

[Transcript] Conversations / Chadden's planet Earth

ABC Listen, podcasts, radio, news, music, and more.

When Chattan Hunter was seven years old,
the thing that got him most excited
was the TV series Life on Earth.

Like many other kids who grow up to do amazing things,
watching David Attenborough prove to be a gateway drug
into a life of adventure for Chattan.

It started with a PhD in baboons
in the highlands of Ethiopia.

And that's where, sitting around a campfire one night,
Chattan met David Attenborough in person.

And seeing up close the art, the storytelling,
and the action that goes into making nature documentaries,
Chattan was inspired to become a wildlife filmmaker himself,
which he's done in a big way as a director on planet Earth
and frozen planet among many other award-winning doggos.

And in this far-flung pursuit of the marvellous,
Chattan has been scuba diving under the Antarctic sea ice,
lived knee-deep in Bat Phu in Borneo,
and only just escaped the volcanic fumes of Mount Erebus.
Hi, Chattan.

Wonderful to be here, right, Sarah?

Wonderful to have you and have you here safely
when I think about some of those things you've done.

I want you to take me back to the seven-year-old you.

What does your mum say about the way you'd watch Life on Earth
when you were a kid?

Yeah, she describes me watching Life on Earth
crawling up the back of the lounge room sofa
and putting my bum on the back of the sofa
with my back against the lounge room wall,
flat against the lounge room wall,
and my arms outstretched like I was being electrocuted.

She said, it's like you're being electrocuted.

You were just glued to that wall.

You're so excited.

It's so interesting that you didn't go towards the TV.

You went away from the TV.

Exactly. I was just, yeah, just so rigid.

Spready gold.

It's the kind of sit-up-straight-type attention
that I was hooked on.

And what was it that was so gripping for you, do you think?

I think it was a very seminal TV series.

[Transcript] Conversations / Chadden's planet Earth

And this is back in an era where we had no other forms of media, really. A lot of us would sit around the TV for a TV event. And Life on Earth was just the first time that wildlife filmmaking had started drifting away from a dry textbook style and by using more sophisticated camera work of the time and David Attenborough's beguiling storytelling. And remember, most of us had never seen Sir David Attenborough at this stage. This is in the late 1970s. He was completely new to a lot of us on TVs in Australia. But that the production on Life on Earth was so seminal and classy that I think a lot of our generation remember it as being mesmerising and enchanting. What were your own early experiences of nature as a kid? Well, I was born in Mount Isa. My father was a field geologist. So we were always destined to be out in some fairly remote places. And after Mount Isa, we lived in Iran for years. In Iran? What were you doing there? Well, again, it was my father's geology job. He was looking for precious metals. And this is pre-The Revolution in Iran when it was a little bit more liberal as a place to live. But we were always living in remote places and often couldn't travel with many toys. And so we'd often go out with our mother looking. I remember days where we would... The only mission my sister and I had was to find a stick that we would name and we would befriend that stick and we might make them a little pool in the mud for the stick. This could be a heartbreaking tale of childhood deprivation, but not for you. No, not at all. No, I think it was always that fascination with nature, whether it was a beetle or a bird. And then when we got to Cairns, of course, after the deserts of Mount Isa and Iran, the tropics of North Queensland was absolutely mind-blowing. All of a sudden there was life everywhere. And there was luminous green tree frogs on my bedroom wall. There was... I remember times where you could leave the window open in the tropics for a couple of days in the wet season and plants grow so fast that they would grow through the windows.

[Transcript] Conversations / Chadden's planet Earth

It was like something from Narnia.
And then of course, just offshore was the Great Barrier Reef.
And usually about the Great Barrier Reef in the 1980s
when it was absolutely magnificent.
I mean, it still is magnificent, but back then it was just rainbow colours.
So every school holidays, we'd either be working in cafes
to make enough money to spunk it all in the last few days of the holidays
by going out scuba diving or snorkeling.
But yeah, that combination of rainforest and reef in Cairns
absolutely got into my blood.
That obsession with nature all around me
is what led me on that trajectory.
Well, it's not surprising then that you studied zoology
at the University of Queensland.
Where did you head for your PhD?
Yeah, after Brisbane, I was looking for animals
that I guess had big brains, social systems
and looked for more exotic adventures.
So I headed to the University of Liverpool
where a professor there who specialised in primates worked.
And I didn't know much about primates,
but managed to get the position.
And it was to study gelada baboons in Ethiopia.
And this is a monkey that very few people had seen in decades.
They only found in the highlands of Ethiopia
and there'd been a long civil war there,
a really bloody civil war for almost 20 years.
So I was the first student of his to say,
well, can I go back into Ethiopia
and try and find these gelada baboons?
What were the logistics to get a visa to go into Ethiopia?
It was very hard at the time.
This is the late 90s now.
And it was still a communist country.
When I arrived, I became a resident of Ethiopia.
So I had a little red book.
I was comrade number 743295.
And it took me more than six months,
close to a year, to fully get permits.
But once I saw those gelada in the mountains,
I fell in love with them.
And I just knew that I had to do everything I could
to make this PhD work.
What was your first sighting of them in the wild like?

