafa for example is not in my opinion. The tents are on one level, with a basic lounge area, bedroom and bathroom, outdoor shower etc. But what makes Zarafa exceptional in many critic's books is that it is 'appropriate.' I'd hope that as we go along, all our camps will be labeled the same way, not matter where they are, or what level they are at.

In many ways I see our 'regular' travelers graduating from one level, (the higher one) to the adventure stuff we do as they get more comfortable visiting the bush.

We are planning to add a mobile style camp to Selinda next year. Not because we need to cater to a lower end tourist but because we've identified that with everyone moving more to designer decorated uber camps, we're losing the basic 'tented camp on the ground lions roaring at the window' style and we kind of like that and mourn its loss. Doesn't mean it should be shabby though.

You have been working in northern Botswana since 1981 or so. During this time span, did you personally notice a marked decline in numbers of certain antelope species, such as sable and eland?

The general wildlife numbers are down in the last 30 years. Mike Chase just published a report to that

effect as well. A few things have happened. I think that without a doubt hunting has been a major cause here, because poaching was really curtailed in the 90s. At the same time a great number of species and their numbers concentrated during a dry phase that pasted most of the 80's and 90's and that had an impact, superimposed on by heavy hunting. Now we have one of the largest floods in 70 years and the grazing species have had to move away up against fenced off area that weren't there before and into farmlands. Fortunately cat numbers in the Okavango are reasonable and now that they are protected, the chances of securing their future, is good, here! I have to add though, that every single eco system I come across today, from those in South Africa to Botswana, Zambia, Tanzania, and Kenya are suddenly reporting massive losses, as if we have been losing wildlife under our noses without noticing. Poaching in other places is a huge issue but mismanagement in many places is another. We just have not been paying enough attention. Rhinos are a terrible story. South Africa is losing a rhino every 20 hours on average! And the last incident, (today) was when a rhino was found with a dart in it, indicating an overdose. No one seems surprised anymore that the poachers are using restricted drugs and helicopters.

Above questions posed by Paolo.

In principle I support your views on lion trophy hunting, but I am very concerned that too much focus on hunting is deflecting attention from the far greater threat generated by human predator conflict. Losses to poison are indiscriminate and unsustainable and there is clear evidence in Botswana that lions with ranges that butt cattle ranges are regularly targeted. As a consequence the notion of 'protected areas' comes into question because these losses impact upon reproductive potential well inside reserves. Until this issue is addressed effectively the ban on trophy hunting is unlikely to have much impact on declining numbers. To ensure that I am not misunderstood I'm not suggesting reinstating hunting...I am merely pointing out that the losses to poison far exceed losses to trophy and until this pressing issue is addressed the decline in numbers is unlikely to be arrested. Among others Laurence Frank has long been arguing that poison presents the greatest threat to lions and yet this does not seem to get the publicity that is due. His excellent Lion Guardians program is culturally specific but do you think suitably modified projects could be successfully initiated in Botswana?

The list of abuses is large enough to support your view to a degree. Laurence and Beverly and I work on many things together actually, in particular in Maasailand where we have set up a committee together that includes Lion Guardians, (Stephanie Dorenry and Leela Hazzah), Living with Lions, (Laurence's work) and Maasailand Preservation Trust, (Richard Bonham). Laurence and I agree on just about everything and we go back a long way. He is softer on hunting than I am.

What we do agree on is the impact of poising using a particular posing called Furadan made by a company in Philadelphia called FMC. It is so powerful that a handful will kill a pride of lions, the hyenas that come to eat them, the vultures and flies! There was a 60 minutes piece on this and we have spoken about it in every talk we do. We've also engaged in discussions with the FMC company up to the point they said they would sue, so disengaged but have continued with the discussion in any forum that will have us. We gave a grant to Dr Paula Kahumba in Kenya specifically to stamp out Furadan and get legislation against it.

I think however that tools don't kill things, people do. So while we are active and vociferous against FMC and their product, and it should be taken off the shelves, (not just in Africa near lions or gorillas - it's popped up there too) but anywhere. It is being used in Indonesia and filtering into the water sources there and killing people, it is a more effective tool for killing lions. If we want to stop the killing of lions we have to engage at a different level.

