

# An Evening with Chris Palmer

## ***THE BEST AND WORST OF WILDLIFE FILMS***

Environmental Film Festival in the Nation's Capital

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A few days ago I received the following e-mail from the author and journalist Mark Dowie. He wrote:

On a recent trip to Ecuador I befriended a renowned wildlife photographer. Over drinks one evening he invited me to join him on a shoot the next day. His prey was a very rare and beautiful tropical snake. We met the next morning and drove with a small crew to the edge of the rainforest. I was braced for a long exploratory trek into the wild in search of the elusive viper. Fortunately we didn't have to go far. His porter had one in a cloth bag. He removed it from the bag and placed it on the branch of a tree three paces into the rainforest. The snake coiled itself comfortably around the branch and posed while lights were assembled, lit, and some perfect shots were captured. On the way back to Quito my friend confessed that most of his shots were somehow posed like this.

Mark Dowie added, "I'm sure this is not new or shocking to you. But it did rather spoil all those hours I'd spent watching *Wild Kingdom*, *Nature*, *Attenborough* and others on Sunday morning TV as a child."

As many of you know, I published a book in 2010 called *Shooting in the Wild* which discussed many examples of unethical wildlife filmmaking like the one Mark Dowie described. I praised wildlife and environmental films for their accomplishments, but also took them to task for not living up to their potential and for spreading misinformation and sensationalism. My book was full of mea culpas—admissions of my own ethical failings when producing wildlife films.

But most of us in this business make mistakes. It's been over five years since Steve Irwin was killed by the barb of a stingray while filming in Australia on the Great Barrier Reef, and over eight years since Timothy Treadwell was killed and eaten by a bear in Katmai National Park in Alaska.

Both men liked to get close to dangerous animals and, either intentionally or unintentionally, goad and provoke them. Both men invaded the personal space of these creatures, and when the animals defended themselves, Steve Irwin and Timothy Treadwell paid with their lives.

Harassing wild animals isn't the only problem with much of wildlife filmmaking. Too many programs send out an anti-conservation message, use animals from zoos or game farms without telling the audience, and use computer graphics or staging of some kind to deceive audiences. As I say, I've done many of these things myself.

This evening I'm going to show you examples of the worst and the best of some recent wildlife shows.

**Let's start with three of the worst.**

***The Grey* which is a problem for its anti-conservation message.**

<http://movies.yahoo.com/movie/the-grey/>

*The Grey* is an action-packed thriller that pits man against wolf. A group of oil-rig workers are left stranded in the remote Alaskan wilderness after their plane crashes. The survivors are relentlessly hunted and pursued by a vicious pack of massive, bloodthirsty, and terrifying wolves.

This film could not have arrived in theaters at a worse time because wolves no longer have the protection of the Endangered Species Act and ranchers are out to kill as many of them as possible.

The clear message from the film is that wolves hate us and are violent, aggressive, and predatory. It's true it's a movie and not a documentary, but I still object to its depiction of wolves. It plays on the cultural fear we have of wolves, as we see in fairy tales like Little Red Riding Hood.

Wolves are, in fact, rarely aggressive towards people. They are superb hunters of hoofed animals, as well as being caring parents. They live cooperatively in packs and, like us, are highly social.

Some of you may have a different view, but in my view, *The Grey* hurts wolf conservation efforts. It demonizes wolves as menacing and cunning man-eaters—a species we are better off without. In fact, they are a critically important species and we need them to maintain healthy ecosystems.

**Here is my second example of a problem wildlife film, this time for the audience deception involved.**

***Turtle: The Incredible Journey***

<http://movies.yahoo.com/movie/turtle-the-incredible-journey/trailers/>

The makers of this movie about loggerhead turtles call it a documentary. When you watch it, you think you're watching real footage of this highly threatened species. In fact, the film is full of computer-generated imagery and special effects.

The film, which has a commendably strong conservation message, tells the amazing story of the turtle's journey over twenty-five years, involving a massive migration from a beach in Florida to Africa and back. Dangers and threats lurk everywhere.

What I don't like about this film is that viewers have no way of knowing what is real and what is digitally manipulated, enhanced, and animated. In my opinion, and you may differ with me on this, it isn't ethical to have so much *unlabelled* artificiality and artifice in a so-called *documentary*.