[Transcript] Conversations / Chadden's planet Earth

Well, I climbed up to about 3,000 meters
in the Simeon Mountains in Northern Ethiopia.
And I had local guides.
It's a wonderful scene up there.
They wear a lot of these beautiful white robes.
A lot of them are barefoot and they carry wooden staff.
And it looks like something out of the Bible.
And you climb higher and higher up into the Simeon Mountains.
You get above the treeline.
And these gelada baboons are the only monkeys in the world
that live exclusively on grass.
So they're grazing these alpine meadows.
It looks a little bit like a scene from Sound of Music.
But then you've got 800 gelada baboons.
Instead of nuns, there's these giant baboons, monkeys.
Yeah, big, hairy baboons plucking away at the grass.
And they're actually very attractive.
I will defend them because I think a lot of people
think of baboons as scruffy and a bit dog-like.
And they've got a big square muzzle.
Gelada have this beautiful rounded muzzle,
kind of coconut shaped, a bit like an orangutan.
And they have these beautiful manes on their heads,
silky golden hair, golden chocolate colors.
And I would name some of the gelada
that I was getting to know and study.
Names like Tina Turner or Rod Stewart.
And you say they live on grass.
They must have to eat an enormous amount of grass
to get enough protein.
Yeah, absolutely.
Yeah, they sit there plucking away all day
and sometimes digging to eat the tubers.
But it does mean that you can get in amongst them quite easily.
They're not hidden in the trees.
It was a lot easier to observe their social system
and to collect data.
So I didn't mind that they ate grass.
But it meant you worked at very high altitudes.
I had a little mud hut.
And I lived in that little mud hut for years.
And just with candlelight, I had candlelight
and I would boil rice and lived a very, very local existence.
And the gelada would range up to 4,500 meters.

[Transcript] Conversations / Chadden's planet Earth

So you're talking that's not quite twice the height of Kosciuszko, but it's a very high altitude living. And what would they make of you, Chatten, as you're wandering around them on those highland meadows? Well, at first, they were very scared. When I was first trying to habituate them, trying to get them used to me, they'd just been through 20 years of war. So they were very skittish of humans and they'd spot you over a crest on the hills and just disappear. So it was a bit heartbreaking at first, but you just had to keep going gently and slowly and sitting down. And with a lot of primates, the trick is to not make direct eye contact. Direct eye contact is often a sign of threat or intimidation or you've got a real message to drill home. So you do a lot of sitting, a lot of not trying to make eye contact, watching them out of the corners of your eyes and just slowly gaining their trust. Eventually, they just get a little bit tired of walking away from you. They're like, oh, God, there's a guy with a clipboard again. Okay. You had been studying bower birds in Australia before you went over to look at the gelato. What connection is there or what parallels are there between those two seemingly very different kinds of animals? Yeah, so when I was at University of Queensland, I did my honors degree on satin bower birds. A lot of people know they collect the blue objects. And at first I thought, oh, birds, you know, small brains, not much going on here. But the more time I spent in the rainforests around Brisbane and Lamington and the Bunya Mountains, watching these birds, I realized that they had a very complex social system. The males might build a bower and collect blue objects, but then you'd sit there in the forest watching and another male would swoop in when the owner was away and he would wreck the bower a little bit

[Transcript] Conversations / Chadden's planet Earth

and steal some objects.

And then the owner would come home

and be like, hang on a second, what's going on here?

And then would fly off and try and steal objects back.

And I realized that the females,

they land on the bower and they judge the males

based on how many blue objects they can collect

and their dancing and the construction

of their beautiful arched bower.

But they also have to judge the males

based on their social skills as well.

And whether they'll be bullies or called peace.

And it was just a very fascinating social system.

And Gelada baboons happen to be one of the only primates

that are fully female dominated.

So the females have tight family units

and they pick and choose their males based on the males,

being peacocks really, running around, showboating,

having to kind of pretend fights, pretend aggression,

but it's a very female dominated social system.

And so I really, I was really fascinated by that element.

And this kind of complex social dynamic.

I mean, as you spent time there

and just this regular feature in their environment,

did you, you know, did they try to draw you

into their own social worlds?

They do realize that you are a primate as well.

Not as good looking as them, Chattern.

No offence.

Exactly.

They do know if you're a male or a female,

they certainly get a sense of how dominant you might be.

And they would then start trying to engage you

in their debates.

So if a male is having an argument

with one of the other males, flipping his lip, grunting,

giving flicked eyebrows, he might come over to beside you

and put his shoulder beside you

and then look up at the other male and start grunting.

And you look beside you and think,

whoa, whoa, whoa, hang on buddy,

I'm not getting involved in this.

And then females as well,

if they're a lower ranking female in the family

[Transcript] Conversations / Chadden's planet Earth

and then they're not getting much access to the head male,
sometimes they would start grazing grass
closer and closer to you and cosyng up.
And again, you'd be like, look, I'm just not involved.
I'm just here to observe.
Exactly, I'm here to observe, not get involved.
But they would try and engage you
and the trick was always to not make eye contact.
One day a BBC crew turned up to film the Gelada baboons
and you suddenly found yourself on the ground.
What had happened?
Yeah, it was a very unusual scenario.
I felt a bit faint and I said, I needed to sit down.
And then I was sitting there beside these two British friends
and one of them was saying, oh, do you know what my name is?
And the other one was saying, oh, do you know what my name is?
I remember sitting there thinking,
come on, Mark Martin, good friends,
what are you asking me in such a silly question?
I know, of course I know your names.
And what they told me later was that it took me 45 minutes
to wake up and actually switch my mouth on.
And what had happened in the meantime
is I'd had a grand mal seizure, a full epileptic fit
at their feet.
My eyes had rolled back in my head
and frothing at the mouth.
And the Ethiopian field assistants
who I'd been working with for years up there,
they were watching at the same time.
And while I was in the middle of this seizure,
they said, oh, don't talk about this.
We don't say anything about this to Chaden.
So wait, you've been having seizures before?
Apparently, and I didn't know this.
And so in the evacuation, I was being asked questions
about whether I knew I had epilepsy,
whether it could be a brain tumor.
We had no idea.
And I found one of my main field assistants down
in the Mudhut village on the way out of the mountains.
And I grabbed him and I said,
Malalam, remember in the market a few months back,
I fell over, didn't I?

