



FILMING BEHAVIOURAL SEQUENCES IN TOUGH ENVIRONMENTS

Three leading figures from the world of natural history production discuss their experiences with the Panasonic VariCam and EVA1 large sensor cameras, and offer advice for shooting in challenging environments including underwater, at high altitude and in extreme weather.

Panasonic was proud to sponsor an exclusive seminar with three leading individuals in natural history production at the Wildscreen Festival held in Bristol late last year. The event was well attended by camera operators, aspiring filmmakers, directors and producers, who all gathered to listen to the speakers' experiences of using the VariCam and EVA cameras in extreme environments.

The workshop was hosted by Elizabeth White, Producer/Director for Islands, the opening series of Planet Earth II, and also the Frozen Planet series for the BBC NHU. After a brief introduction, the three filmmakers premiered a clip of their footage which was shot with the VariCam LT, VariCam 35 and the EVA1. They discussed their experiences of capturing wildlife behavioural sequences on the Panasonic cameras, concluded with an audience question and answer session.

The Speakers:

Hector Skevington-Postles – Recently captured snow leopards in the Himalayas for the BBC NHU 'Big Cats' and has been involved on shoots for the upcoming 'Our Planet', all of which were shot on VariCam LT.

Martin Dohrn – Producer and director for 'David Attenborough's Ant Mountain', and the upcoming 'Age of Big Cats' for Ammonite, both of which were shot on VariCam 35.

David Diley – A multi-award winning filmmaker and underwater cinematographer, known mainly for his work with large sharks and other marine predators. He uses the EVA1 in a Nauticam underwater housing unit.

Martin Dohrn on VariCam 35:

The first speaker was award winning director and producer Martin Dohrn. Martin's career spans over 20 years producing landmark natural history series', and has previously worked with National Geographic, the BBC and Terra Mater among others.

His latest projects, for which he used the VariCam 35, involved working with Sir David Attenborough on 'Ant Mountain', and 'Age of Big Cats', looking at seven species of big cats and their ancient ancestors from the early ice ages over two million years ago.

Attenborough's Ant Mountain was shot on the Swiss Jura at about 1000-2000 metres altitude, presenting a number of challenging conditions.

"An extreme environment is simply an environment for which you are not ready. We went there in the winter with lots of warm clothes, heavy boots, lots of equipment and were ready for the ice and snow, yet the sun came out and melted all the ice and snow. There were days when we weren't ready for that and the ants weren't ready," says Martin.

The VariCam's flexibility helped Martin to capture incredible footage in the tough environment. The area in which Age of Big Cats was filmed had variable light conditions, and often involved shooting at night and dealing with torrential downpours.

"The VariCam has an amazing ability for working within low lighting levels," says Martin. "It's incredible that if you look at the leopard's eyes you can see the pupil dilation, at the same light level as moonlight. That's dark, too dark for a normal person to be able to read a book, yet we managed to get a perfectly normal picture."

"The VariCam has incredible dynamic range and flexibility to adapt between dark and light. We were able to get never seen before footage of lions running in the rain by continuing to shoot and persevering with the weather."

Hector Skevington-Postles on the VariCam LT

Hector Skevington-Postles is a wildlife and documentary cameraman. His extraordinary project, Big Cats, involved chasing snow leopards across the Himalayas in Northern India. Hector chose the VariCam LT for his shoot, spending five weeks navigating the terrain.

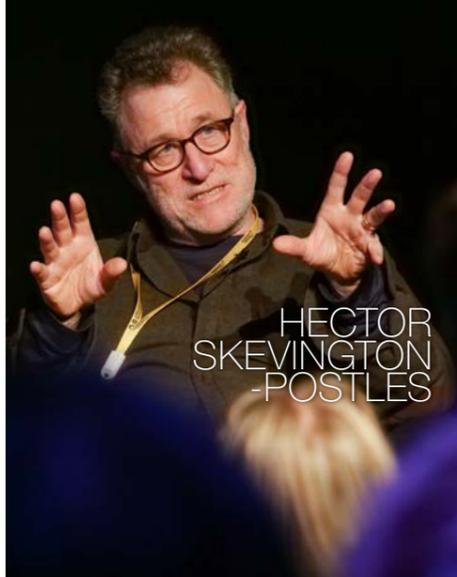
A short film clip from the shoot was played:

"Over two years the Big Cats team mounted 30 filming expeditions across the globe. All cats are elusive and shy creatures and notoriously hard to film, none more so than snow leopards. The big cats team set out to film a lonely male leopard's search for a mate. After months of planning, director Anna Friend and camera operator Hector, embark on a journey high into the Himalayas. The home of the snow leopard."

