



A Risky Business

A terrorist threat and a close shave with a hippo mark just another day on the job for **Wendy Darke**, Head of the BBC's Natural History Unit. **Mary-Anne Baldwin** reports

So you think you understand risk? Meet Dr Wendy Darke, Head of the BBC's Natural History Unit (NHU). Like your typical business leader she's well versed in handling unforeseen costs, health and safety scares and stakeholder expectations, yet her risk register also includes leopards, scorpions and filming in the Antarctic Ocean.

"Natural history programming is among the most risky areas of TV production," says Wendy. "The unpredictability of

animal behaviour and environmental factors can be huge."

Charged with delivering world class wildlife programmes for channels across the BBC, a typical day sees Wendy manage up to 50 teams spread across remote locations, often in all seven continents. Like war correspondents for the animal kingdom, her team battle to bring back stories of life and death. As their boss, mitigating risk is Wendy's forte.

"The hallmarks of the NHU are high quality, innovation and originality, which by their nature mean you're doing something you simply haven't done before. Therein lies a huge amount of risk," she explains. "But I always crave the possibility of what we can achieve."

It's why educated gambles are at the core of Wendy's work life. She reasons that "the biggest risk is not to take the risk. Otherwise you'll deliver something dull, boring and derivative". >

Unsurprisingly, Wendy is one of those people everyone wants to talk to. Eyes light up as she mentions her job title and they all want to tell her which natural history programmes they've enjoyed lately, from Life Story to Springwatch or the Masai Mara's Big Cat Diary. She takes it with the affability of someone who hasn't heard it all before.

It's thanks to a genuine passion for nature and conservation, which Wendy traces back to her childhood watching the BBC's legendary David Attenborough and her favourite elephant (also called Wendy) at Bristol Zoo, near where she grew up.

We meet in London, where she often comes for work, and discuss the Natural History Unit's latest project, something Wendy's very excited about. Earth's Wildest Waters: The Big Fish is an extreme-fishing competition in which contestants are moved each week to a new global beauty hotspot.

"They're pitted against the elements, using their skills and expertise. Only one



Deadly 60 presenter, Steve Backshall, gets close to a hippo, which is Africa's most dangerous mammal.

angler will be crowned the champion," she explains with polished clarity. Then her tone switches. "We were all set to go to Uganda for the first part of the challenge. It was Good Friday; there was a terrorist threat in Jinja. That instantly changed everything."

The production was forced to find an alternative location and re-order its episodes, airing its Icelandic challenge first, although as a viewer you assume that was Plan A. It says a lot about the type and scale of contingency planning Wendy is used to.

Risk has featured throughout Wendy's work life. One of her early career wins was the double Bafta-winning Deadly 60, a CBBC programme that has been seen by 44 million people in the UK – roughly 80 per cent of its population. "It's also gone to almost all territories worldwide," Wendy adds.

"When we did the very first shoot for Deadly 60 when I was executive producer, the crew were in South Africa and Steve Backshall [its presenter] was

face-to-face with a massive hippo. That was a heart stopping, defining moment. The bar was raised off the scale.

"Thankfully, I had the best team in the world. They made all the right decisions so they all came home safely, and it created an aspiration that helped shape and define the whole series."

For each episode, Wendy relies on the same thing that got her through that first Deadly 60 shoot – an exemplary team. For the average leader that might include a CFO, HRD and some well-selected NEDs, however Wendy's team of 350 people gathers scientists and world-leading camera people.

"There are people with PhDs on all manner of life sciences and people who have worked in many remote locations. The level of knowledge, skill and expertise held within that community of people is really second to none; you don't get that level of information on Google!"

What Wendy doesn't boast about is that she shares many of her team's >

WENDY'S TIPS ON MITIGATING RISK

1. Give clear communication on what's important regarding your brand, product and service
2. Ensure you have appropriate internal training to identify and reduce risk
3. Apply vigilant trust, ensuring senior managers have the right checks and balances in place
4. Locate skills and experience within your organisation so you can seek informed decisions
5. Recognise and adapt to your mistakes fast, making sure that you learn from them.



talents. And while most leaders' learning curves are desk-bound, aside from a brief spell on the dole (a rite of passage for any young creative), Wendy's is like one big adventure.

After a joint honours Degree in Geology and Zoology at the University of Bristol, Wendy moved to the Great Barrier Reef where under a SERC-funded PhD scholarship, she researched corals, a lifelong fascination of hers – because of the vibrant colours, she explains. It's also the reason why she specialised in underwater filming.

Wendy then spent 10 years travelling the world as a BBC researcher, before becoming a series producer, executive producer, and then taking the helm at the Natural History Unit in 2012. Throughout her role, Wendy's aim has been to build relationships between people by connecting them to the wonders of the natural world.

Wendy approaches each programme with "forensic clarity" and exacting standards because, as she explains: "It's a very unforgiving world, the creative sector. You're only as good as your last project and everyone in the industry knows that acutely."

Every aspect of production needs to be scrutinised, from the more routine

issues of budgets or long working hours, to managing such a globally diverse and transient team, or ensuring authenticity and factual accuracy. "The level of rigour and discipline in taking out the risk is massive," she explains.

Within the planning process, Wendy's team charts episodes frame by frame in a storyboard, rather like a cartoon. From that they determine what camera footage they need and how to get it. They then quantify the risk so that they can limit their exposure to it. It's business strategy and due diligence, just in a less conventional format.

"You make the programme in your head, thinking about what you need to do to capture it, how to make it exciting, compelling and factually accurate," she explains. It's something she's done over 1,000 times, but the standards can't drop.

Wendy relies on her team and what she refers to as 'tacit knowledge'. "Anybody could have put those ideas on a piece of paper," she says, rather modestly. "But you need knowledge, skill and experience to know how to take the risk out.

"You need to believe that your instincts are right about something that you've never done before. That's based on the knowledge you've acquired and the

knowledge of other people in the sector, who you can ask for insight."

But just like any other business, strategies are subject to change so the best lesson in managing risk is to avoid irreversible decisions. "Animals don't read the scripts," Wendy points out. So with numerous uncontrollable variants, she must have a backup.

Wendy tells me: "I raise a glass to two things in life, serendipity and Plan B. Because generally, Plan B is the reality." ■



Wendy Darke
Head of the
Natural History Unit
BBC

As Head of the BBC's Natural History Unit (NHU), Wendy has responsibility for editorial governance, ensuring the NHU retains its global reputation for quality, ambition and factual integrity.

She oversees 200 hours of output each year from landmark productions such as Big Blue Live on BBC One, Springwatch on BBC Two, CBeebies' Andy's Dinosaur adventures and Radio 4's Tweet of the day.

Previously, Wendy was Executive Producer for NHU Children's division. She has been with the company for over 20 years.

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