[Transcript] Conversations / Chadden's planet Earth

And I said, yeah.
And did my muscles or spasm?
And he went, yeah.
And my eyes rolled back, yeah.
And he was just looking at me like,
what did you think happened?
And why hadn't they said anything?
No, and partly the reason is that epileptic fits
are seen a lot more in society there.
They don't have access to epilepsy medicine.
So they're not as frightened by them.
They see them a lot more.
But for them, it was an exorcism of demons.
And while I was having my seizure in the mountains,
the Ethiopian saying, it's because of the monkey demons.
He hangs around the monkeys far too much.
He's exercising monkey demons.
If he was gonna have one more fit,
he was gonna take him to the witch doctor
deeper in the mountains,
where we would cut Chadden's head and bloodlet.
Chadden, I'm glad that the BBC turned up, I have to say.
It was lucky. And you were medivac.
And so they didn't know at that point,
if it was epilepsy or what could they tell you
once you got to a doctor? No, we had no idea.
It was quite terrifying.
And as I was being rushed out of the mountains,
I was quite groggy having just woken up from this.
We got stopped in the capital.
And because I was a resident of Ethiopia,
I actually wasn't allowed to leave.
I had to apply for an exit permit.
And so my Australian passport couldn't get me out of there
on a plane.
We had the embassies all trying to talk to the foreign ministry
to try and get this exit permit rushed through.
So I got out a few days later, back to the UK,
did all sorts of medical tests.
And the Liverpool School of Tropical Medicine
did brain scans where they found a brain parasite,
a parasite that had gotten into my brain.
It's a little blood fluke, a worm called schistosomiasis.
And normally it's a very benign parasite.

[Transcript] Conversations / Chadden's planet Earth

It's trying to find its way to your liver or kidneys.
And people can live with it there for years and not know.
But my little male and female worm coiled up together.
They got a bit lost.
And they set up their white picket fence in my brain.
And when they're laying eggs,
the eggs were blocking some of the capillaries,
causing the seizures.
And so the doctors were able to identify
that these brains laying the eggs was causing the seizures.
Chattin, how did they treat you?
Well, the treatment, luckily, is fairly straightforward.
It's just an oral antibiotic.
So I was in an infectious diseases ward.
I had to have a room on my own, which was crazy.
But apparently the worms dying can cause one last seizure.
So I got all my uni mates to come into the hospital room
to say, wait, wait, watch, watch, watch.
No, no, no, wait, watch.
Of course, it didn't happen.
And I was able to go back to my work.
You were happy to try to be extra in your own horror film, I see.
So you did get the treatment
and remove the parasite eggs from your brain
and head back to the Ethiopian Highlands.
And you and your troop of baboons
had kind of got on the radar then of film crews.
Who turned up one day?
Yeah, well, this was, I guess,
the most eminent wildlife filmmaking guest you could get.
So David Attenborough came for a series called Life of Mammals.
And this is what was over 20 years ago now.
But for me, having grown up watching Life on Earth
and that being that seminal moment as a seven-year-old
when I decided I really want to turn my love of green things
and fluffy things into a career someone would pay me to do.
And here was the man turning up at my campfire
who was the inspiration for me as a seven-year-old.
So it was one of those real pinch yourself moments
when David arrived.
And what was he like? What's he like offscreen?
David, he's a wonderful person to work with.
You know, anyone who's met him will say the same thing.
He's incredibly humble.

[Transcript] Conversations / Chadden's planet Earth

He's gracious. He's very funny.
And he loves listening.
He doesn't have an ego.
He's buoyed by this incredible curiosity.
And that is what has kept him going for so many years.
He's 97 now, still narrating wildlife films.
But he has this incredible curiosity
about everything around him.
So he would sit there just picking my brains
about these gelato monkeys,
asking question after question after question.
And of course, as a 20-something-year-old,
I was just pinching myself thinking,
oh, my God, here is David Atmer just asking me all the questions.
I would ask him questions.
He was so interested in what you had to tell him
that I believe he had to break a lunch date to stay with you.
That's right. We wanted to extend in the mountains.
We had some bad weather,
and I was in charge of the travel arrangements,
and I was trying to say, oh, David,
do you think we might be able to extend just by a few days?
I think when there's rain clears,
we can finish off the last few scenes.
And he'd say, well, I guess, Chad, maybe I could.
I just, I've got lunch with a friend on Tuesday.
I was saying, well, surely, David,
your friend would understand.
Do you think you could maybe move that lunch
just so we could finish off this really important filming?
And he said, well, I guess I could, Chad.
And it's just that Nelson isn't in town that often.
And I just, my jaw just dropped.
And I was like, oh, God, he is talking about Nelson Mandela.
This is David Attenborough bumping lunch with Nelson Mandela
just to stay on with my ratty monkeys for a few more days.
Well, maybe it was because of conversations like this one.
You got infected with another bug
in the Highlands of Ethiopia, the filmmaking bug.
Why did documentaries end up stealing you away
from university?
Yeah, it was a very interesting switch there.
But I'd always wanted to share my love of nature.
And I'd always assumed I would do that through classroom.

