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NORMA FOSTER AND 'WILDLIFE IN CRISIS'

ABSTRACT

Norma Foster (born Vorster) produced and presented a 26-part series, "Wildlife in Crisis", which covered many of the most significant wildlife areas and problems in Southern Africa. The series, though produced for Viacom for American television, was the first wildlife documentary series shown on South African television when the service started in 1976 and it arguably influenced many important later practitioners. The article covers Foster's background as a beauty queen and actress, and it examines the role of the Department of Information in facilitating the series. It also examines ways in which the National Parks Board sought to highlight their role as pioneering and cutting-edge wildlife scientists by allowing Foster access to game capture, veterinary treatments and discussions with scientists. It argues, finally, that the privileged role the National Parks Board gave Foster may have limited their coverage by more important and influential American wildlife programmes such as "Mutual of Omaha's Wild Kingdom".

Keywords: media history, media studies, science communication, documentary, conservation science, Department of Information, Connie Mulder, Kruger National Park, Eddie Young, SABC history

INTRODUCTION

The most significant series of documentary films ever made in the Kruger National Park in South Africa was produced and presented by an unlikely source: Norma Foster, born Vorster. Her 26-part series, *Wildlife in Crisis*, was filmed across Southern Africa from 1974 to 1977 with strong collaboration and input from the National Parks Board and the Natal Parks Board and private wildlife owners. Eleven of the 26 episodes centred on the Kruger.

Though discussion of this series is limited to six of the episodes, which have been found in South Africa, there is a rich archival record of Foster's interactions with South African authorities and this has been supplemented by information with many of the original crew. (All of the archival material that follows is from the Skukuza Archive, Folder NK27.) This

article examines how and why Foster gained such access to the Kruger, which had traditionally not been particularly receptive to filmmakers and was a difficult place to film wildlife, compared to the Serengeti, Etosha or the Okavango. Correspondence suggests that she enjoyed support from figures such as former cabinet minister Dr Connie Mulder and the Department of Information figure Les de Villiers, although there is no evidence that the South African Department of Information offered any financial support (Rees & Day 1980).

Foster and her camera crew drew on earlier Kruger films made by the American programme *Wild Kingdom* that focused on animal captures to overcome difficulties Foster and her director faced given her time constraints. They turned to covering scientists and parks officials and Foster's own interactions with animals as their primary focus rather than aiming for a traditional blue-chip documentary. The article suggests ways in which this series, the first wildlife programme shown on the new South African television service in 1976, influenced viewers as well as the careers of those who worked on it. It concludes by suggesting that the privileged access Foster enjoyed meant that South African parks, particularly the Kruger, were less willing to collaborate with other international filmmakers.

Norma Foster's life and career

Foster was a former beauty queen – the first Miss South Africa in 1956 who competed in the Miss World competition in London that year – who then turned to working in theatre and film, in South Africa, England and the United States. She won the first Miss South Africa competition in 1956 based on public voting for photographs sent to newspapers. Biographical information at the time shows that she came from an East London family and that her older sisters were also local beauty queens who won competitions like Miss East London.

Information in the newspapers suggests that she acted as a photographic model and secretary for a local company producing swimwear, but in her curriculum vitae she sent the Parks Board in support of her application to make films, she produced a far more impressive list of career achievements:

Norma Foster became a singer and dancer at the age of twelve and throughout her school days, she studied acting, creative design and stage craft. She became an ice-skating champion at sixteen, a champion ballroom dancer of Latin American dances at seventeen and Miss South Africa at eighteen. Her devotion to the stage was only equalled by her love for nature's wildlife which surrounded her throughout her youth.

The unusual career of Norma Foster began in South Africa where she was born. She divided her time between performing in and the creation and production of live shows. Between the ages of eighteen and twenty-three, she created, designed, produced and co-produced countless musical revues – in which she also starred. The shows played theatres, cabarets and supper clubs in Johannesburg, Cape Town, Durban and Salisbury.

