



MARK CARWARDINE

WILD THOUGHTS

Following the recent *Blue Peter* scandal and others, a motley collection of broadcasters has been forced to admit faking everything from phone-in competitions to so-called 'live' tv shows. It raises some interesting questions about natural history film-making.

Steve Leonard was unfairly criticised for a programme that claimed to show him tracking caribou via a GPS receiver from a hotel in the Yukon. In fact, the scenes were 'reconstructed' in the UK and the ruse was rumbled when an eagle-eyed viewer spotted a British electrical socket in the background. But so what? The programme-makers didn't have the luxury of flying Steve and his crew back to the Yukon to fill in the gaps, and the end result was exactly the same.

I'm equally 'guilty'. I remember presenting a radio programme years ago when I accidentally fell into a rough sea. Somehow we lost the recording, and back in London I had to re-enact the entire escapade. Yes, we were faking it – but the facts remained unchanged.

I know many people in the BBC's Natural History Unit, and they are all honest, principled folk. But while the broadcasting market is getting more competitive, budgets are getting smaller, and they are expected to work

miracles in the time available. Sometimes they use captive animals and pretend they are wild; they combine several different

sequences and edit them into one; they spare us from too much blood and gore by pretending that a gazelle has escaped from the jaws of a big cat; and, at least once, they have used computer wizardry to bring dead animals back to life.

It's been suggested that any sequence crossing the thin line between fact and fiction should be clearly labelled. But wouldn't we rather be hoodwinked by a little fakery once in a while than have unnecessary interruptions to the magic of some of the best natural history television in the world?

The bottom line is that we should not expect total honesty. It's impossible. What we should expect – and, in most cases, we get – is absolute integrity.

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