[Transcript] Conversations / Chadden's planet Earth

I thought I'd be a biology teacher or biology professor.
And I was loved getting excited
and telling people about that little blue beetle I'd found.
But it took me about at least four years
to finish the PhD with the war and the parasites,
and you name it.
And it's exhausting and lonely.
And probably four people in the world ever...
Well, I'm gonna say three and a half people
ever read that PhD
because I'm pretty sure my dad never finished it.
But I can't blame him, it's pretty boring.
And yet the first film I got to help the BBC make
about those Jalalababoons, possibly 50 million,
eventually 100 million people saw that film.
And I just thought the reach and the power of film
and TV especially as a powerful medium
to get message across was just giddy.
It was a real epiphany for me
that if I wanted to share my love of nature,
that filmmaking would be a medium
where I could really get more impact.
Your first major shoot was for Planet Earth,
where you went off to caves in Borneo.
What was the attraction?
Why were you filming there?
Yeah, well, partly the attraction for me was...
This was my first chance to get out of Ethiopia.
And I'd had a hard few years there, enjoyed the monkeys.
But the chance to go exploring the caves of Borneo
was super exciting.
And I knew it was going to be a rough job.
We were going down into a cave for a month.
And the object was to try and film
the world's biggest mound of bat poop.
This is a pile of...
Oh, the glamour.
The glamour.
This is a pile of powdery guano
that had been built up from years and years
of bats on the ceiling.
And it was over 100 metres high.
And it reeks of ammonia.
It's almost like your nostrils are being peeled out,

[Transcript] Conversations / Chadden's planet Earth

that the stench will live with you forever.
And we had to work out how to bring scale
to the world's largest pile of poop.
And when you climb this mountain of bat poop,
it's like powder snow.
It's so powdery that you sink in up to your thighs.
And we were trying to rig cameras to glide up and down
this mountain of bat poop.
That was the one thing we had to do.
We was just trying to get cameras
to show you the scale of the bat poop.
So, I mean, you could have sunk and never recovered.
I mean, how do you not just sink
to the very bottom of that enormous pile of bat poop?
Yeah, well, we have these paper suits on
that spread our weight a little bit.
But yeah, it was grumpy.
You got covered head to toe in bat feces.
And this was my first time being on camera
behind the scenes in Planet Earth, the original series.
Some people might remember the Caves episode.
There's a 10 minutes at the end where we're seen there
with bat poop all over us.
And it took me years and years to shake this image.
I'd go around the world talking about what I did,
other films I'd make, and people would come back to,
oh, Planet Earth, that Caves episode.
I was like, yeah, you're the guy covered in bat poop.
And so, I think it was probably about 15 years
that I just was known as the guy covered in bat poop.
But I was trying to say, I've done other things.
Did you question your decision then
at all to swap university or teaching
for the world of filmmaking?
Oh, not at all.
I was off on an adventure then.
And it is just the best job in the world.
You're so spoiled because you continually get
to meet researchers from around the world.
You get to drain their brains.
You get to learn about a new place.
So it's addictive, it really is.
Well, since that shoot in Borneo,
you have been to some very far-flung corners of the Earth.

[Transcript] Conversations / Chadden's planet Earth

Where, though, what part of the world for you has meant the most extreme wildlife experiences? Well, I would say the series Frozen Planet is the one that, if people ask me to list it at 10 of the wildest wildlife filming adventures I've had, probably eight or nine of them come from Frozen Planet. It was just one of those series where we were just trying to push the envelope of everything that was possible, just pushing the endurance of our camera gear to the limits, pushing the endurance of humans to the limits. And I was at an age where it was exciting. He was an Australian from North Queensland. The fact that somebody was going to pay me to go and see polar bears and penguins and icebergs, I just leapt at it. What's the usual timing for a shoot on a series like that? How long would you be out in these icy wasteful? Well, Frozen Planet had some longer trips than others because we had to film a lot of the wildlife in the Arctic in a six-month window when everything happens and Antarctica's shut down in darkness. And then you would switch your crew down to the Southern Hemisphere and you'd have about a five or six-month window to film all the incredible activity in Antarctica. So it was real blitz-type filming. So when I went to Antarctica in summer, it was a four-month trip. So I didn't, it was in summer. So I didn't see the sun set for four months. It stayed up for four months. And it was nonstop. We were trying to cover off a lot of different stories in that window and move around. What are some of the technical challenges of filming in conditions of minus 20, minus 30, minus 40? What happens to you and your gear? Yeah, well, you have to learn on the job. Down to about minus 20 or minus 25, things are okay. If the air is quite dry and the sun is out, it's not too bad, you've got good clothing for it. Beyond minus 25, things start to go a little bit pear-shaped, plastics start breaking, which is a big thing. So you might have little heaters or heating cables

[Transcript] Conversations / Chadden's planet Earth

that are trying to keep your cameras warm.
You might have other little plastic sachets,
other just devices, thermoses, things like that,
start cracking, plastic can't hold up.
And your camera gear starts to go downhill.
When you get to minus 40, I really notice
something happens at minus 40 where everything breaks,
humans included, and it just really, really
gets dangerous very quickly.
What's the most dangerous thing that's happened to you
in those temperatures?
Well, minus 40 was, and I only learned this
by being out there, but we were out trying to film
wolves at one stage and we were on snowshoes
and we had to be very, very quiet.
And with snowshoeing through powder snow,
we had to creep up on the wolves using hand signals.
And no one was talking, we'd stopped for a while,
and I was standing there on my snowshoes,
which you kind of propped up like a doll,
you're just upright, and I was falling asleep
and I remember thinking, God, don't fall asleep,
this is really dangerous.
And no one had talked for a long time
and no one had moved.
I remember thinking, you've got to wake up,
you got to wake up your crew and get them out of here.
And I just, I couldn't open my mouth
and I'd get to the edge of sleep, I was falling asleep,
and I'd, inside my voice, a voice was screaming,
saying, you've got to wake up, wake up,
get your crew out of here.
And I'd fall asleep again,
and it was about the fourth time that this voice screamed,
wake up, and I've just got my mouth to move,
and said, we've got to get out of here.
Podcast.
Broadcast.
And online.
You're listening to Conversations with Sarah Konoski.
Find out more about the Conversations podcast.
Just head to ABC.
You can find out more about the Conversations podcast
just head to ABC.net.au

[Transcript] Conversations / Chadden's planet Earth

slash Conversations.