When Columbia pictures producers Cubby Broccoli and Irving Allen went to South Africa to film *THE HELLIONS* with Lionel Jeffries, Richard Todd and other well-

known British stars, they asked Norma Foster to assist them in casting the “local” talent. Norma wound up playing the co-starring role of LOTTIE herself and was promptly invited by the producers to come to London and expand the scope of her show business experiences. Norma accepted the invitation.

In London, Norma studied with Iris Warren, famed coach of Sir Laurence Olivier: she appeared in many films, plays and major television productions. Her 15 British made international film credits include *THOSE MAGNIFICENT MEN IN THEIR FLYING MACHINES*, *THE SPY WITH A COLD NOSE*, and *THE GREAT CATHERINE*; she also starred in a *DIFFERENT LIFE*, *REFUGE IN RIO* and several other German-French co-productions.

On the stage, Norma Foster played the lead in *DIARY OF ANNE FRANK*, *CAT ON A HOT TIN ROOF*, *SUDDENLY LAST SUMMER*, *THE CHILDREN’S HOUR*, *RING AROUND THE MOON*, *ROMEO AND JULIET*, *LOOK BACK IN ANGER*, *MISS JULIE*, *ST JOAN* and other plays. On television she played many roles for shows produced by the B.B.C, A.T.V. and ASSOCIATED REDIFUSION.

During these acting days, Norma Foster worked as director-producer-designer and “jack of all trades” at London’s illustrious Actors Workshop. By producing and directing showcasing for young actors and actresses she gave vent to her own creative ability and at the same time proved her capacity as a showbusiness executive.

Still in her twenties, Norma Foster went to the United States in 1967. She joined the Screen Actors Guild and appeared in two Columbia pictures which – ironically enough – were filmed at MGM Studios. She became a member of Professor Goodman’s famous Department of Theatre Arts, at U.C.L.A. There she was given the opportunity to produce, direct, act and in general assist the Department. In short order, she became an assistant professor and gave classes in Shakespeare. Prof Goodman expresses himself most enthusiastically in referring to Norma’s work in his department.

After some travels abroad and visits to the land of her birth, Miss Foster embarked upon a film producing career. In 1972, she founded her own production company, Norma Foster Enterprises, Inc. and Normavor Productions (Pty) Ltd. Her first feature film and television spectacular is due for release in America and Great Britain late in January, 1974, to be followed in mid-January with a television special *CAPTURED TO BE FREE*.

Thus, Norma Foster’s career has come full circle. She relives her experiences with wild animals of early childhood days and intends to devote the sum total of her know-how to the production of the television series *WILDLIFE IN CRISIS* which is slated for production in early 1974.

When she wrote of the “illustrious Actors Workshop” in London, was she actually referring to “The Theatre Workshop” run by Joan Littlewood, famous for its left-wing dramas such as *Oh, What a Lovely War?* There does not seem to be any actors workshop active in London in the 1960s. Her claims about teaching, presumably as an adjunct professor, in the UCLA Theatre Arts Department, are difficult to verify although Professor Henry Goodman was a senior faculty member in the 1970s.

For the South African audience, Foster stresses her highbrow theatre roles, from Shakespeare and Shaw and Ibsen to Christopher Fry, Lillian Hellman and John Osborne. It would have been relatively easy for her, as a Commonwealth citizen, to claim British citizenship in 1961 and one can speculate that she moved before South Africa left the Commonwealth in May 1961.

There are many impressive achievements claimed in her letter. *The Hellions* may not have been a box office success but Broccoli a year later co-produced *Dr No*, starting the James Bond film phenomenon and the South African cast for *The Hellions* included Ken Gampu and Patrick Mynhardt, suggesting that if Foster was in some way responsible for casting or local recruitment, that she was well connected and astute. Her English film and television roles were relatively minor: perhaps most prominently as a bit player to Margaret Rutherford's Miss Marple in *Murder Ahoy*.

