



'Justine filming Black Rhino in Namibia for the BBC.'



**Wildlife filmmaker
Justine Evans wins
the Royal Television
Society Outstanding
Contribution Award**

Justine Evans is a wildlife filmmaker and cinematographer with a career spanning more than 30 years, who won the RTS Craft & Design Outstanding Contribution Award in March this year. Growing up with Richmond Park on her doorstep, Justine has always found comfort and solace in nature and this love of the great outdoors combined with a passion for film making and storytelling, has taken her on a journey across the globe to capture intimate moments at incredible locations with fascinating species. From filming gibbons in Borneo to rhinos socialising at a Kalahari waterhole in the moonlight and a notorious, elephant-predating pride of lions in Botswana, Justine has found herself in some extraordinary situations, but being anywhere in nature makes her happy.

By Sarah Adams

Sarah Adams: You must be thrilled to have won the RTS Craft & Design Outstanding Contribution Award?

Justine Evans: That was a complete surprise! When I took the telephone call, I thought they were asking me for advice about who to nominate! Then they said it was me who had won! I am very proud, but it has been hard for me to fathom really. I think now we have more women in decision making positions and we are being put in the spotlight more, but there is still a very small number of us doing this job and working in natural history filmmaking.

Do you feel that there is more gender equality in the natural history and wildlife filming sector or is disparity still very evident?

There is still a lot to change, and I am surprised how long it has taken to get this far but there is an energy behind change happening now, and it is partly because there are more women in those higher executive positions who are helping to drive it. In the past as one of the few female camera freelancers I never felt that I had much of a voice and thought I should tread carefully if I still wanted to get work. I know there is still a way to go in my field, but I now work with lots of women who have come into the industry in more recent years especially on the producing/directing side of things and they are often keener to work with female cinematographers. There are also more female groups and organisations such as the Wildlife Camerawomen Community and they are very vocal and stand together in a position of strength. There is definitely more energy around making change happen rather than remaining passive and hoping things will just change by themselves. In the coming years I believe things will be very different.

It has been quiet on the commissioning front for some time – what projects do you have coming up?

I do have a few things coming up with some indies and the BBC and I think the second half of this year will see things pick up. There has definitely been a lot of tightening of belts, but I am very lucky and generally tend to have consistent work – this is the first time in a long while that the industry has been this quiet.

It has made me think quite a bit about the natural history filmmaking business in general and how it can be quite a harsh place for us freelancers. Wildlife camerawomen and men are all working alone



'Justine filming Gelada Baboons in Ethiopia for National Geographic and Disney+ documentary series, 'Queens'.'

after all, and I think it would be good for us to be in a kinder industry where work is shared out a bit more. With so much fallout from the commissioning freeze it is easy not to notice what people are up to and the next thing you hear is that good talented colleagues have given up as they haven't worked for a year. I think production companies have a responsibility to be more proactive and not automatically give work to the same people all the time.

You are a big supporter of encouraging young people into the industry, how easy is it for people to get a break?

I do see plenty of young people coming into our industry and now there are more wildlife filmmaking courses out there. It feels like there's a clearer pathway into it. I mentor a student each year from the National Film and Television School's bespoke natural history course. I really love doing that and find it very rewarding. I was joint series DOP with Sophie Darlington on Queens, a new National Geographic series made by Wildstar about powerful female leaders in the natural world, and we both mentored some of the younger women involved. There was an ambition from the start to mentor throughout the making of the series and we have brought on some of the young women cinematographers up to a higher level. It would be lovely if this sort of thing could be



built into every well-funded series as mentorship is so key to increasing diversity in the industry and we have the opportunity to bring people on to another level by structuring that into the production.

Before I joined the industry back in the early 1990s, the impression I had about the natural history TV industry was that it was only for exclusively educated, wealthy people – men really and I had no connections at all to that world – I thought it was a flight of fancy to even consider it as a career option.

It's so good to see that it's slowly becoming less exclusive and there are more straightforward routes in now.

So how did you break into the industry, and what made you want to be a natural history film maker?

I grew up near Richmond Park in London and nature made me feel very happy and content. I was lucky to have that green space on my doorstep and lots of freedom too. I remember regularly being alone in the park with my dog, often after dark, seeing badgers, owls, deer, it was magical – like Narnia! I left the orange glow of the streetlights behind, and I was in another world. There was no one around and that feeling of being still and waiting for nature to come has stayed with me. It makes me feel happy, rewarded and content – just seeing a young

Tawny owl on a branch or the deer in the moonlit woodlands - it has always made me feel as if I am part of something.