So, Chatten, this experience of going out into either the Antarctic or the Arctic conditions, which are so extreme for a human body to experience, there's one thing, I guess, about being above ground and filming polar bears or penguins, but you decided to take that even one step further and go below the sea ice.

Have that ever been done before?

Had people filmed under sea ice?

I think people have filmed under sea ice.

I mean, we're always trying to find new stories and things that haven't been done.

We were on the Rossi,

which is a permanently frozen bit of ocean.

It's that deep in Antarctica.

And we drive out there with a big industrial drill.

So a drill bit the size of a manhole.

And we drill through the ice about two or three meters down.

You've got a manhole through the whiteness.

And then you would park a little wooden hut on top.

So it's a little wooden hut on sleds.

It's got no bottom, so it slides over the hole.

And then you could walk in the hut.

It gives you a little bit of warmth

with somewhere to get your dive gear on.

Then you dive down through the manhole.

What are you wearing before you tell me that?

What the hell do you wear to go diving?

Well, you've got a dry suit,

which keeps your skin dry underneath with insulated layers.

You've got thick gloves.

Every bit of your body is covered except for your lips.

Your lips have to hold the regulator in your mouth.

So your lips are the only thing exposed to that water.

And the water is actually minus two.

It's actually colder than zero

because it's got salt water in it.

It's able to stay in liquid form colder

than what ice in our freezer would freeze at.

So you're in your little wooden hut

parked over this hole,

covered completely apart from your lips.

What's the moment like where you step into that hole?

[Transcript] Conversations / Chadden's planet Earth

It takes your breath away.
I mean, you have to really tell yourself to keep breathing.
Your whole body just kind of tenses and shocks
as you drop down through that hole.
But you've got to get through it and get out of the way
because there's someone coming behind you.
And once you're out then in the water beneath the ice,
is there light coming through the ice?
Are you in darkness?
Yeah, there is.
And that's what's so magical.
It's a scene that is so otherworldly
because the ice has light coming through.
So it feels like a glowing surface of a planet.
And it goes all the way to the horizon.
So you feel like you're on a spacewalk.
And all around you is this beautiful inky blue black.
And the other thing about the water underneath sea ice
is it's crystal clear
because there isn't enough light to create organisms in there.
So you can see hundreds of meters to the sea floor.
So it's a beautiful landscape.
You feel like you're on a spacewalk with a white surface
of a planet just at your head
and then this inky blue space around you.
So is it quite disorientating then?
It is a bit.
Yeah, it is.
As I said, you feel like you're in a sci-fi film.
And you'll leave that hole.
Normally with ice diving, you're tethered.
You have a rope around your waist for safety
and people can call you out.
We had to beg our hosts the Antarctic base we were staying at
to let us dive without the tether ropes
because they would get in the way of the filming.
If we wanted to turn the camera around,
we didn't want those ropes in the image.
So we managed to convince them to let us dive without the ropes.
But of course we get down there with...
I was down there as director.
I was there with the cameraman.
He's carrying his big camera.
And you're like kids in a candy shop.

[Transcript] Conversations / Chadden's planet Earth

It's like, wow, are we going to film?
And you'd keep one eye on the hole
because that's your only lifeline to figure out.
And you can see light coming through the hole.
You can see light through the hole.
And you have a little cord that hangs down
with a little flashing flashlight on the end of it.
But you'd paddle away.
And it's one of those deceiving things
because the water's so clear.
You'd always look around and be like, oh, yeah, there's the hole.
That's where safety is.
But when your oxygen was getting low,
you'd start paddling back and you start paddling and paddling
and then you'd look up and the hole hadn't gotten any closer.
And your oxygen's going down and you're paddling and you're paddling
and you think, grief, we're more than 200 meters away from safety.
And that would never happen on a dive in the other oceans
because you just can't see that far.
You wouldn't get that far away from safety.
So there were some hairy moments where it took us a long time to get back.
And we assumed the water was dead still under that ice.
And on one of these dives, we realized that a current
had started underneath midway through the dive.
And that was something that we hadn't planned for.
But then swimming against a current with little oxygen a long way from safety.
And I guess the way you're describing the water as being so clear,
you're not able to pick up that a current's even there necessarily.
Exactly, yeah.
You can't tell a current started and you can't judge distances.
So even for an experienced diver, it was a very, very disorientating.
I would really have wanted that rope.
I've got to tell you, I wouldn't care about the camera angles.
How do you get back up once you finally return to where that little flashing light is?
When you get back, you can tug on the little light rope
and someone in the hut will drop down a little ladder
and you'll start to get out.
So what was worth the risk?
What sort of creatures did you encounter down there?
Well, we were there admiring all sorts of organisms on the sea floor.
But I was looking at some specks in the water
and I thought they were just at arm's length because they were so small.
And I held my hand up to try and see what these little dust motes were floating in the water.
And I realized they were beyond my hand and deeper.