Californian divorce records reveal that she was briefly married to an American, James Arnold Doolittle, a well-known theatre manager and producer, particularly of dance, after whom the Doolittle Theatre in Los Angeles is named. Their date of marriage and divorce is given as October 1972 and their residence as being in Los Angeles.

Wildlife in Crisis was shown on US television, translated and sold in other countries such as Japan, shown on the SABC, and regularly used for rest-camp viewing in the Kruger Park itself. She seems not to have made any more films after that series and to have carried on living in the USA where she had a few dozen Twitter posts from 2011 till 2016 under the handle @Jarrett2like with most of her posts being re-tweets of material about beauty queens and the treatment of wild animals. In 2021, she was still alive in Los Angeles though in poor health.

How are we to understand her career and achievements? Was she a beauty queen celebrity whose charm and South African background she exploited to get special access to the Kruger and other national parks to produce pro-South African propaganda at a fraught political period just prior to the 1976 Soweto uprisings? Or was she the one being exploited by South African authorities?

An examination of her correspondence in the Kruger Park archives suggests that she should be seen as a more complex feminist figure who undoubtedly used her beauty queen credentials and South African connections, but was intellectually ambitious, as shown by hiring a coach like Iris Warren, the highbrow theatre appearances, and managing to appear in British films. Her writing and command of English was good and, judging from her letters, she was socially able to handle a variety of media and audiences. The range of topics covered in the films and the outlines of these suggest a strong scientific and conservation background undoubtedly owing largely to the input of South African National Parks staff, but Foster, as the presenter of the programme had to understand, accept and publicise these concerns. In February 1976, Foster gave an interview to an American journalist Dwight Newton for the *San Francisco Herald Examiner* (Newton 1976). Her interview with Newton starts powerfully: "The cheetah is the fastest animal on earth and it is not going to outrun civilization,' predicted Norma Foster here yesterday."

The role of the Department of Information

How did Foster suddenly emerge as a film producer able to engage the full co-operation of the National Parks Board? What persuaded Viacom, then in the business of producing television content, to invest in such a series and the National Parks Board to co-operate? The answer is suggested in a letter to the park authorities in which Foster shows the political support the project enjoyed and her rationale for doing it:

As you are aware, the Honourable Dr C. Mulder M.P. has given his blessing to this project through Messrs Reineke M.P. and L. de Villiers of the South African information office. The latter have suggested that your board arrange as wide press coverage as is possible to publicise the commencement of shooting and to arrange a function on the first day of shooting if possible, to which will be invited heads of those government departments involved in this project, government personnel and those dignitaries without whose wonderful help and encouragement, I would not have been able to bring the series to fruition.

I feel that this series is the start of an important step forward for the Republic in the media into which it is entering. The goodwill attached to this whole project and which will be gained throughout the world cannot be measured financially. The world will be shown what South Africa is doing in regard to animal wildlife preservation and also how South Africa, without prior experience in television, will, with a predominantly South African operation, film a television series of this magnitude for international release.

It seems likely that this “L de Villiers” was Les de Villiers, who was closely linked to Eschel Rhoodie and the Department of Information. Though this suggests that the project, like a nearly simultaneous Laurens Van der Post film for the BBC (Glenn 2020), enjoyed the support of the Department of Information, this was probably in the form of arranging access and local logistical support and the co-operation of wildlife authorities rather than direct financial support. There is no mention of this project in various exposés of hidden Department of Information funding.

Although Foster was the producer and presenter, Viacom arranged for Arthur Dreifuss, a well-known Hollywood director, to direct the series while South African Henk Maartens was presented as the main camera operator in the set of CVs that Foster submitted to the National Parks Board to justify the project, with Maartens’ work on the *Mutual of Omaha’s Wild Kingdom* episodes and the Emmy won for their work in 1970 mentioned.