Viewers naturally assume everything they are watching was shot in the wild with free-roaming loggerheads. As the New York Times said in its review, audiences have no way of knowing when nonfiction ends and fiction begins. When viewers find out much of what they watched was computer-generated, will they also begin to doubt the multiple dangers that loggerheads face from people? Will the film's conservation message be undermined?

There's nothing wrong with using animation, as long as viewers are told. In fact, animation is a good thing. It can reduce the amount of manhandling of turtles which is needed when you film the real creatures.

**Now we come to the third example of a bad wildlife film, this time for animal harassment. Dave Salmoni and *Into the Pride***

<http://animal.discovery.com/videos/into-the-pride-cleo-challenges-dave.html>

Dave Salmoni has a series on Animal Planet called *Into the Pride*. The audience is told that a pride of lions is aggressive towards people and needs to be taught to become accustomed to ecotourists. How does Dave Salmoni calm them down? He repeatedly aggravates them. The audience is never told that if Dave were to leave them alone, they might very well calm down on their own.

Salmoni rides around the Namibian bush on a quad-bike looking for a close encounter with lions. Lions quickly get habituated to vehicles, but when Dave gets off his bike, as he likes to do, the lions become aggressive and charge him. This makes great television, but lousy conservation. The lions are being gratuitously provoked for the sake of ratings and in the process becoming frightened and needlessly stressed.

Dr. Luke Hunter, the Executive Director of Panthera, a renowned conservation organization dedicated to saving the world's wild cat species, recently wrote a devastating critique of *Into the Pride* for the Huffington Post. Under the title, "Tormenting Lions for TV," Dr. Hunter chastised Dave Salmoni for being a "self-absorbed ignoramus" and the program for being "self-indulgent baloney." Some of you may like Dave and disagree with me on this.

**I'm now going to show you some clips from programs that I have *mixed* feelings about. I think the jury is still out.**

***Shark Week***

**<http://dsc.discovery.com/videos/shark-week-2011-videos> (“Viciously Attacked”)**

I've spoken out in the past about how I dislike the hugely popular Shark Week, now going into its 25<sup>th</sup> year. In one essay in July 2010 for the Huffington Post, I wrote,

This week of bloody feeding frenzies and vicious shark attacks is part of a larger trend in nature programming. Instead of seeking to educate or to promote environmental conservation, these shows focus only on presenting graphic, sensationalized animal violence. Programs like those in Shark Week – while they might garner high ratings and attract advertiser dollars – all too often mislead the audience, exploit animals, and fail to promote conservation. At a time when sharks face increased threat from shark finning, overfishing, and pollution, testosterone-fueled programs that depict them as vicious, man-eating killers only make it more difficult to convince the public of the need to protect them.

I have revised my assessment of Shark Week after Brooke Runnette, its executive producer, came to speak here last month at AU. She told us of the attempts she's making to introduce more conservation and natural history, and to convey how fascinating sharks are rather than how menacing they are.

Brooke Runnette is leading efforts within Discovery to work more closely with scientists and conservation organizations such as Oceana and the Pew Charitable Trust's Global Shark Conservation group.

When Brooke spoke here, she admitted openly that Discovery is driven by ratings and that if the ratings of Shark Week decline, she will likely lose her job, but she is trying to be responsive to the criticism of Shark Week by conservationists.

So the jury is out on Shark Week until we see what Discovery Channel broadcasts this July, but I'm grateful to Brooke Runnette for acknowledging the problem and trying to do something about it.

**Here is another example of where the jury is still out—this time for a National Geographic program called *Shark Attack Live***

**<http://www.bing.com/videos/search?q=Shark+Attack+Live&view=detail&mid=0A238C703D8A0DD31DC00A238C703D8A0DD31DC0&first=0&FORM=LKVR22>**

Marine biologist Ryan Johnson recruited a small team of “shark angels” to test whether sharks are driven into a feeding frenzy by the sight of white, human flesh, the smell of human blood, or the flash of jewelry.

So in National Geographic's *Shark Attack Live*, scientists and filmmakers bait the shark infested waters off the South African coast while bikini-clad young women swim with them without any protection.