[Transcript] Conversations / Chadden's planet Earth

And this was when I was realizing how far you could see.
And these little specks started wobbling around and getting bigger and bigger.
And as they got closer to us, I realized they were emperor penguins coming up from the depths and they're beautiful, magnificent animals underwater.
They're glorious torpedo shaped, beautiful black and white colors with that lovely flash of sulfur yellow on their heads.
And they came up closer to us and these emperor penguins had never seen humans before. Certainly not where you were.
No, no. So they eyeball you and then they start swirling around us, orbiting around us and they're one meter long.
They're really big animals and of course things underwater look bigger.
So we felt like we were in a snow dome.
You know, those little plastic snowdoms you shake and the snowflakes swirl around. You're just floating in midair with this white surface of another planet above your head and dozens of these beautiful torpedo rocket ship emperor penguins orbiting you, just checking you out.
And I remember this absolute out of body experience.
I remember thinking, someone is paying me to do this.
I feel so incredibly grateful.
What an extraordinary experience.
And how many humans can have experienced something like that, Chad?
You and your friends, you and the filmmaker, there can't be that many.
Yeah, probably a handful on the planet.
How long does it take you to come down from an experience like that once you're back out on the ice?
Well, I mean, it's a life buzz isn't it?
These encounters stick with you forever and inspire you.
I think for me, though, the big thing with wildlife filmmaking is that I get to share that.
We capture images and then millions and millions of people get to see what it looks like for emperor penguins to swim under the ice.
And when they come up to the surface, they're looking for holes to escape out of and they squeeze their feathers at the last minute and have a jet trail of bubbles.
So they get these beautiful comet trails just as they come up and to capture those images and to share them in frozen planet and to reach other people is what makes it special.
It's for me, it's not an internal bucket list experience.
It's about I've been very privileged to see something special.
I really want to share it with as many people as possible.
Tell me about an experience you had with a different animal at the very other end of the earth in the Arctic, an Arctic wolf.
Oh, yeah. What a magnificent animal.
I was out on the tundra one day in far northern Canada and I saw some snow geese take flight and start squawking and I knew there'd be something there.
And through my binoculars, I could see an Arctic wolf on the horizon, beautiful, big, white beast and it lifts its nose and sniffs the air and then starts trotting directly towards me.

[Transcript] Conversations / Chadden's planet Earth

And this is kilometers away and I watch with my binoculars going, Oh God, it really is coming to check me out.
And I walk away and I think I was nothing I can do.
And it went down part out of sight beyond the crest came up again closer and closer.
And my heart just starts pounding.
I think God, this wolf is coming straight at me.
It can probably smell trail mix or smell me.
Who knows what it is.
And I remember thinking to yourself, OK, you're not at danger.
Don't attack people.
It's a naive wolf.
This wolf has never seen a human.
It's just curious.
And all of my biological training, everything I knew about wildlife, my brain is fighting my heart.
My heart is pounding out of my chest because it's a visceral experience.
An Arctic wolf now trotting, running towards you.
And I had to have this mental battle and just say, you're OK.
You're OK.
And I sat down with my back against a rock was one of the only rocks out there in the tundra.
Only about a shoulder height.
And I sat there with my back against the rock, trying to breathe with my heart pounding, watching this wolf get closer and closer.
And it slowed down as it got within 20 meters of me.
And it's already taller than me as I'm sitting down and it starts zigzagging towards me.
It's sniffing to the left, loses my scent, then zigzags to the right, loses my scent, zigzags back.
And it's just zigzagging closer and closer, smelling me.
Very, very curious.
I had no idea what I was.
I'd never seen anything like it.
And I was just trying to stay frozen.
As I said, my heart's just going bananas.
And this wolf eventually zigzags its way up to my boots and just sniffs at my boots and looks down at me.
And it's this magnificent head.
It's like a white werewolf, huge, beautiful animal.
It's just absolutely glorious.
And it looks down at you with these incredibly curious eyes.
They've got ice blue eyes.
These really, really electric blue, an amazing eye in the animal kingdom.
It looks down at you, this big shaggy white head and these electric blue eyes.
And it was like it's looking right through your soul.
And it just looked at me and then turned around and then trotted off again.
You say that the biologist you knew could tell yourself rationally this wolf wasn't going to pose a threat,

[Transcript] Conversations / Chadden's planet Earth

but there are dangerous animals up there in the Arctic.

What about polar bears?

That's true.

Yes, good point.

Polar bears are one of the very few animals on the planet that actually will stalk and hunt humans.

There aren't many of them, about four or five.

But polar bears are a real danger because they are not afraid of hunting humans, even a healthy polar bear.

And there was one trip.

This was Seven Worlds One Planet, I think now.

We were out filming polar bears hunting beluga whales.

And this is in summer.

There's no ice.

They have to get climb on top of rocks in the Hudson Bay Ocean, the water.

And they're trying to jump off rocks onto the back of beluga whales.

It's an incredible scene.

So we knew we were safe if we stayed on the boat.

Even on land, you could see a mile.

And we got on the mud flats one day just to have lunch.

And we've got our armed guard there with a big bear safety shotgun.

And we're looking around.

All the bears are out swimming, looking for whales.

And I wandered off for a pee away from the ocean.

And I was there doing my business.

And then just there out of the little sagebrush on the tundra, this white head started lifting up a polar bear.

A giant male polar bear lifted up blinking.

He's just woken up and he's blinking just a few meters from me, looking at me.

And he starts to clock.

His eyes start opening.

His eyes start looking more and more curious.

And I look over my shoulder and the armed guard and my cameraman are looking out to see.

Giving you some privacy.

And it's very windy up there anyway.

And I realized, okay, I'm not going to shout.

The one rule I knew is don't run.

The only thing that runs is pray.

So never run.

