



Where the Wild Things Are

Sir David Attenborough looks at the history and contribution of the ground-breaking BBC Natural History Unit in Bristol. As a result of the NHU's presence, Bristol has accumulated a unique set of

broadcasting talents and skills and natural history programme making has become a part of the city's cultural identity.



Sir David Attenborough
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The Natural History Unit in Bristol is a rare constant in an evolving broadcast world. Whereas other specialist centres of excellence have come and gone, the NHU has always been there, or so it seems. What happy combination of circumstances and talents made Bristol the ideal habitat for the Unit, enabling it to grow into the most enduringly successful out-of-London production department in the history of the BBC?

You might argue that there has always been a strong interest in natural history in the West Country, and a long tradition there of self-educated, amateur naturalists. From the limestone hills of the Mendips, and the Jurassic coastline of Dorset, many a fine fossil collection has been unearthed, including those assembled by the father of modern geology, William Smith, and the mother of dinosaur-hunting, Mary Anning from Lyme Regis. The estuaries and wetlands attract migratory birds and their attendant birdwatchers: from coastal cliffs through dramatic moorlands to lush meadows and river valleys, the area boasts a rich and varied flora and fauna.

But the truth is that the NHU would not exist in Bristol, had it not been for the enthusiasm and passion of one man, and his belief in the public service ideals of the BBC. Desmond Hawkins was not himself a trained naturalist, nor a West Countryman by birth. Brought up in London, he moved as a

Opposite: Peter Scott with a fox cub
on the set of *Look*

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radio producer to the BBC in Bristol after the Second World War. He had a passion for the writing of Thomas Hardy and a feel for West Country landscapes, and he loved the area’s natural history. He started natural history production in Bristol with radio programmes such as *The Naturalist* (which had a curlew’s song as its theme tune) and *Birds In Britain*, long before the arrival of television in the area. As a boy, I listened to those programmes, and I daresay my own passion was stoked by them.

In 1952 I began my career with the BBC in London, at the Television Talks department in Alexandra Palace. We were making a variety of programmes – I worked on anything from political broadcasts to archaeological quizzes – but before long I launched *Zoo Quest*, a series which took me all over the world and helped to determine the future course of my life. Meanwhile, in Bristol, Desmond Hawkins had decided that as soon as it was physically possible to make television programmes in the West Country, his team of natural history specialists would show these upstarts in London how it was really done. Hardly was *Zoo Quest* on the air in 1954 than Desmond had decided to launch his own series *Look*, with Peter Scott, whose bird sanctuary at Slimbridge was only 20 miles or so up the road from Bristol. The fact that there was still no actual television studio in the city, or for that matter any transmitter or television sets in the region, did not deter

him. Instead he brought in an outside broadcast unit, ran cables and cameras into the large radio studio normally used for symphony concerts, and piped the programme by land line up to the London transmitter: an ingenious adaptive use of technology that has been one of the hallmarks of the department ever since. So natural history television programmes were being made in Bristol even before anyone in the region could watch them.

Enthusiasm is infectious, and Desmond gathered about him a core of people whose passion for natural history equalled his own, so that by 1957 it was officially recognised as a production specialism in Bristol, and he set up the NHU proper there. I might add that he tried to poach me for the unit, but my head of department at the time, Leonard Miall, was having none of it.

One of the attributes that made Desmond so inspiring a producer, and then manager, was his unshakeable belief in the public service tradition of the BBC. Instead of simply setting out to measure success by the popularity of its programmes, the BBC declares that its duty is to spread before the audience the entire spectrum of possible content, so that its achievement must also be measured by how complete is its coverage of the range. This was a responsibility that was keenly felt by Desmond Hawkins at the time he was building the NHU in Bristol. Instead of concerning himself only with the kind of subjects for which there was already a known audience, Desmond made excellent programmes that reflected his own interests and so discovered new audiences. It is worth remembering that at the time, although television was better established in the United States, there was virtually no



Desmond Hawkins interviewing Peter Scott for *The Naturalist*

Overleaf: David Attenborough outside a cave entrance during filming for *Life on Earth*



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serious natural history content at all on US networks, because the ethos of their commercial broadcasting model was to chase ratings, rather than bother cultivating an audience for a new genre.

