Shooting in the Wild: An Insider’s Account of Making Movies in the Animal Kingdom

By Chris Palmer

A Study Guide

Shooting in the Wild: An Insider’s Account of Making Movies in the Animal Kingdom takes you behind the scenes of the hugely popular nature film genre, sharing the adventures of the daring and creative people who make these films and TV shows. It also pulls back the curtain on the dark side of wildlife filmmaking, revealing an industry more and more driven by money, sensationalism, extreme risk-taking, staging, fabrication, and even abuse and harassment of animals.

The following are a series of questions that can be used either to enrich the individual’s reading of the book or to stimulate discussion in classes or book groups.

Foreword by Jane Goodall

A sparkling essay by the famed primate researcher and author describing her own experiences with filmmakers who come to Tanzania to document her work, and her take on wildlife films in general.

1. What are the biggest ethical concerns Jane Goodall has about wildlife filmmaking?
2. What steps has she taken in her own films to produce them ethically?

Preface

Looks back on Chris Palmer’s entry into wildlife filmmaking and the beginning of a new era in environmental programming.

1. In what ways is film uniquely able to promote conservation?
2. Chris Palmer started his career with very little experience in filmmaking. What factors can make an inexperienced filmmaker successful?
3. The National Audubon Society at first resisted the idea of going into the film business. How do mainstream environmental groups use media today?

Introduction: Movies That Can Change Your Life

Explores how wildlife films got to be such a powerful form of entertainment as well as a key conservation tool, as well as how the genre came to be dogged by ethical issues.

1. What factors have led to the increased interest in wildlife films?
2. Why is it important to know if a film is made ethically or not? How does knowing that affect the viewing experience?
3. How best can viewers show their support for ethically made films?
Chapter 1: State of the Art: The Many Faces of Wildlife Filmmaking

An overview of the whole universe of wildlife on the screen: in movie theaters, television, and new media.

1. This chapter presents the different kinds of wildlife films. How influential can these films be? Have you ever changed your behaviors or attitudes based on a film? What about the film inspired you to change?
2. What does the recent, explosive success of wildlife films say about audiences? Is this success a good sign or a bad sign for society?

Chapter 2: How Did We Get Here? A Brief History of the Business

Profiles some of the pioneers of the genre and shows how the roots of current problems in wildlife filmmaking lie deep in the industry’s past.

1. How has wildlife filmmaking changed over the years? Is the industry getting better or worse?
2. What are the strengths and weaknesses of early wildlife filmmakers?
3. This chapter discusses many examples of inaccurate or misleading films. What effect do those films have on the viewer?

Chapter 3: Behind the Camera: How Wildlife Films Are Made

An overview of how a film gets done, from pitch to distribution, based on the author’s extensive experience as a producer.

1. This chapter discusses the importance of creating compelling stories. Is it more important to be exactly accurate or to tell an entertaining story? How best can filmmakers reconcile the desire to tell interesting stories with the desire to be truthful and accurate?
2. There are three main stages of filmmaking: pre-production, production, and post-production. Why is pre-production so important?
3. What steps must a wildlife filmmaker take in preparing that a filmmaker of scripted work would not have to?
4. Of the many stories involving adventures and mishaps in the wild, choose one and explain what the filmmakers did right and what they could have done better.

Chapter 4: The Money Chase: Finding Funds without Selling Out

The challenge of raising money for productions, including a lively portrait of Ted Turner, the author’s friend and longtime colleague on Audubon’s film program.

1. What kind of things can filmmakers do to make their projects attractive to investors?
2. The chapter includes several instances of investors making particular requests in exchange for funding. How far should a filmmaker go to secure financing? What kind of compromises are worth making and what kind are not?
Chapter 5: Cult of Personality: The Celebrity Connection and Presenter-Driven Shows

How the emphasis on celebrity hosts and high-octane presenters is driving what viewers see: the good, the bad, and the ugly of working with big names.

1. Why is having a celebrity host so important for wildlife films? What downsides are there to using celebrities?
2. This chapter discusses the Crocodile Hunter and presents a mix of opinions on his success. Do shows like his do more harm or good? How could they be made in a more ethical way?

Chapter 6: Audience Abuse: Staging and Other Deceptions

Dubious practices some filmmakers use to inject drama into their films but that often deceive audiences into believing that “staged” or manipulated scenes are real.

1. All films create an artificial version of reality. Why do viewers expect more accuracy from documentary films than other films?
2. This chapter explains how sound is sometimes recreated and not recorded live. Is there an ethical difference between staging visuals and staging sound?
3. The chapter discusses some of the positive and negative aspects of game farms. If you were shooting a wildlife film, would you ever use a game farm? If so, in what situations and why? If not, why not?

Chapter 7: Too Close for Comfort: What Filmmakers Do for the “Money Shot”

Some filmmakers routinely endanger themselves and wild animals by getting too close—sometimes with tragic consequences, as when Steve Irwin was killed by a stingray. An especially dramatic chapter with accounts of Timothy Treadwell falling prey to his beloved grizzlies, Brady Barr being mauled by a python, and more.

1. When Randy Wimberg’s life was put in such grave danger, who do you feel was most responsible? What should have been done differently?
2. In what ways do the films mentioned in this chapter take advantage of and harm: the animals? The film crew and host? The audience?
3. Brady Barr sees a huge difference between his own actions and those of Steve Irwin or Timothy Treadwell. How different are they?
Chapter 8: Nature Porn and Fang TV: The Temptations of Sex and Violence

At the extreme edge of the wildlife film business are productions that sell sex and violence—good for ratings, bad for the animals that are demonized, trivialized, or even harmed.

1. Where is the line between showing “the dispassionate cruelty of nature” and showing nature porn or fang TV? Should nature films refrain from showing sex and violence?
2. How do violence- or sex-based wildlife programs influence your views of animals?
3. Do these nature porn programs serve any positive purpose?

Chapter 9: Sins of Omission: Leaving Conservation Behind

Wildlife films have been vital to landmark conservation campaigns, like the fight for dolphin-safe tuna. While some films now avoid conservation messages in the push for commercial success, others use them creatively—for example, to persuade Africans not to eat great apes as meat.

1. In what ways have films influenced conservation? What aspects of films can make them effective tools for conservation?
2. Why are so many filmmakers afraid of making “conservation films”?

Chapter 10: Doing It Right: Profiles in Ethical Entertainment

Profiles of a half-dozen gifted and committed filmmakers show how these films can be riveting entertainment while respecting the animals’ boundaries, portraying their lives and habitats truthfully, and addressing conservation issues.

1. Compare one of the filmmakers in this chapter to one of those in Chapter 7. What are the major differences in their approach to filming and in their final products?
2. When filmmakers set out to make ethical wildlife films, what added difficulties must they face?
3. Can audiences tell the difference between ethically and unethically made films? How does the difference manifest itself?

Chapter 11: The Way Forward: How Wildlife Films Can Make a Difference

Palmer proposes an eight-step program for reforming the wildlife film business, and offers his vision for what it can be at its best.

1. All films, whether they are promoting conservation or not, must attract viewers. What can filmmakers do to attract audiences without resorting to nature porn?
2. Are there aspects of pro-conservation films that make them more attractive or entertaining to viewers? How can filmmakers best capitalize on those?
3. Choose one of the Eight Steps to Reform and explain how the proposed reform differs from common practice. What effect would that reform have?