The challenge

Making 26 half-hour wildlife episodes – in effect two years’ worth of broadcasts – in a year was a daunting proposition. From the beginning, Foster planned to highlight “present and future research that is being done” (letter September 13, 1973) but she also seemed to underestimate the complex demands of filming game, asking airily for assistance in helping to “locate the game which we are to shoot around in each episode possibly the day before to facilitate us keeping up to schedule” (*ibid.*).

This was obviously an unrealistic expectation and their start, according to Les Kottler, the sound technician on the crew at the outset, made this clear:

Firstly, the scale of the production being talked about seemed over-ambitious to me. How could 26 episodes of an essentially-unscripted - in today's terms, reality - series be produced in a year, shooting all over SA and other parts of Africa, with a crew of 2 camera operators (Francois and Henk Mertens shooting on 16mm film, not today's infinitely more sophisticated and much more portable HD gear), one sound tech (me), and one editor (Bill Asher from Killarney Studios, if I recall)? I do recall some kind of shooting outline (there may even have been a script - Francois may remember), but, naturally, the animals weren't about to learn their lines, much to the chagrin and frustration of our Hollywood 'B movie' director and former choreographer, Arthur Dreifuss, who thought he could get the animals to do what he wanted on cue! Alas, it was not to be ... surprise ...

Rob and Francois will laughingly recall how Arthur, at the start of shooting, lost his cool while waiting in a hide for an animal to show up at a waterhole. Hours later, with Arthur's patience at boiling-point, a giraffe and a zebra (?) show up to drink, and Arthur, thinking he's back in Hollywood, yells out something like, 'Go on, giraffe, @\$ the zebra now! Action, @\$ the zebra now, NOW!!' I'm not making this up - I remember this like it was yesterday! (And I don't remember too much else about working with Arthur!) We're all doubled over laughing, trying to shoosh Arthur as, needless to say, the animals beat a hasty retreat! And so it went. I seem to recall we were soon told we were already 'behind schedule,' but, obviously - though not to Arthur! - there could be no production schedule in the bush.

As I noted above, for all my inexperience at the time, I felt that what we were being sold was beyond Norma's reach, for all her noble environmental intentions. Wildlife filming is - and was then, too - a specialized area of production, for which Norma had no real previous experience. Loving animals ain't enough. She hired a (talented) feature-film director with no documentary, no wildlife, and no African experience. She embarked on a worthy project, on an unrealistically-ambitious scale and timetable...

My sense over the years has always been - and maybe this is being unfair, but I've always felt this way, nevertheless - that she sold the idea of *Wildlife in Crisis* on the basis of her Miss South Africa credentials, her beauty, her 'foreign experience' and her not-inconsiderable verbal and written sales skills... But the fact that she got a project of this scale off the ground is, in and of itself, a testament to both talent and determination [21 May, 2020].

This start probably soon convinced Foster and Dreifuss, perhaps influenced by Henk Maartens with his experience of filming animal captures and animal rehabilitations for the American programme *Wild Kingdom*, that their film should not focus on the animals but on their human protectors. The opening credits of the series eventually became the hyperbolic: "*Wildlife in Crisis* is the true story of the dedicated people whose courage and determination have saved countless rare animals from extinction. In this report, wildlife investigator Norma Foster will give us her eye-witness account of their tireless efforts." Much of this rhetoric mirrored that in *Wild Kingdom* episodes where threats to endangered species such as cheetahs or rhinos were mentioned.

While some of the episodes may have stressed social or political issues, such as an episode on poaching, most of the episodes were resolutely scientific and dealt

with the problems veterinary scientists and scientists faced. It was a tour de horizon of wildlife in Southern Africa, ranging from the Kruger to the private ostrich farms of Oudtshoorn, the triumph of the provincial Natal Parks in saving the rhino, the desert lions of the Kalahari, and the benefits of a walking safari in the Tuli Block. Mixed with the strongly scientific issues such as the treatment of anthrax or research on stresses when animals are captured were episodes designed to show Foster who presented the show to good effect in dealing with orphaned animals, cradling baby animals, or watching Targa, Eddie Young's semi-tame cheetah, hunting.