"Spiti Valley was the location of our shoot, and is a hotspot for snow leopards," says Hector. "There were about eight leopards in this vast environment. In the Himalayas there is a Halo Effect, where there's a high abundance of wildlife in areas where Buddhism is strong. As a result, you get a real culture of looking after the animals," Hector explains.

"The challenge is quite self-evident with snow leopards. Not only are they a hard cat to shoot due to their ability to blend into the hillside, but the altitude in which we are working is tough to deal with. You're walking long distances, and carrying a lot weight, in extreme cold and altitudes which can present a number of challenges."





HECTOR SKEVINGTON-POSTLES



MARTIN DOHRN



DAVID DILEY

» Hector spoke highly of the VariCam LT as his camera of choice for the shoot. "The main things for me when choosing a camera is making sure it's good when using a long lens. The reason for this is that with a long lens you're always trying to get more light in. Even in snowy conditions, you'd be surprised how much (light) you need, particularly when you're shooting snow leopards from over a kilometre away."

"A key feature of the (VariCam) LT is its dual-native ISO. That was 100 percent the winning factor on this shoot. Having the ability to have fantastic sensitivity despite working at the end of the lens helped to counteract things like the sun going down over the valley. Suddenly you realise the light has just dropped off, and then the cat will appear. Having the dual ISO just saved everything."

The extended battery life on the VariCam LT also proved crucial to Hector during the course of his filming expedition. "The LT actually draws relatively low power, so you get more out of the batteries. It's those small things that over a long shoot will make a big difference."

"The temperatures can be around -5 to -10 degrees Celsius. You're trying to keep those batteries warm all the time otherwise they just drop off if they're getting cold. If I can get even a quarter more out of each battery it gives me the luxury of having less to carry. Filming the cats you need to be running the camera constantly so any extra battery power I can get is brilliant and that's another reason I chose the LT."

"Plus it's hard to charge the batteries. We were up in a remote village and power can come and go for four or five days at a time, so we always have back-up generators. With the LT having 10 batteries say rather than 15 you might save half an hour at night charging batteries so you can get more sleep. Half an hour each night over five weeks, that little thing makes a huge difference and it's those things you look for in the equipment and the camera that you want."

"The LT itself is really lightweight so when you're there in position and the cat has disappeared around the corner and you're chasing it picking up the camera over your shoulder, the VariCam LT being that much lighter is a big plus."

David Diley on EVA 1

Finally, David Diley is a filmmaker specialising in underwater cinematography, and shooting marine life. His experience with the Panasonic EVA1 involved taking it to Egypt to shoot Oceanic White Tip Sharks. He outlined his experience using the EVA1 and the extreme environment he faced whilst diving in the Red Sea.

Filming underwater presented a different set of challenges for David. "We had the currents to deal with, I actually almost drowned after being stuck twenty metres down with not enough air to get back to the surface. Plus, aside from the water conditions, you have the heat. We filmed in Egypt during the summer with temperatures at mid to low forties. Everything takes more effort due to the heat. You're tired, you're fighting the currents and it's exhausting. You then have to deal with the sharks which can become very aggressive sometimes."

"When we were filming the White Tips they spend a lot of time towards the surface of the water, so one of the main challenges is you're pointing your camera up a lot of the time towards the light so you've got to handle the exposure at the surface whilst also trying not to underexpose everything underneath it."

The flexibility and ease of operation of the EVA1 helped David with his shoot. "You can't control where the animal is going. When I'm filming any large shark I don't want to be thinking how I do things with the camera because I'm also having to dive, there's too much going on my mind to add anymore into that."

Getting familiar with the camera set up benefitted David when filming underwater. "If you are shooting on a camera like the EVA, one of the best things to do is spend time in the dark blindfolded, and getting to know where everything is. Because I do everything manually, from changing the white balance depending on the depth, manually focussing, changing the exposure, it's vital that this becomes second nature so I can concentrate on what the animal is doing."

The EVA also gave David the flexibility he needed in post editing. "Generally if I'm shooting underwater I'll film at 59.94p. What's good about the EVA is that if I decide I want to have it running at normal speed, I can convert it down to 24fps or 25fps and it looks like true 24p or 25p. I like to have that option in post."

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