A lot of people say they started filming because they were born with a camera in their hand and loved photography, but for me it was the natural world that drove it and I started to think about how I could work in nature and be out there in that environment telling stories. Like so many people, I was influenced by natural history programmes on the telly at the time and Life on Earth and Living Planet had a huge impact on me. I remember thinking that someone did that as a job and how amazing that job would be!

In my later teens I really started to become interested in the artistry of filmmaking and storytelling, but I was advised that my career options if I was interested in animals were probably being a vet or working in a zoo! Neither of these were an option for me and I believe you do have to have your own mind and trust your instincts. It did all start to flow in some way, and I ended up finding a job in London working for a company that compiled info for TV ads. I did basic editing and pulled commercials together and then someone told me about volunteering at the National Film School. From there I got a place on a drama-dominated film-making course at Bournemouth Film School. There were no natural history options, but the course was situated in Dorset's



'Justine in a tree top canopy filming for National Geographic and Disney+ documentary series, 'Queens'.'

lowland heathland, the only habitat of its kind in the UK and it was under threat. Luckily for me the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB) approached the school to ask if we could make a ten-minute campaign film on some of its rare species. I led on that project and was then asked by the RSPB if I could make a 30-minute film for them about the illegal international wild bird trade. I shot and directed that, and it was quite an adventure! I teamed up with another filmmaker – Sarah Cameron- and we decided to focus on the Moluccan cockatoo, a CITES Appendix 1 protected parrot that is found only on a few islands in Indonesia but was being illegally sold in European markets.

We were in our early twenties and very naïve so went off to Seram Island undercover, because we couldn't say we were from the RSPB – I think we got away with it because we were two young women, and I don't think anyone would have suspected what we were actually doing!

The big producer of natural history programmes at the time was the BBC, but I found it very hard to get any opportunities with them. It was Sean Morris, a founder of Oxford Scientific Films, who gave me my first big break when he asked me to film the lifecycle of a neotropical tree in Panama for National Geographic. It was all shot on film, and I made loads of mistakes but having that freedom to go out there and try was so exciting and a huge learning curve for me. We were based at the Smithsonian Institute's tropical research centre on Barro Colorado Island amongst scientists and researchers. I learnt so much about tropical biology and it was the start of my love for the tropics in general.

You have seen some incredible communities of animals in fabulous locations but what do you love most about your job?

With natural history there is plenty of shooting you can do that's driven by technology and it delivers incredible results. What I love the most though, and is definitely my happy place, is having the opportunity to spend the time getting to know the animals. It's a very special moment when you have quietly got into position, maybe waited for many hours, and something amazing unfolds in front of you without the feeling that you are affecting the behaviour in any way. Or if you have the opportunity to spend many days with the same individuals really learning the finer details of their behaviour and building stories. The other thing I really love about the job is the people I have had the opportunity to meet and work with around the world over the years. There really are some amazing people out there doing extraordinary things to help protect our natural world who I would never have met if I hadn't been doing the work I do.

You have been to so many locations and made so many programmes – which have had the most impact on you?

I made a BBC Natural World film, which I co-produced and shot, about traditional shepherds in Romania and I fell in love with the country and mountains and the feeling of a life that has disappeared

from Western Europe. Just hearing the sound of wolves howling as dawn broke across a misty forest was unforgettable. It took my thoughts back to Richmond Park and how as a young girl I used to imagine what it would have been like with wolves and bears roaming freely and wishing they were still there. Filming gibbons in Borneo and Thailand was another highlight – they are the most beautiful animals and watching them in the forest moving using amazing acrobatics, crossing the tree canopy and living at that height was incredible.

I have seen a lot of change in our planet over the years. I have been filming the natural world and it's when I go back to places I haven't visited in many years, and they are unrecognisable because of human encroachment that is hard. I had that experience recently in Kenya's Masai Mara as it had been over 15 years since I was last there and the loss of forests, encroachment by cattle grazers and pressure from mass tourism was shocking. However, the opposite can be true and some places continue to be well protected such as Costa Rica in Central America where I first filmed very early in my career. I have returned a number of times in recent years to find the forest areas in some protected areas are expanding and better connections and corridors are being created. There are positive natural history stories out there – we just need to find more of them.

What kit do you use?

Camera kit use for wildlife is very broad depending on the subject matter and production preferences. Recently I have been shooting on Arri Alexa, Red Raptor, Helium and Gemini, and Sony Venice. Plus, the Selex Superhawk night thermal imaging system. The go-to long lens for its great zoom range is the Canon CN20. DJI handheld gimbal systems and drones are extensively used on shoots too...actually the kit options are huge these days especially when it comes to grip and camera movement.

And finally...what would your dream filming project look like?

A dream project on an unlimited budget, now that would be giving too many secrets away, but it would be along the lines of the interconnectedness of everything.

Article by Sarah Adams, Production Editor of Zerb magazine.

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