Scientific Kruger

The major emphasis of the episodes on the Kruger scientific services was to show that South Africa was a world leader in dealing with wildlife health and management. The series managed, for example, to show off Dr Toni Harthoorn, a major figure in darting big game for capture (Harthoorn 1970), who had moved to South Africa from Kenya, with a sophisticated laboratory set up in the veldt examining darted animals. A few years after Chris Barnard had performed the world's first heart transplant in Cape Town, the bush doctors were showing that they too were world leaders.

As Jane Carruthers has pointed out, the management of Kruger by this time had moved to a far more scientifically guided administrative ethos after the gifted amateurism of Stevenson-Hamilton (Carruthers 2008). It seems clear that Foster took her directions on what places to visit, what scientific issues to focus on, and which figures to feature from local authorities such as Kruger Park veterinarians but also National Parks Board authorities.

These films thus give an intimate sense of how the National Parks Board wanted to communicate itself and its mission at this time but also a national sense of how South Africa saw its conservation efforts and successes across national resources (the Kruger and other national parks), provincial parks (the Natal Parks Board reserves), private initiatives such as ostrich farming, and the efforts in the increasingly disputed area of South West Africa where Foster visited Gobabeb, the research station in the Namib Desert and also the desert lions of the Kalahari. Foster paid for her bravado in riding a camel in one of these episodes, as she fell off and suffered a serious back injury.

While the Department of Information and the National Parks Board may have collaborated behind the scenes on what Foster should film, it seems more likely that local officials were pleased to work with a South African born, Afrikaans-speaking presenter who often dealt with them in Afrikaans even though she spoke English on screen. Her films highlighted their efforts rather than claiming the limelight as the *Wild Kingdom* presenters had done. A serious but probably boring topic like the dangers posed by anthrax could get serious treatment with the local experts shaping the script and narrative.

Any discussion of this series is hampered by the fact that only six of the episodes have been available for viewing – and those thanks to Foster sending copies to Dr Eddie Young of episodes in which he had featured – though there are detailed synopses

of the other episodes available. There are reportedly copies of all the episodes in Foster's possession in the USA.

Effects of the series

The South African parks authorities were obviously highly satisfied with what Norma Foster had produced. Her series was shown on South African television when it started in 1976 and was an influential early portrayal of careers in wildlife and conservation and the value of this sector. Eddie Young's widow, Nicki Young, says that she and many of her school contemporaries of the time were inspired by the films to take up careers in conservation. Copies of the films were also donated to camps in the Kruger and regularly shown there, also highlighting the value of conservation.

Many of the people who worked on her film, like Francois Marais, went on to make important contributions to the genre. The most important influence, however, may have been on a young Kruger worker, Danie van der Walt, who became involved in helping the production and later became the producer of South Africa's most important documentary television programme *50-50*, with the balance being between coverage of nature and culture. Without Foster's films and the confidence they gave local figures, South African television may have had a slower start.

This preference for Foster as presenter came at some cost, however, in that the Kruger in particular stopped collaborating with *Wild Kingdom* from the time Foster started working in the park – something evident in letters from Warren Garst in 1976 and in 1978. Garst inquired about possible subjects for filming on February 11, 1976, writing to Brynard and praising the Kruger for its work done there and noting that several of their most memorable episodes had been filmed there but that years had passed without collaboration. On 20 February, Tol Pienaar replied, saying that Brynard had passed the letter on to him for reply. Pienaar responded warmly to the "pleasant surprise" of hearing from Garst, but then noted that "Norma Vorster Productions have been filming quite extensively in our National Parks for the last few years, producing more than a dozen films which cover a very wide field of research projects and management practices, particularly in the Kruger Park". Pienaar suggested some alternative projects: on Gus Mills' research on brown hyenas in the Kalahari Gemsbok Park or Dr Robinson's research on bats.