Our research however is starting to show that we are losing lions at a rate of 2,400 a year, (based on population decline curves and fixed on present day position on that curve.) Of that conflict of all kind,

not just that using poison, is responsible for around 55%. Hunting is responsible for around 30%, (based only on CITES figures) and trade at this stage is taking about 15%. So while hunting is not the largest culprit here, as you rightly say, it is something we can engage with and stop and make a significant difference by so doing. (See later in response to a question from Lion Aid.) Conflict is a much larger, more diverse, spread out cause that involves thousands of different scenarios from cattle to slash and burn, even in some cases tourism! So it's an adversary without a face that we can do a little against on a case by case basic and even then, we can probably only erode the cause by a few percentage points with compensation, lion guardians, bomas and the range of projects that in fact we are financing now via the Big Cats Initiative. But if we were looking for one thing that could eliminate one single cause of 556 lions a year, it would be hunting.

I'd have to agree that we aren't going to solve this with one magic bullet. It is taking a menu of solutions adapted to different regions. Laurence and I have discussed a version of what they do in Kenya for Botswana. I think that anything is possible and all efforts are valuable, also talking about technology to reduce conflict, which I think might be the real answer here.

Above question posed by Duiker.

Of all the National Parks, Reserves and other wildlife destinations you have visited in Africa, which has been your favourite location to date, and why?

I love Katavi in Tanzania. I also love the Makgadikgadi Pans. We just did a part for a series called Great Migrations in the pans and loved it. Both places have the same qualifications for us; they are both wild, open horizons and wildernesses in their own way. In these places you get a sense that you could get lost in the landscape and inside yourself and I think that is what wilderness is all about. Both are harsh, Katavi reminds me of the old Savuti days without the overland trucks.

Question above posed by Tom at Ziara Safaris.

The Big Cat Initiative has supported a number of projects in Africa. In your honest opinion, can dangerous predators like lions continue to survive in areas with close contact with humans with stopgap programs like building predator proof bomas? Is this really a long-term solution to a prevalent problem?

Fences are a stop gap program that seem to be the vogue right now and I am concerned about the long term viability, and the fact that many establish chain-link fences and run the risk of making secure habitats and more stable inhabitant lifestyles for previously nomadic people, especially in ever more sensitive migration paths. However, unless we do two things, **1)** compensate for someone's cattle losses or **2)** prevent those conflicts, we can't even have the conversation about the intrinsic or economic value of lions, (or other dangerous predators) to all of us, including the communities. At least now, there is effort being made to make it better, to prevent cattle losses and to engage. Next we can educate and create stake-holding in operations like ol Donyo Lodge, for example, and develop meaningful partnerships. By tacking the short term we set ourselves up to develop a long term solution as well and we need to simplify because while we figure out the long term in places like Kenya where there are now officially just under 2000 lions left, by the time we get there, places like Maasailand will have none left at all.

The Big Cats Initiative looks for projects that are scalable if they work and that can be expanded out of 'short term' into medium, and long term.

You have both been quoted as being against the sport hunting of lions. Can you tell us what active funded programs you are undertaking to end the practice?

None. Hunting is a philosophy as well as an activity, so to be clear, while I fundamentally disagree with the shooting of animals for sport it is also a mindset not just an action we have to change. It's called recreation by the hunters, ignoring for now the huge finances at play inside the industry, I think it is unethical today for us to derive pleasure from killing something. Beyond fundamentals however, I don't have a major problem with people shooting deer in New Jersey, (where there are no predators) or ducks. I still question why you might desire to kill so badly. I caution people against shooting, (for fun) declining, threatened or endangered species. We are not going to fund a campaign against the hunting industry however, because I think that in essence it is a collection of people who enjoy the outdoors but who have been born into, or fallen into, associating the outdoors with killing. I would rather engage with them and have them understand that what they are doing to big cats in Africa is damaging and then steer them to a new appreciation of the outdoors because frankly, they are half way there already. I don't think there is great evil in the hunting industry, just a lack of understanding about what the stakes are.

Being from South Africa, what active initiatives are you undertaking to put a stop to canned lion hunting?