The rationale behind this live reality television program is to show that everything we've learned about sharks, including great whites, is wrong and that sharks are not mindless man-eaters.

I'm not sure if this is exploitation or whether this is a good idea. I have mixed feelings. One of my filmmaking friends told me, "This is another example of National Geographic trying to get some headlines and ratings at the expense of sharks and young girls in bikinis. There is zero science in it." On the other hand, I can see that this is an effective way to get a young male demographic interested in sharks and conservation.

**The jury is still out on the next series, too, called *Wicked Tuna*, which is from National Geographic.**

<http://video.nationalgeographic.com/video/national-geographic-channel/extras/wicked-tuna/ngc-wicked-tuna/>

I first heard about NatGeo's proposed program *Wicked Tuna* about two months ago. My friend Carl Safina, a dedicated ocean advocate, wrote an angry article for the Huffington Post condemning National Geographic for making a program glorifying the slaughter of threatened bluefin tuna for entertainment.

Immediately following his withering criticism, top NatGeo officials invited him to DC to meet with them. They assured him that *Wicked Tuna* would not ignore conservation.

My own feeling is that I believe that National Geographic, renowned for its bold conservation initiatives to save big cats, the oceans, and many other resources, is not going to produce a program that would sully its deserved conservation image by glamorizing the killing of a magnificent and threatened species.

The jury is out on *Wicked Tuna*. The trailer wasn't promising, but we'll have to wait and see if the series is made responsibly or not. It premieres on the National Geographic Channel on Sunday, April 1.

**Let me now show you some clips from some of the best recent wildlife films.**

***Jaws Comes Home* made for Discovery Channel's Shark Week by veteran underwater cinematographer Nick Caloyianis.**

[http://www.monstersandcritics.com/smallscreen/news/article\\_1653813.php/Great-White-Invasion-and-Jaws-Comes-Home-on-Discovery-Sunday-July-31](http://www.monstersandcritics.com/smallscreen/news/article_1653813.php/Great-White-Invasion-and-Jaws-Comes-Home-on-Discovery-Sunday-July-31) Or use my DVD and show first three minutes of it.

*Jaws Comes Home* tells the story of the infamous great white shark's return to the North Atlantic. It follows Greg Skomal, a marine biologist with the Massachusetts Division of Marine Fisheries, as he tracks two of these majestic beasts for six months along the United States' eastern coastline.

This film gets high marks in my estimation because it's entertaining, science-based, accurate, and does not try to show great whites as menacing man-eating machines.

### ***Green***

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Qfd0H9gmluo> or **show first few minutes of DVD**

*Green* by Patrick Rouxel has won a slew of top awards for very good reasons. All Patrick's films are about animal suffering, deforestation, and human folly. *Green* is no exception. Patrick calls it "a poetical film on the extinction of the orangutans."

As I explain in my book *Shooting in the Wild*, most wildlife films are full of copulation, aggression, and death in an attempt to get high ratings. *Green* is unusual for one reason. It accurately portrays the tranquility, slowness, and calm of nature.

With virtually no narrating voice-over and no music, the film does a superb job of depicting the complex ways consumers and viewers are interconnected with dying orangutans and ruined forests.

### ***Barbie, It's Over* (Greenpeace PSA). Show DVD**

This PSA, which Greenpeace recently pulled off to stop deforestation, is a triumph of humorous satire. The campaign attacks Mattel's use of virgin paper from Indonesian rain forests in its Barbie doll packaging. The video worked like magic. The company received 500,000 e-mails protesting their packaging. Barbie's overloaded Facebook page had to be shut down. The result was that Mattel, the largest toy company in the world, announced it will stop using environmentally-damaging packaging.

**Another superior film series is *Frozen Planet*, narrated by David Attenborough in Britain and by Alec Baldwin in the US. Show trailer:**

<http://www.bing.com/videos/search?q=Trailer+for+%22Frozen+Planet%22+on+Discovery+with+Alec+Baldwin&mid=3F7E54085D878D7D7F2D3F7E54085D878D7D7F2D&view=detail&FORM=VIRE7>

This premiered in the US on the Discovery Channel just two days ago on Sunday night. How many people watched it? When the series was broadcast in Great Britain last fall, a colossal 11 million people watched it.

