The Entertainment Imperative: Wildlife Films and Conservation

Why wildlife films don't always please conservationists.

STEPHEN MILLS

"Let no-one forget that, first and foremost, we are in the entertainment business." That is how Anglia's 'Survival' veteran producer Colin Willock sums up the aim of wildlife film-making. And who 'in the trade' would disagree with him? Not, I suspect, the BBC Natural History Unit, nor Oxford Scientific Films, nor any of the other rightly respected purveyors of televized nature.

Wildlife programmes[1] are not a branch of academics, nor a chapter in the new testament of green theology: they are part of the mainstream of television – which means 'show biz'. The overriding aspiration of TV is to entertain its audience. It is a high-tech amusement arcade that either makes money, or, in the case of the BBC, likes to prove it would if it had to – and it probably will have to.

The criteria for what will amuse, and what will thereby attract the advertisers or justify the increasingly precarious license fee, are derived from exhaustive and sophisticated market research. The watching habits of 6000 annually selected 'representative' households are continuously monitored. No matter how strong your hunch that there's a vast audience out there just waiting for a nature programme with no awful music and a script by Wittgenstein, the controllers of programmes have the data to confound you. They know for certain that everyone is watching 'Blankety Blank' – or, in rare moments of intellectual inspiration, 'Coronation Street'.

To wildlife photographers – the individuals who get the ideas and set off for the wilderness (or their studios) to capture nature on film – the dominance of this entertainment imperative can come as a shock when they first encounter it.

Projects are usually expected to fit certain formulae. There is an unwritten convention among facetious executives which decides whether a 'wildlifer' will be an "ooh" film, an "aah" film, a "yuck" film or a "click" film. An "ooh" film is about pandas or koala bears, and it shows how they spend their whole lives cuddling their young without the interference of social workers. An "aah" film makes you gasp with wonder. It describes how the peculiar fly orchid is pollinated by just one species of insect – and shows you the process from *inside* the flower. The "yuck" film shows in sticky detail the slimy sex-life of the large yellow slug *Limax pseudoflavus*, and it lasts for half an hour. The "click" film is the slimy sex-life of *Limax pseudoflavus* part 2, including a treatise on the need to conserve the species in Stow-on the-Wold: the click is everyone turning off their televisions.

"Nice Title. You've got it."

It is hardly surprising that the ambition of most TV producers in 'the natural history business' is to make a film that is either cuddly and amusing or fascinating and amusing. A film-maker who consistently flies in the face of this convention, unless he is extremely lucky or exceptionally talented, will only ever function on the fringes of production.

The prevailing requirement for nature films to succeed as entertainment is the main reason why they sometimes fail to please conservationists. Programmes are consequently criticized for sameness, for glossing over important issues, reducing complex arguments to stark conflicts, concentrating on the wonders of nature and ignoring the dismal progress of destruction, tacking on conservation messages as afterthoughts, giving a false sense that all is more or less well with the world.

Urban fox. Photo: Andy Rouse, Wildlife Photographer of the Year competition, 1987

There are, however, other related constraints against high seriousness in wildlife programmes. These include the chains of command, the way films are financed, the changing structure of the industry, and the nature of the television medium itself.

For in-house producers, within most large stations, access to the people who control the money can be notoriously difficult. Although subsequent planning will be detailed, a new idea may have to be justified in a two-minute interview with a business executive whose fingers can almost be heard snapping with impatience. It helps a lot if the idea is catchy. For example, a senior producer in the BBC Natural History Unit told me how he had wanted to do something a bit complicated and needed an unheard-of extra 20 minutes on top of his allotted hour. He was in London at Broadcasting House where he happened to bump into the hallowed controller of programmes outside the gents'. He seized his chance, but instead of launching into a lofty explanation of his aims he just said "How about 'Around the world in 80 minutes?' ". The reply: "Nice title. You've got it."

Of course, many programmes are still devised and filmed by independent directors or camerapersons working alone in the back of beyond. But freelance does not mean freedom of expression. A top ITV cameraman explained to me that even after 12 years the only individuality he can put into his films is what he manages with his camera. Back home, the producer will edit the material to fit a predesigned media package, often throwing away the film-maker's own notes and co-opting an inexperienced but biddable young writer to cobble together a last-minute commentary. In such cases the audience may quite consciously have been perceived as a collective moron.

Although the intellectual content of nature films is probably not improving, the photography is becoming ever more sophisticated. Again, the financiers have their market research to hand. Only readers of *Ecos* want to look at nature films to exercise their brains; the other viewers – at least 80 per cent of them – watch simply "for the photography". Every year the amazement factor is jacked up a notch or two. A kingfisher diving into the river is no longer good enough. Now you must deliver it hurtling into the champagne ice-bucket at a Buckingham Palace Garden Party. Consequently the cost of production has escalated, with a quality half hour coming in at more than £100 000 – much more in America. Increasingly, this sort of finance has to be put together in a package, with three or more TV stations and probably a publisher all chipping in. New-style, wheeler-dealer, natural-history distributors are busy criss-crossing the televised world arranging the money; and it is they, as much as the individual stations, who now wield editorial power. International moguls are not going to slide into their seats on Concorde to pursue funds for a single, one-off conservation programme: they require a series 'concept', a minimum of 3 hours scheduling. And they will tell you that there are 135 hours of finished documentary chasing each hour of broadcasting time – so the concept has to be "pretty sexy".