There seems to have been some further correspondence between *Wild Kingdom* producers and Kruger staff because on June 20, 1977, lion researcher Butch Smuts wrote to *Wild Kingdom* associate producer Richard Reinauer to say that the lion research work he was doing had already been filmed twice: by the SABC and Normavor Productions. Smuts points out that both these films, made mainly at night, involved lots of effort and says he cannot see the point of another film repeating the previous ones. He nonetheless suggested further discussions in Skukuza to discuss possible alternatives.

Nothing seems to have come of these alternatives and a year later, on March 13, 1978, Garst again wrote, this time to Pienaar. In his letter, he again says flattering things about the quality of research done in South Africa, and points out that *Wild*

Kingdom had not filmed in South African National Parks since 1971. He then makes a critical observation about Norma Foster:

In the past, you've said that Norma Vorster has filmed your operations for the American TV market. We've made an effort to determine how widely these films are distributed. In the last two years we have found only one station, in the Los Angeles area, which has shown them. There are probably more, but the coverage is certainly not as wide as your projects deserve. Certainly not as wide as we can offer with an American audience of 35 million and a world-wide audience of 100 million in 40 countries.

Pienaar's reply made the Kruger's preferences clear:

In this respect I must point out to you that since our last contact nothing has changed. We are still under obligation to Norma Vorster to cover our research and management projects for the overseas TV programs, and this arrangement has the official blessing of our government. This has been brought about by the factual and non-sensational nature of her films and a very positive publicity which she has always promoted for her country of birth.

I'm afraid I do not agree with you that she does not get good coverage for her films in the United States and other countries, and having seen the many excellent reviews which her material has elicited all over the world (even behind the iron curtain), we have no reason to change the present arrangement.

As we have limited scope for long-term filming projects of this kind I do not see my way clear in offering your organisation anything substantial which will not also be covered by Norma Vorster's unit.

If you're going to visit South Africa in any event you're welcome to discuss the whole matter with me should you come to Skukuza, and we may then be able to work out something that will be to our mutual satisfaction.

Here Pienaar reveals the extent to which Foster/Vorster enjoyed official government support for her films. He recuperates her South African identity by changing her name back to Vorster and by implication snubs Gerst's very well-known programme.

Consequences

Wildlife in Crisis won an award for the "Best Location Documentary Series" at the 11th Hollywood Festival of World Television with the award given at the Cannes TV trade fair in April 1977 and was also shown on Japanese television. One other consequence of Norma Foster's highly positive portrayal of the conservation efforts of the Kruger and other national parks was that the Kruger became far more receptive to approaches from filmmakers – particularly if they were South Africans with a strong scientific background. The tone of letters to filmmakers like David Hughes in the second half of the 1970s from Pienaar and other leading officials is far more genial and positive than earlier responses had been. Foster thus arguably helped open the Kruger Park to filming.

But Gerst's observation is telling: South African National Parks, in cutting links with *Wild Kingdom* in favour of a local presenter with limited North American or international

reach, sacrificed not only most of its chances to influence an American audience but also a large international audience. The undoubted benefits of developing a local industry and local filmmakers and of producing content that would appeal to local watchers thinking of a career in conservation have to be weighed up against what was lost. The Kruger and other parks could conceivably have had both but the point Butch Smuts made was pertinent: scientists and local managers only had limited time to engage with filmmakers. The irony of this development is that the Department of Information, in trying to control international perceptions of South Africa and its leading role in conservation, may have diverted the Kruger and other national parks' resources and collaboration from the leading international wildlife programme at the time and lost a sympathetic international audience at the very time, after the upheavals of June 1976 in Soweto, when they needed it most.

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