*Frozen Planet*, a BBC/Discovery Channel co-production, depicts our polar regions in all their magnificence and beauty. The seventh episode investigates what climate change will mean for the people and wildlife that live there.

When *Frozen Planet* aired in the UK, an ethical issue arose. The Daily Mirror revealed that David Attenborough filmed polar bears in a zoo while leading viewers to believe that the animals were filmed in the subzero Arctic wilderness.

I was delighted to see on Sunday that Discovery added a prominent disclaimer saying that some of the scenes were shot under controlled conditions.

The overall excellence of *Frozen Planet* is clearly apparent, and I commend the BBC and Discovery.

**Another excellent film is *To The Arctic 3D*. This IMAX film, narrated by Meryl Streep and with songs by Paul McCartney, is on climate change and polar bears. It's a co-production from Warner Bros. Pictures, MacGillivray Freeman Films, and IMAX Corporation, and the first film presentation of One World One Ocean. Full disclosure: I'm president of the One World One Ocean Foundation.**

***See DVD for four clips***

Six years ago, my colleagues Greg and Shaun MacGillivray felt if they didn't do something now, they would miss a critical chance to tell the story of the Arctic. So we raised some money and started filming.

The documentary adventure *To The Arctic 3D* tells a tale of survival. The film takes audiences on an emotionally powerful journey into the lives of a mother polar bear and her twin seven-month-old cubs as they navigate the changing Arctic wilderness they call home, now threatened by climate change.

We've launched a massive multimedia educational campaign in tandem with the release of the IMAX film. The campaign will amplify the impact of the film with Arctic-themed content available for multiple platforms. It includes a lobby display, a speaker tour, a companion book, an educator guide, grants for Title I school field trips to the film, online videos, photo galleries, other educational materials, and a call-to-action initiative to help protect the Arctic as one of the last great wildernesses on Earth.

One World One Ocean is a 20-year, multi-platform campaign that is harnessing the power of film, television and new media to generate greater global awareness of the ocean's importance to society. Our goal is to inspire and connect millions worldwide in an effort to catalyze a movement to restore and protect the world's oceans.

It is always a challenge to make an IMAX film. The camera is gigantic, weighing 250 pounds in its underwater housing. The water is below freezing, ideal conditions for cameras to jam, hands to freeze, and regulators to break.

When the camera is switched on, it makes a noise like a chain saw causing many wildlife species to flee. Often all that we're able to capture on film is the distant, fleeing rear-ends of creatures that have been frightened by the noise.

On top of this, the film load is only three minutes long — so after three minutes of shooting, the camera must be disassembled and reloaded with fresh film.

And each roll of film costs \$3,000 to buy, process and print! This pretty much means that every time you push the button on the camera, the budget is hemorrhaging.

People often ask me how we estimate the budgets for our IMAX films. The process is rigorous. We take the low estimate, the median estimate, and the high estimate — and we add them together.

Why did we make this IMAX film on the Arctic? Because we're projecting on huge screens five or more stories tall and transporting audiences to that amazing and vulnerable ecosystem. We feel it's the best way to show people this beautiful place, why they should care, and ultimately get them to want to protect this international treasure.

The reason I judge *To The Arctic 3D* a good film is because it takes conservation seriously. The film is built into a conservation campaign, so the chance of making a real difference is much higher than for a film alone.

The release date is Earth Day this month (April 20), and I hope you'll get a chance to see it.

**My final example of a wildlife film that has great merit is *True Wolf*, a theatrical documentary being released this June. Full disclosure again: Bruce Weide and I served as executive producers for *True Wolf*. It was produced by Tree & Sky Media Arts: Rob Whitehair produced and directed, Pam Voth co-produced.**

***Show True Wolf trailer***

Fate, in the guise of a filmmaker, had thrown Bruce Weide and Pat Tucker together with a wolf named Koani. After the filmmaker abandoned them and the wolf, Pat and Bruce faced a choice: put the wolf to sleep or come up with a way to lead a wolf-centered life. And from that came a journey that changed all of their lives dramatically. They learned, quite often the hard way, how to live with a wolf as they strove to give Koani's life purpose by having her serve as an ambassador for her species.