The same notion of public service had been drummed into me during my formative years in television, so when I became Controller of BBC Two in 1965, one of my aims was to introduce the widest possible subject matter to my audiences, and naturally I wanted to indulge my own passion for natural history. When BBC launched colour TV in Britain, I could think of no subject better suited to showing off the new technology. I commissioned from the NHU *The World About Us*, initially a series of 26 fifty-minute programmes that turned into a long-running strand, and helped to establish a global reputation for the unit. Bristol also produced *Life*, a magazine programme that covered natural history news stories. Productions like these, building on the foundation of its existing BBC One output, secured the future of the unit and bound natural history production ever more closely with its Bristol roots.

At BBC Two, I also launched a style of documentary which would now be described as the ‘landmark’ series, taking a big subject and devoting 13 one-hour programmes to it. The first of these was Kenneth Clark’s *Civilisation*, followed by Jacob Bronowski’s *The Ascent of Man*. Both series proved an enormous success. An obvious contender for the same treatment had to be the history of all life on earth, but that was a subject I hankered after tackling myself. As soon as I resigned from my management job in the BBC I suggested the idea to one of the most experienced producers at the NHU, Chris Parsons, who would later himself head the unit. This was without a doubt at the time the most ambitious series to be produced in Bristol. We started work on it in the mid-1970s, and the ground-breaking *Life on Earth* was transmitted in 1979 to huge audiences, selling around the globe so that eventually it was estimated that 500 million people watched it.

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It seems to me that natural history is a particularly vigorous type of specialism, perhaps more so than others. There is a great deal of trial and error in producing natural history programmes, and the people who make them have built up extraordinary levels of knowledge and expertise. Waiting patiently week after week in freezing temperatures for a snow leopard to creep across a mountainside, or understanding precisely when and how to film the annual hatch of turtles on a starlit beach, requires special skills. So too does the post-production of natural history series, and once a commissioning momentum was established, over the years the NHU in Bristol attracted many satellite businesses and freelancers. The city has accumulated a unique set of trades and talents, be it specialist camera equipment hire or Foley artists.

At the same time the cultural life of Bristol has benefited from the existence of the NHU. The world’s first wildlife film



Chris Parsons (left), Peter Scott (centre) and Tony Soper at the re-launch of BBC Wildlife magazine

festival, Wildscreen, was held in the city, attracting visitors from all over the world. The University of Bristol would probably tell you that its Zoology department gains greatly from the fact that the best natural history television unit in the world is within walking distance, and a close and symbiotic relationship has sprung up between the two. Producers and academics drink in the same pubs and exchange ideas, and many a promising young graduate has found employment at BBC Bristol.

By virtue of being the first in the field, the NHU has been the leader right from the start. At every wildlife film festival it walks off with a sizeable portion of the prizes. What is sad is that so many other natural history units set up in response to Bristol's success have since withered and vanished. Similar units in New Zealand and Australia and at Anglia Television in the UK gave the BBC a run for its money, but no longer exist because in commercial television the expensive, specialist genres are the first to be slashed when shareholders' profits fall. Of course the BBC has to keep an eye on the balance sheet too, and trim its sails in stormy weather, but its public service remit means that it should never allow the ship to sink.

David Attenborough next to a rattlesnake while on location for *Life on Earth*



It may have been historical accident that the NHU was founded in Bristol, rather than London, but instinct tells me that when Desmond Hawkins produced the first natural history radio programmes there in 1946, he already saw far further than the wildlife that was on his West Country doorstep. For, natural history transcends the usual audience demographics. There is something about looking at the natural world that appeals to all ages and all intellects, from seven to seventy, from university professors to teenage under-achievers. And so natural history programme making has become as much a part of Bristol's cultural identity as seafaring or the wine trade. The skills it takes to make such programmes are now woven into the fabric of the city, and long may it remain so. ■

Sir David Attenborough's career in broadcasting spans over 50 years. He joined the BBC as a television producer in the early 1950s, rising by 1965 to become Controller of BBC Two, where he introduced colour television to the UK. In 1973 he resigned in order to return to programme making, claiming 'I haven't even seen the Galapagos Islands.' Classic wildlife series such as *Life On Earth*, *The Living Planet*, *The Tree of Life*, *The Private Life of Plants*, *Life of Mammals*, *Life in Cold Blood* and many others followed. He was knighted in 1985 and given the Order of Merit in 2005. Among many other distinguished achievements, he is a Fellow of the Royal Society, and has been a Trustee of the British Museum and the Royal Botanic Gardens at Kew.

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