

## Pondering nature - Chris Palmer: Do no harm

**Chris Palmer, director of the Center for Environmental Filmmaking at American University in Washington, DC, considers the impact of one of the predominant contemporary approaches to wildlife filmmaking in an age of abundant sensationalism.**

In the 10 years since *realscreen* magazine first went into publication, wildlife filmmaking has been through many changes. The biggest change lies in the way presenters on television now move in as close to wild animals as they can, often forcing dangerous animals into interactions that are frequently physical, in your face, and extremely stressful for both parties.

This approach makes for great television. We are all suckers for scary scenes involving gnashing fangs, spilling blood and ripping flesh. From the safety of our armchairs, we enjoy a pleasurable adrenaline rush. Coming into ferociously intimate, if vicarious, contact with a snake, crocodile, shark or bear is, for many of us, addictive.

But many presenter-led programs have grown out of hand. Like Lindsay, Paris and Britney, presenters are going to increasingly dangerous extremes to grasp our attention and win higher ratings. Super-charged and constant excitement is the lure that rivets viewers to their television screens and keeps them from turning the channel. Careers rise and fall on the degree of danger, risk and sensationalism.

Grabbing a reptile or other wild animal on camera makes for more than exciting television. It also brings production costs down, because the animals are often captive, so you don't have to wait three weeks in a blind as the film budget evaporates. Audience members feel an emotional tie to the program, the consequent ratings are high, and network profits (and bonuses) increase. Children love the showmanship of the programs, and this early interest might lead to a lifelong love of conservation. Everybody wins.

Well, perhaps not everyone. First, presenters get hurt. Perhaps the most infamous example is the late Steve Irwin, killed last year when he and his cameraman swam too close to a bull manta ray.

Second, the airing of close encounters of the biological kind can mislead audiences into thinking that invading the personal space of wild animals is a perfectly ethical thing to do. This problem is a double-edged sword. On one side, viewers can get the idea that the animals are much more dangerous than they really are, because they only see animals being goaded into violence. On the other side, viewers may conclude that wild animals are like people and will respond to kindness and soothing words by being friendly, cute and cuddly.

Third, shooting up-close stresses animals. When a TV host jumps onto the back of a crocodile, or grabs a snake, or gets close to a mother bear and her cubs, the animal becomes severely stressed. This stress underlies many of the attacks seen on television - animals are provoked into attacking in self-defense.

Several people in North America have already died this year in bear attacks. Bears have been killed in retaliation. These attacks weren't the fault of the bears. People, almost certainly influenced by what they saw on TV, got too close and unwittingly provoked the attacks.

Chuck Bartlebaugh, from the Center for Wildlife Information in Missoula, Montana, says the number of bear attacks is rising due to tourists getting too close to the animals in imitation of TV wildlife presenters. He says the number one killer of grizzly bears is habituation and food conditioning caused by tourists whose actions are fueled by television programs that legitimize invading the personal space of wildlife.

How ironic that films made by people who are trying to further our understanding of wildlife are a leading cause of bear mortality. We too often forget that one of the rules we need to live by is: don't harm the animals we are filming. We need to find ways of getting high ratings without jumping on terrified carnivores. We need to respect the very wildlife we claim to love.