So for 16 years, this unusual pack traveled to communities that were hot beds of anti-wolf sentiment, hoping to show the public the truth about wolves. *True Wolf* is an entertaining and emotional story that will leave you thinking about the human-animal bond that affects all of our lives.

The film has been picked up for theatrical distribution and will be opening in June in Landmark Theaters and will then roll out across the country to a theater near you. Visit [www.truewolfmovie.com](http://www.truewolfmovie.com) and [www.wildsentry.com](http://www.wildsentry.com) for more information.

The reason I judge *True Wolf* to be a good film is that we stayed true to the story without trying to sensationalize it, wolves are portrayed accurately, and we embedded the environmental messages within the story line. As Rob Whitehair says, you don't need to hit people over the head with a conservation message if the story can lead them into a new understanding.

**I've shown you some of the best and the worst of wildlife films. I want to end by giving you three guidelines for producing ethical wildlife films:**

First, don't deceive the audience by surreptitiously using CGI to manipulate images, or by using captive animals from game farms. Fakery, manipulation, and staging are all too common in wildlife films. Staged footage should be labeled as such to ensure that the trust between filmmakers and their audiences remains strong.

Second, don't neglect conservation. Too many films fail to mention conservation, and some even have an anti-conservation message by demonizing animals and encouraging us to fear and hate them.

And third, don't harass, badger, or harm wild animals when filming. Unfortunately, animal harassment and cruelty have been pervasive in wildlife filming for decades. This harassment can take the form of everything from simply getting too close and disturbing animals, to deliberate goading. Provoking wild animals for the sake of entertainment and ratings is wrong. This might well be a contributing reason why we, as a society, continually harm and hurt animals.

What underlies so many of these ethical lapses—audience deception, lack of conservation, animal harassment—is the desire by broadcasters to create excitement and achieve high ratings. Cable TV and movies are driven by audience demand for captivating entertainment.

The only way to combat this pressure is by the public speaking up and demanding ethically made films. This is important because films and videos are becoming for many people their only link to nature.

We need to write and complain about flawed shows, like Carl Safina did over *Wicked Tuna*, and we need to use the power of social media to boycott shows that harass and kill animals, like *Swamp People* on the History Channel.

Above all, up-and-coming filmmakers should be schooled in filmmaking ethics. And don't forget, films on conservation don't have to be dull. They can be brilliantly entertaining, as we saw with *The Cove* and with *Whale Wars*.

I'll take some questions, and then I'll finish up with brief final thoughts.

## **Q&A**

I showed you two clips tonight about wolves, so let me end by giving you the wolf credo by Del Goetz:

Respect the elders  
Teach the young  
Cooperate with the pack

Play when you can  
Hunt when you must  
Rest in-between

Share your affections  
Voice your feelings  
Leave your mark

I dedicated my book *Shooting in the Wild* to wildlife filmmakers who are determined to make films that matter and I commend everyone here tonight for supporting conservation. All of you will leave your mark on this world.

Thanks for coming this evening.

Let's segue right into the Eco-Comedy winners.

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## **Eco-Comedy Winners**

One of the recommendations in my book *Shooting in the Wild* is that filmmakers use more humor. To encourage this, four years ago the Center for Environmental Filmmaking, EPA, Mill Reef Productions, and Eco-Sense launched an annual Eco-Comedy Video Competition. I'm thrilled that we've now been joined by the Sierra Club as our major sponsor and I thank my Sierra Club friend and colleague Adrienne Bramhall, who regrets she can't be here tonight.

Tonight I want to announce the winner and runners up for 2012, but first let's applaud all those here who submitted a video. Please put your hand up. (*Applause*)

The winner receives a \$1,000 prize from the Sierra Club.

I thank Angeli Gabriel for organizing this program, and I thank Adrienne Bramhall, Janice Canterbury, Adam Beckerman, Fred Grossberg and Angeli Gabriel for serving, along with me, as the judges. (*All stand and be recognized*).

***Show the finalists, followed by the winner.***

On behalf of all the judges, I congratulate the winner and finalists.