



TRUE LIES

Industry insider reveals the dark side of wildlife filmmaking



An Emmy award-winning wildlife filmmaker, IMAX film producer, and founder of American University's Center for Environmental Filmmaking in Washington, D.C., Chris Palmer might have been the last guy you'd expect to challenge one of the foundational elements of wildlife films: the way they get those shots.

You've seen them in theaters and on television: stunning close-ups of lion cubs nestled with their mom in an open field. Two wolves fighting over a fresh kill. A bear with his nose buried in an elk carcass. This is the stuff of nonfiction—intimate glimpses of what animals are really like in the wild. Or maybe not.

As Palmer reveals in his recently published book, *Shooting in the Wild*, many such scenes are, in fact, staged. The animals, who may be

captive-bred or captured from the wild, are oftentimes imprisoned in "game ranches" and rented out like props to filmmakers and photographers. The practice's ethical implications aren't limited to violating public trust. Animals are often kept in dismal conditions, subject to abuse, or even sacrificed in staged scenes of predation or conflict. Even when filmmakers work in natural settings, Palmer says, animals may be harassed or put in harm's way to obtain that "perfect shot."

Of course, not all filmmakers resort to such methods, and Palmer lauds those in the industry who follow what he calls the "do-no-harm approach that sets conservation as its highest goal." For the others, he hopes his book will inspire higher standards, even as some in the industry defend questionable tactics as necessary for producing films that connect people with wildlife. Katie Carrus, managing editor of humanesociety.org, sat down with Palmer to get his take in this edited interview.

What inspired you to write *Shooting in the Wild*?

I wrote it for anyone who's glanced up to the screen and seen a whale or a polar bear and thought, "My god, I wonder how did they get that shot?" What it does is give away the trade secrets of how we make these films, and some of those trade secrets—I'm afraid—are not very pretty.

And I wrote the book because it could

only be written by an insider. I had become haunted by the degree of audience deception, by the degree of fakery, the way audiences got misled in so many different ways.

How do you respond to the argument that getting these shots of animals helps conservation?

I don't have a good answer for you because it's about that sort of foundational ethical

question: Do the ends justify the means? And if a film is going to have a huge impact globally on conservation, then does that excuse within the film a low level of animal harassment? Everybody's going to draw that line in different places. I feel that line has been drawn in the wrong place too often, and too often we've said to ourselves that these films are good for conservation, and therefore it's OK if animals get

disturbed, harassed, even killed during filmmaking.

Can you explain the connection between game farms and nature films?

Game farms are companies that hold wild animals captive in small cages and rent them out to people like me, people who come along and say, “I need to make a film, and I need a snow leopard, or I need a lynx, or I need a bobcat,” and then they take them under controlled conditions and let the photographer or filmmaker take photographs or footage of them and make them look like they’re wild, free-roaming animals. Whenever you see a close-up of a wild, charismatic species like a bear or wolf in a movie, the chances that it’s a game farm animal are very high.

What are the conditions like for the animals?

They’re awful, miserable. The animals [may be] caught in the wild and brought into captivity, and they’re often abused—if they don’t behave well for the clients, the owners will hit them and try to get them to act the way the filmmakers want. I’m not saying it’s true for all of them, but it does happen. They’re also transported across the country in small cages—it’s agony for these animals.

What about the sensationalism that goes on in wildlife filmmaking and television?

I’m absolutely shocked by this. You can see it on YouTube now—a scene with Bear Grylls [when] he jumps into a river and crashes around and eventually finds a monitor lizard. He holds it up by the tail and swings it around as hard as he can to kill it against the tree, and he just stuns it. Then he gets out his knife, and he plunges the knife into the back of this beautiful animal to kill it. I think all those types of behaviors just show a huge disrespect to animals and set a very bad example.

What about the filmmakers who are doing it right?

One couple I would pick out is [Genesis Award-winning filmmakers] Dereck and Beverly Joubert. They work with National Geographic, and they have gone out of their way to make sure they don’t disturb animals when they film. They’ve set a very good example. I would pick out [The HSUS’s] Kathy Milani as a model. Another one is Cynthia Moses. Another one is Larry Engel. And another one is Tom Campbell. So there are people out there.

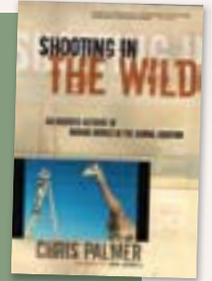
What can other filmmakers learn from their example?

I think what we need are new innovations in

EDITORS’ NOTE:

The staff of *All Animals* screen wildlife imagery printed in this magazine, working with photographers and agencies that specialize in authentic images shot in the wild.

As often as we can, we publish the work of our in-house photographers; to see a recent project by Kathy Milani, whose efforts to document the Canadian seal hunt are described in *Shooting in the Wild*, turn to page 26.



storytelling so that we can make films that are responsible but also exciting and that can compete against *American Idol*. People often say to me, “Chris, what you’re saying is fine, but the result is going to be dull films, and no one’s going to watch.” And I think that’s a fair criticism. That’s why I run the Center for Environmental Filmmaking at American University—we’re trying to generate a new generation of filmmakers who will be more responsible and more conscious of animal welfare but at the same time produce films that are incredibly exciting and dramatic.

So how do we get there?

When we’re making films, we need to go out of our way to make sure the animals are treated responsibly and not harassed or disturbed. We need to use long lenses so we don’t get in their spaces. We need to stop grabbing them and getting in their faces and goading them.

The purpose of my book is trying to get the general public to question what they’re watching more so they’ll write letters to [networks] and say, “How did you get that shot, and why did Bear Grylls kill that animal, and would you please stop doing that?” If they get a letter from a [viewer] who’s upset about the way an animal’s treated, they’ll pay attention.



CAN YOU TELL THE DIFFERENCE?
This photo was taken in the wild, but the captive tiger on the opposite page was posing for a photographer.