And then I was looking at the guard thinking, even if I was to be able to get back to the guard, and he picks up his rifle, he can only shoot directly at me.

I'm standing between the gun and the polar bears.

And I'm trying to whistle and my mouth was so dry.

I was like, I'm trying to get their attention.

I couldn't whistle at all.

[Transcript] Conversations / Chadden's planet Earth

My mouth just wouldn't work.
And I turned back around to zip up my trousers.
And then a second male polar bear starts to lift up out of the bushes and stretch.
They're stretching their forearms.
These are the size of small cars.
And they must be brothers, male polar bears, like hanging out together.
And they look at me with their blinking, waking up look.
And they stretched their full height, like a cat's back.
And I'm staring up and thinking, okay, I'm done.
There's no way I'm going to be able to run out of this.
And it was only because they'd been feeding on whales that they were full, fat, sleek, and well-fed.
Almost every other polar bear in summer is starving and often quite desperate.
And I just happened to be lucky to be there face to face with two big, well-fed male polar bears.
And they took one look at me and turned around with them.
You can't compete with a beluga whale.
So I kind of staggered back to the gardening cameraman, tapped him on the shoulder.
I still couldn't quite talk.
I pointed and they turned around and saw these two massive white polar bear bums waddling off.
And he was gone, grabbed his gun, like, oh, what did you do to them?
Take me back to Antarctica Challenge and tell me about what you were filming there one Christmas day.
Oh, Christmas.
Yes, Christmas.
We had to keep filming through the southern sun.
No holidays for us.
No, no.
Well, the sun never sets, you see, in Antarctica in the mid-summer.
So on Christmas day, we were up on the side of Mount Erebus.
This is a famous volcano, an active volcano down in Antarctica.
And we got dropped off by helicopter.
We were camping up there, but the helicopter took us up to these, they called fumaroles.
And it's a little ice chimney that gets created by hot air coming out.
And we climbed down into this fumarole to go and see these ice caves that we'd heard about.
Some scientists had described these beautiful ice caves, but no one had ever filmed in there because a camera's just condensed and it's dangerous.
So we dropped down through this hole in the ice and this incredible world just opened up.
We're in this chamber, maybe the size of a lounge room, but it had these beautiful ice crystals, these wonderful colors to them.
And some of them were dangly chandelier shapes that wobbled gently in the breeze.
The ice crystals were so delicate that they would actually wobble in the breeze.
And the surface of the ice cave is just volcanic soil.
So it's the warmth coming off the soil that melts out these ice caves.
And then the different gases and airflow creates a different icicle in each chamber.
So we'd go through a little, push our way through another little hole in the ice and get into the next

[Transcript] Conversations / Chadden's planet Earth

room.

And in this room, the ice crystals might be dinner plate sized hexagons that were all pale green.

The entire walls just covered in these rows and rows of hexagon green dinner plates.

And then we'd push through another little hole in the ice.

And then there'd be an entirely like pillars of gently shaded blue crystals.

And it was like something out of Harry Potter.

You just couldn't believe these different chambers we were going through.

So what you were seeing and filming was completely astonishing.

But what about how you were feeling as the time you were spending in those ice caves went on?

Yeah. So we got, we got a, we lost track of time.

We just, we just wanted to keep filming these ice crystals.

We were deeper in, but we started getting, we started getting headaches.

And the cameraman was, was really struggling to work.

And then I was too.

And we kept, we kept soldier got a bit had some panadol and they got worse and worse.

And the cameraman had to lie down.

I started vomiting, excruciating pain.

I thought I was going to pass out.

And, and we realized this was really dangerous.

We had no idea we'd eaten something dodgy at camp or what was going on.

We tried to find our way back through the chambers.

We had to remember each chamber, which ice crystals we'd seen,

in which God was it the purple hexagon plates first?

Or was it the dangly green bits?

We got back to where we thought was the way out.

And we're on our hands and knees now.

As I said, I was vomiting.

I felt like I was going blind.

And we couldn't find the entrance.

We looked up at the, the roof of this chamber.

And what had happened was a blizzard had blown snow over the top of the hole

and kept it basically created a snow cap on this hole.

And so we couldn't find a way out.

And with the last strength we had, we abandoned our cameras.

We abandoned equipment.

We had no strength left.

We used our ice picks and we had to try and hack our way up the side of the ice chamber

and get to this cap of ice and punch our way through to punch this snow out

so we could get up into fresh air.

And we stuck our heads out and was a blizzard outside,

but we actually got fresh air.

How extraordinary.

Did someone come and get you?

Well, we called for help.

[Transcript] Conversations / Chadden's planet Earth

We had a satellite phone.

We could call for help.

We were on death's door by then.

And later scientists went back with a, they call it a gas canary, I think, and it's a little monitor and they drop it down into the cave

and it reads all the signals of all the dangerous noxious gases in there.

And it was beeping madly and they pulled it up saying,

you guys should be dead.

It's like the toxic gases that you were trapped within there are absolutely deadly.

And there's no way you should be in there.

And it was just a, I feel a bit foolish now,

but it's one of those safety concerns that at the time you just don't know.

You don't know what you don't know.

I guess there aren't that many field guides for should you be filming

in an ice cave in an active volcano in Antarctica?

This is what you need to be careful of.

Exactly.

And it was Christmas, because it was Christmas day,

we went in there with Santa hats on.

We had a hip flask of brandy in case we could celebrate,

but we didn't get onto the brandy because we were so sick.

But yeah, so the rescuers came and pulled these two Santas out of a hole in the snow.

We were like, what are you doing?

I feel very mercenary to ask this, but did you get the images out?

