An interview with David Attenborough

A rare breed

His name is synonymous with animals – and especially rare species of wildlife – so it comes as something of a surprise to discover that Sir David Attenborough's favourite creature in the world is actually … human.

"I think a three-year-old child is just the most enchanting organism there is," smiles the veteran broadcaster. "They're endlessly interesting, absolutely adorable … chimpanzees come close, but three-year-olds are just so engaging, fascinating. The behaviour of these little things wandering about on the floor … just captivating."

And he's got a particular favourite sub-species. "I've got two grandchildren, but they're in Australia," he says, a tad wistfully. "But I manage to get there about every year to see them," he adds, and in fact he was able to hook up with them while filming for his new series, *The Life Of Mammals*, which begins on BBC One on November 20.

But he was really Down Under on the trail of some slightly more elusive offspring – that of the platypus. "The platypus is a very crucial creature," Sir David states. "There's nothing else remotely like it … it represents the link between reptiles and other mammals, so it is a pretty key species."

But a shy and evasive one. "When I did *Life On Earth*, which was over 20 years ago, obviously the platypus had to figure in that, and at that time nobody had ever filmed a platypus at this crucial moment, giving birth, in its burrow. And we – that is to say the BBC and the production unit – offered a very big financial bursary, a research scholarship, to any Australian scientist who would work for a year or two, if they would allow us as a consequence to find a way in which we could actually film in the platypus burrow. And nobody in Australia would agree to take it on because they said it's impossible, so we had a very inadequate sequence in *Life On Earth*.

"But this time we're 20 years on, you think let's try again, let's take another angle. In that 20 years, just one zoo managed to breed a platypus, and they quite rightly were very nervous about interfering with their successful female. So we said, okay, let's see if we can do it by underground methods in the wild.

"We put a radio tag, a little collar, on one of the platypuses. That sent a signal that goes through earth, so we could follow its beep along the tunnel and up the bank, and then it suddenly stopped and we knew that's where her burrow was. So then we put in the auger, very, very gently, and carefully broke through the surface of the burrow and peered inside with this little camera. And so that's how our cameraman got those shots of a platypus with its new-born baby. That was a real first, it was a very exciting thing to do."

And there were another couple of firsts for Sir David during the making of *The Life Of Mammals*: filming sea otters and seeing the blue whale. "I was very thrilled by that, I must say; it was unforgettable," he enthuses. But there was one close encounter that he was less happy to experience … and readers of a

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nervous disposition should skip the next couple of paragraphs!

"I don't like rats, I've never made a secret of that – they are the ultimate horrible thing," Sir David says with a shudder. And they're bad enough when you're fully fit, but…

"For the first time in nearly a quarter of a century I had a very bad stomach upset in India," he continues. "I went and sat on the loo and got rid of the entire contents of my stomach and I was feeling at a really very low point, as one does. Well, I was sitting there … and a rat came up from between my legs from the loo."

Luckily Sir David can laugh about it now, and does as he concludes, "He was wet, I have to tell you!"

Thankfully the delightful experiences have far outweighed the bad for Sir David in his incredible 50 years in broadcasting – which almost ended before they began when his initial application for a job as a BBC radio producer was turned down. Fortunately it came to the attention of the fledgling television service, who thought he was just the man for their new Talks Department. After producing programmes for several years, he got a chance in front of the cameras when the regular *Zoo Quest* presenter was taken ill just before transmission. He was a success, as was the programme, and so began his astonishing career in Natural History programmes.

But he has not just been a groundbreaking presenter and producer. For Sir David, as Controller of BBC Two, was the man who introduced the British viewing public to such landmarks as Kenneth Clarke's *Civilisation*, Brunowski's *Ascent Of Man*, *Monty Python's Flying Circus* – and televised snooker.

"We had huge freedom," recalls Sir David, explaining that at the time, BBC Two was only available in a few parts of the country as it was on a new technical standard – 625 lines as opposed to 405 – and it took time to build transmitters for nationwide coverage. "We were positively encouraged to do things like snooker because if we had the major sports the country would have been outraged that it wasn't on BBC One. So right from the start we were able to do oddball things."

The channel's success led to more promotion for Sir David, to Director of Programmes, but four years in that job was enough for him.

"I was one step further away from programme making, and I feel very much a programme person so after eight years in administration I thought that was enough."

A wise decision, as with his landmark series such as *Life On Earth* – still used as a teaching aid in universities – *Life Of Birds* and *Blue Planet* he's gone on to become one of the best-loved names on television and even makes an appearance in the Top 100 Great Britons, as voted for by BBC Two viewers.

And as well as being essential viewing, his programmes have helped enhance people's knowledge of, and shape public opinion on, environmental issues.

"People certainly know a great deal more than they used to," he agrees, "and the audience is very well informed by and large. A taxi driver asked me only the other day a quite complicated zoological question which 30 years ago would only even have occurred to a research zoologist working for a doctorate. He said to me, 'I don't understand this altruism, I don't understand

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why animals should be doing things that apparently damage themselves for the sake of their offspring, now why would this be?' Sophisticated stuff, and it had occurred to him because of what he had seen on television."
As a figurehead of the conservation movement, Sir David hopes that he can stimulate this kind of response in all his viewers.

"I would very much hope that the overall effect of natural history programmes is that people are more aware of the value and the beauty and the importance of the natural world and thus will have a greater concern to protect it and be more alarmed when it appears to be damaged," he says. "And to make appeals and to protest if politicians were to ignore it. But 30 years ago there was no such thing as a Minister for the Environment, and now, big things, leaders of the world all assembling in Johannesburg. They didn't do all that much but nonetheless they know they've got to address it anyway."

Certainly the public response to the first episode of *Blue Planet* made a big impression on him. "*Blue Planet* was scheduled to be shown the day after the September 11 attacks," he explains, "and I thought at the time, nobody was going to want to look at television at all – certainly not a programme like that – after such a ghastly and appalling tragedy. But in point of fact there were huge audiences and I think the reason was that after such appalling things, people found solace in thinking that there were realities beyond human beings, that life in the depths was still going on and always would go on in spite of all the appalling things that human beings do to one another, and that there was reality independent of these terrible things, and I think people found consolation in that.

"Natural history's appeal is that it's unpredictable – it's new, it's dramatic, it's beautiful, it's not trying to sell you anything, it's not trying to get your vote, it's a huge relief from the stuff which we are bombarded with where people are either trying to sell you something, or trying to earn huge sums of money on quiz programmes, and it's always surprising and astonishingly beautiful."
Certainly *The Life Of Mammals* lives up to that billing, breathtakingly ambitious in telling the story of 4,000 species which have outlived the dinosaurs and conquered the farthest corners of the planet – to which David and the team trek to film such delights as the smallest mammal (the two-inch pigmy shrew) and the biggest (the blue whale); the slowest (the sloth) and the fastest (the cheetah); and the least appealing (the naked mole rat) and some of the cutest mammal babies sure to have viewers cooing at the screen, from little chimps to Sir David's own favourite, a wee human being.

It's clear that this 76-year-old hasn't lost any of his love either for wildlife or for making programmes about it – he's already thinking about his next project.

"The one thing that we haven't yet exploited, though in fact we have now got the facilities, is to go very, very small, and maybe I will do that in the next series. I would very much like to use that technical facility of being able to film spiders and ants and bees and scorpions…"

Sensing a less than enthusiastic response to these not very cuddly creatures, he leans over persuasively. "No, you'd like it, I promise!" he insists.

Somehow, with Sir David presenting, I think we would.

Judy Leighton