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And the story is not made up

"Chimpanzee" is not a documentary film but still provides fascinating facts about our closest relatives

Next week the Disney nature film "Chimpanzee" opens in German cinemas. An article that appeared in this week's issue of DER SPIEGEL is making waves and, for this reason, we would like to take this opportunity to make the following clear: while this film is not a documentary, its contents are not made up. The story is based on the results of more than 30 years of painstaking research on these and other extremely exciting aspects of the lives of our closest living relatives. For practical reasons the filmmakers were not always able to capture the story in exact sequence but this is common with wildlife films.

In order to tell a story that is coherent enough to be carried by a feature film, the story had to be collated from the wealth of authentic footage that Disney nature had accumulated. To researchers studying chimpanzees, for instance, it is obvious that "it is impossible to film a hunt with 30 apes in the trees and four to six hunters on the ground all moving in different directions with just one camera in one day," as Christophe Boesch, Director at the Max Planck Institute for Evolutionary Anthropology, puts it. Of course the wildlife filmmakers had to edit different hunts together in order to have a complete hunt sequence for the film. The same applies to the territorial fights between neighbouring groups of chimpanzees. While these regularly take place in the Taï rainforest, there were practical reasons for choosing a group of chimpanzees in Uganda for the "rivals" shown in the film: the forest is more open there and it is possible to see and film the interactions that the filmmakers were genuinely witnessing in Taï.

The film shows the first 6 years of "Oscar's" life – Alastair Fothergill and Mark Linfield, however, only had 2.5 years to film in the Taï rainforest. It should therefore be clear that Oscar's story could only be told by including episodes from the lives of other young chimpanzees to fill in the gaps. The time spent in the rainforest was an immense technical and physical challenge for the film team and the reproaches made by DER SPIEGEL should not diminish their performance.

As chief scientific adviser, Christophe Boesch made sure that the scientific facts in the film were presented correctly. However, the researchers did not have any influence on the dramaturgical design of the film. Since it is a family film, "Chimpanzee" of course has a happy ending. Unfortunately though, this is not always the case in the wild. Indeed, very few orphaned chimpanzees survive, even despite adoptions like this.

Anyone who wishes to explore the science behind the film in more depth should visit www.schimpanzen.mpg.de, a website specially prepared by the Max Planck Society.

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