They are there.

They are there.

So people can see those.

The ice crystals were brought to life and I don't think they've been filmed since.

You've had more than one pretty close experience with mortality doing this work.

How do you think of that?

Do you approach the risks that you take or certainly have taken in the work you do?

Yeah.

I mean, generally we try to be as safe as possible.

It's a very carefully planned operation.

We do a lot of homework.

We work with locals.

It's never been animals.

I always say that it's not animals that are dangerous at all,

but sometimes the physical places that we've put ourselves in.

But it's funny how perceptions of risk and danger are quite different, individual to individual.

I often say to people, I say, you know what the single most dangerous thing is I do in my life?

I'll be like, oh, what is it?

[Transcript] Conversations / Chadden's planet Earth

After everything you've done, I'll do it every day.
I'm like, oh my God, what is this?
I said, I cycle to work through Brisbane City.
It's to this day the single most dangerous thing that I do.
I think probably sometimes my wife wishes I didn't do it, but that perception of risk is a different thing.
The statistics of driving in a car are more dangerous than flying in a plane, and yet a lot of people can't get their head around it.
It must be that you've got a really rational mind in some way, because I could look at that data, but I would feel differently faced with the polar bear or trapped in an ice cave full of volcanic gases.
You must be able to be quite cut and dry about just the facts of risk.
I think so.
And those are rare moments.
I mean, don't get me wrong.
I've had a very wonderful and I'm grateful for my career decades of wildlife filmmaking, and those are the few moments that are the most hairy.
Most of the time you're sitting around in a hide waiting for a bird to turn up.
Desperate for something to happen.
Yeah, exactly eating Snickers bars and watching Game of Thrones or something.
I've always wondered about that.
I mean, how much footage ends up on the editing room floor when you're making nature documentary?
How much is you just filming not much?
A staggering amount.
Our shooting ratios are 400 to one.
For every 400 minutes, we film of the lions.
You're going to see one minute of that.
So the editing process is staggering.
It takes us months and months to sift through the footage.
And is it a case where you'll set up cameras and then leave them, or is there always a photographer or filmmaker keeping an eye on it as it's happening in real time?
We do both.
We do both.
The remote cameras have become more advanced and more common.
The one thing that an actual camera operator is that they have the power to change the size of the frame,
or they can pan, they can tilt.
They can be more creative with the imagery.
They can help build a story of different shots that will edit together.
And a remote camera is a bit dumb in that sense.
It can only kind of shoot one angle.
It's a combination of different techniques to get close-ups and to build the story.
Given all these extraordinary parts of the world that you've experienced and adventured in,

[Transcript] Conversations / Chadden's planet Earth

what brought you back to Australia finally?

Well, it was early 2020, and my wife and I just had our second baby.

We had two under two, and I had just finished another beggating series, Seven Worlds One Planet.

And we were taking a bit of a break.

And we went to Byron Bay for a few months, but this was March 2020.

And of course, the COVID door locked behind us.

So we ended up spending 2020 to lockdown year in Byron Bay.

And of course, with little kids in Australia, I remember kayaking off Byron Bay with no tourists.

The town was empty.

The town was cheap.

Not like that anymore.

With my little two-year-old on the front of my kayak.

And we were just off the headland there.

There was no surf, so no surfers were out.

And a pod of dolphins started circling us, checking us out.

There was mothers and young ones, and they were spraying around us and chattering.

And I remember my two-year-old just going, Dolphin, Dolphin.

And thinking, gosh, this is the kind of immersion in nature that I can bring kids up with.

So it was a pretty easy decision to basically decide to come back home to Australia

and give my kids that immersion in Australian nature that I had.

And you're making films based on Australian wildlife and nature now.

What's the one on ABCI view that you've made?

So just recently, we finished a film called The Platypus Guardian.

And it was a very sweet tale about a local in Hobart who has some really rough times in life but befriends a city platypus and creates this grassroots movement to try to save them.

And what I loved about the story was it just brought humans into that world a bit more.

It was a bit more about human wildlife relationships

and about what people in cities can do to enjoy wildlife.

So yeah, different style of storytelling.

The big Attenborough stuff is glossy and beautiful,

but The Platypus Guardian is very sweet and closer to home.

I think that the seven-year-old you that was glued to the war watching David Attenborough would be just very, very happy with what you've done with your life, Chadden.

I think so. I hope so.

Yeah, I think if I could pinch myself and yeah, have the time again.

You could say play with those sticks, watch that TV.

It's all going to work out well.

Chadden, it's been...

Keep the curiosity up. That's the thing.

It has been really extraordinary to hear some of your stories.

Thank you so much for being my guest.

Oh, thank you, Sarah. Been a joy being here.

You've been listening to a podcast of Conversations with Sarah Kanoski.

For more Conversations interviews, head to the website,

[Transcript] Conversations / Chadden's planet Earth

abc.net.au slash conversations.

It's Carl here.

I'm the co-host of the ABC's Short and Curly podcast.

Now, at Short and Curly, we're also big fans of conversations, especially the kind between kids and adults.

Around the dinner table or on long family car trips, the kinds of conversations that get everyone thinking, debating, and sharing their ideas.

In a world that's sometimes difficult to navigate for kids and for us adults, me and my co-hosts Molly Daniels and ethicist expert Matt Beard are here to help start those conversations about the stuff we all face as we try to get through our lives the best way we know how.

We've got a new season of shows out now that are sure to get the opinions flying at your place as we try to imagine the world without some pretty big things, like a world without heartbreak or privacy or winning and losing.

And there's plenty more.

You can find and follow Short and Curly on the ABC Listen app.

.