Canned hunting is a disaster and we've written to the Minister about it and our views. We support any action against it. It is however the tip of the iceberg! Canned lion hunting involves lions bred in captivity, (largely) so it has little impact on the wild lion population decline that Beverly and I have dedicated our lives to trying to save. The ethics of this though are terrible. Even the average, (let's call them 'wild') hunters should be up in arms, (appropriately) about canned lion hunting. It paints them all as being blood lust hunters. But in Sept 2009 South Africa announced that it would release 44 carcasses into the lion bone trade with permits! We were outraged as you can imagine. But to put it in context, we have 3,200 tigers left in the wild and the tiger bone trade is the largest cause of decline. It's illegal of course. Now in a stroke South Africa has released legal bones from lions, that are indistinguishable from tiger bones into the market allowing a loop hole for traders to forge permits and to hide behind legal bones while endangering lions of course but definitively sealing the fate of tigers as a species! It's the canned lion industry that has lobbied so hard to get bones legalized.

This year, without us noticing, or anyone getting involved in the debate the South African government has issued permits for over 1,000 lions to be sold in bone form!

Can you tell us the relative importance of trophy hunting (at an average of 650 lions per year - and with consequent additional mortality and loss of reproduction in prides) compared to losses of lions to other sources (problem animal control, shooting and spearing and trapping by communities, and use of poison) in terms of significance to the reduction of lion populations in Africa?

Sure, generally a lion permit is issued and a male lion is shot. Usually a male lion has a cousin or coalition partner. In some areas this can me three males or more, (Kwaro has 7!) The 'brotherhood' so to speak is an environmental necessity to hold back marauding challengers. After one male is shot, those marauders from outside of the territory sense, usually by listening to the quite of roars of scenting that only one male is in residence, breach the boundaries and attack. This is usually a fight to the death. If not either way, the male is ousted and leaves any productive role in the system. So at that point we have lost two lions to one permit.

At the same time the new males turn their attention to the female pride. Average prides comprise 8-10 females. Depending on where they are in the cycle, each female has 4 cubs, (average.) The new male's evolutionary drive is to mate and raise his own offspring. So males swoop in and kill as many cubs as they can. Strike between 20 and 30 cubs at this point. Those that escape die anyway, unless that are extremely fortunate and in the later phase of their 'cubhood.' In which case they become

prematurely nomadic. Our figures you will see are adjusted down to accommodate this. In our experience, each takeover like this results in one female at least dying of wounds or leaving. A lioness is not adapted to a solitary life, so her odds of survival go down.

The nett result is somewhere between 20 and 30 lions, including two males for one license fee. This is clearly not a way to do business if the objective is sustainable utilization of resources, (or stock.) Consider your figure of 650 and let's say that this happens only every second year in an area. That is 6,500 deaths a year but we are only looking at the CITES number as quoted.

Add this statistic. If we have 20,000 lions, on average we have 4,500 male lions in the system today. We're shooting that entire stock every 6 years, which is basically two male lion tenures of territory, (average of three years) ACROSS Africa!!

Conflict, (spearing, poisoning etc) appear to be random and across the sex and age breakdown of a pride, in fact females are more likely to be speared than males. Poison ills the whole pride. But these also become the listed figures, what is damaging about hunting is that those 'ghost' or potential lions disappear without record, and there is definitely selective and additional effort to seek out the biggest trophies and worse, by the very nature of hunting, and our species, we tend to want to hunt the rarest and increasingly hunt as the species becomes increasingly rarer. (There is little point in spending twenty one days hunting down an impala to hang on your wall when all your friends have one is there?)

Above questions posed by Lion Aid.

What do you both want to be remembered for the most? The Last Lions?

We're both happy to slide away knowing that we played a role in turning African conservation and big cat conservation around and nothing would make us happier as we took the last image on our cameras and fell over than to know that our predictions of extinction of wild lions in Africa in the next ten years was proven wrong.

And do you think that we will really turn this planet around, or are we really as a species on limited time due to most of the planet not really caring enough to change the way we live?

No, no. There is no more caring a species! We have composed arias that make us all weep, collectively, death deeply saddens us, and we fear our own mortality. As such we have the capacity to rally and march against injustices, (Apartheid, the Holocaust) and throw ourselves in front of chainsaws cutting down trees, or Japanese whalers! We're a crazy species that deep down, and often not that deep down, maybe just intuitively, discerns wrong from right. Knowledge and understanding gets in the way. I don't think anyone sets out in life to be an evil son of a gun. So, we're hugely optimistic that we can and probably will solve the problems of the Planet but we're in a phase of denial where we just don't know the true or complete effect we will have by being greedy. It's funny how greed is a moving target and many would trade greed for cash against a lust for life if life itself were threatened.

What non African mammal would you love to film in the wild?

I just saw some images of wild Martens in Alaska! Wow. Tigers would be a bonus for us and we've sort of being holding back on them, trying to find the right fit regionally for something that hasn't been seen a million times. I also have a desire, and I'd better act fast, to film polar bears. Beverly has always loved Orangutans and Gorillas and the list could go on, it is really endless.

Above questions posed by Brian's Art for Animals.

Looking at the trend of the last thirty years, do you see any chance of real wilderness (ie natural functioning eco-systems) surviving in Africa, or are we seeing the last of the greatest show on earth?

This is the greatest show on Earth isn't it? 80% of Africa is uninhabited. I think we need to protect the wilderness we have right now. Then we need to re-evaluate ways we do business on the planet. Its way to easy for us as we get older to say things like it will never be the same or as good as it was when we were young and rock and roll is better than rap. We're not that big, that this snapshot, that is our lifetime is better than before and certainly after our departure. It's just ours. I'm reminded of Voltaire, who said - "If I am to die at the tip of a blade it will be with a sword in my hand." Of course we will fix this.

Above question posed by Cannedlion.

Have you ever felt that your personal safety was threatened by the events you were filming?

We've been through a lot. We've had our vehicle smashed by elephants four times, I've had malaria four times, been stung by over 20 scorpions, had two snake bites, been in two plane crashes. There have been buffalo and poaching threats. We've been stuck with no food or water and had to walk out. I once had to swim to winch a stuck vehicle out of the swamp exactly where we had been filming the biggest croc in the area where every tickle of a fish made me leap up and water walk! But actually, I

think we are more comfortable in the field, filming than any other place on Earth.

I appreciate your work; however do you understand that some people find films with a whole lot of predatory animal gore a bit much?

Yes I know. It's strange to me though. Most kids have witnessed over 10,000 murders on television by the time they are 10, (I heard) and we live in a world where these digital stories of humans being blown up, raped, kidnapped killed in wars pervade our lives in such a way that we develop immunities to be being shocked by it all. So I am often surprised by comments about animal gore. That being said, very few of our films actually show any gore. We specifically look at and show the hunt, chase and catch up to the moment of the kill, then, frankly, once it is a dead animal we leave or shut down cameras because beyond that point it's just feeding. Often it's the feeding that people find offensive, but that isn't the reason we stop then. We stop because so many other filmmakers do actually go for the shock and over dramatize the harsh 'reality' of nature. I feel that it can be perceived as being harsh but only for people that are now so divorced from nature that they feel that dead is something somehow foreign to life when in fact it is an obvious attachment or extension of life. You don't need to be particularly intellectually robust to understand that these moments have been going on for millions of years, and what lions do, because of a very finely evolved natural selection is kill. The very act of killing keeps prey numbers down, keep prey animals vital and as they should be, keep migrations on the move that nurture fresh grown in grasslands and prevent riverine growth from disappearing in some cases, (Aspen trees in Yellowstone.) That in turn keeps water systems from silting up and breaths life into every single aspect of wild eco systems. We don't get to judge this. We get to understand it first and then celebrate it because without those awkward moments when fresh buffalo meat is being ripped out, the whole system that has included lions for 3.5 million years collapses. Now I think filmmakers should be responsible in delivering this message and not indulge or even bow down to broadcaster pressure to hype it up. We are messengers of the wonders we see and know, as a result we have a duel role; to deliver the message truthfully and succinctly in a reduced form, and with an opinion on what it means and in some cases what we can all do to preserve it. A far worse style is one we can't stand; the overhyped, version of this with highly animated presenters in tight shorts on hands and knees taunting a snake or crocodile creating a role model for future safari goers to get out and be a hero and crawl up to a lion or elephant. As we saturate this planet with more people and more input from television and other media we are going to have to become more discerning and when the gore, (whether its one of our films or not) or crazy antics of a presenter offend, to turn it off and go to bed.

Above questions posed by Cosmic Rhino.

Via visiting a place in Africa on safari, or watching a rendition of it on television in between ad breaks, one message is reinforced; we need to right now make a choice and understand, personally and as a species if we are to be a part of this magical intricate planet and all life here, or forever be apart from it, like strangers in a foreign suburb snubbed by the locals, never understanding the language of Earth and always trying to dominate and wrestle it to the ground. It's bigger than us.

Thanks everyone, thank you Matt. Dereck.