Change and Chances

In the meantime, the whole edifice of television in Britain and Europe is about to undergo a massive change. Richard Creasy, the highly respected Controller of Features at Central TV, compares the situation with the moment in Atlantic travel when the steamship gave way to the airliner. With deregulation, satellite and cable TV, we are, most of us, going to be receiving 12 or 13 channels in the next four years, and in Britain the long-cherished hegemony of the BBC and ITV will be gone for ever. Already viewing habits are changing. People with cable TV, for instance, are watching it for at least 25 per cent of their viewing time.

Whether or not the revolution will be good or bad depends on who you ask. The pessimist will describe the Government's broadcasting white paper as a conspiracy to reduce even further television's commitment to serious issues – a response to such controversies as the coverage of the Gibraltar killings. He will fret over the scarcity of funds for so much new

Cow Moose. Photo: Ronald Levy, Wildlife Photographer of the Year competition, 1988

programming, and predict an unstoppable descent towards wall-to-wall game shows. He will dread the imminent arrival of the personal TV-walkman which will swell the market for pre-recorded material and load the dice even more in favour of the packaging maestros. Talk to an optimist, and he will argue that the fragmentation of television will lead to quality specialist channels – like the satellite Discovery channel in the USA, which shows 6 hours of natural history a day. He will say that change is an exciting catalyst for new ideas, and that this era is like the arrival of paperbacks in the print world – heralded by some as a disaster but in the long run the means by which good books have reached many more people.

What most people in TV agree, however, is that the next five years or so are going to be a bumpy ride – probably not the time for experimenting with content. The BBC, for instance, can no longer take its public service role for granted; nor, ultimately, its license fee. The Natural History Unit is very expensive. If it fails to make popular, entertaining programmes – or, perhaps, if it becomes too controversial – it will be disbanded. This is a sober thought for a Unit which has set standards for the world. As for the individual filmmaker, his lot is not altogether a happy one. Carrying a mortgage on £40 000 worth of equipment, paying £2000 a year insurance whether he has work or not, needing to raise £10 000 just for the cost of film stock and processing on the most modest production, he is not well placed to fight the system – though he usually does once or twice in his career.

Brimming with Animals

This is the condition of the industry: tough, commercial, with little time for theorizing. In the circumstances, it might be argued that the number of recent conservation series has been surprisingly high: David Bellamy's 'Turning The Tide', Central's long-running 'Eco', 'Nature' on the BBC, and various strands on Channel 4. That issues are not always successfully explored, even when the question of 'entertainment' has been set aside, is partly due to limitations inherent in the medium itself. Richard Brock, one of the producers of both 'Life On Earth' and 'The Living Planet', summed up the problems succinctly when he remarked that television shows the countryside either "brimming with animals or bristling with bulldozers".

By the "brimming with animals" problem he meant that TV is above all an intimate medium. The small rectangular box is like a sampling mechanism, selecting things to look at and excluding everything else around them. It is far less effective at conveying empty panoramas than it is at showing the busy activities of a single creature. Consequently it gives the false impression that the countryside is full of close-ups. This has implications for conservation, because when the public actually goes into the country and looks around, it cannot find the high quality telephoto views of birds and animals it has been led to expect, and may be disappointed. This places an onus on conservationists to gratify the need or risk losing public support.

An amusing instance occurred when the RSPB opened up the nest of a great-spotted woodpecker, putting glass in front so people could watch from a hide as the birds went in and out of the tree. They also set up a video camera to relay live pictures into the hide. Visitors settled themselves in front of the TV monitor – and ignored the real-life events that were happening a few feet further away behind the glass. . . .

The "bristling with bulldozers" problem is slightly different. By and large, because you can't read a page of film again

or stop it and look up the footnotes, film has to have immediacy. Its imagery tends to be rather crude because it cannot afford to be ambiguous If you want your beautiful avocet juxtaposed against an image of pollution you have to stop and focus very deliberately on the coca-cola can lying in the mud when the bird reaches it. If instead you allow your camera only to glimpse the can subtly out of the corner of its eye in passing, you risk your audience thinking "Whoops: the cameraman didn't see that can. He filmed it by mistake!"

In any case, television is probably not an appropriate platform for expounding noble and complex arguments. A couple of years ago the Fish and Wildlife Service in America asked high-school pupils what they thought about various sea mammals and the threats posed to their survival. Did sea mammals matter? Were they beautiful? Dangerous? Worth preserving? Then they showed an emotive television film and tested its impact. Suddenly everyone cared about sea mammals. Six weeks later, however, the teenagers were asked the same questions again, and they had forgotten all the details. Most of them had unconsciously reverted to their original prejudices and preconceptions. This boils down to the old chestnut of whether or not TV influences social conduct or merely reflects it. If we watch a violent film, do we slaughter our awful neighbours? If we watch a conservation film, do we go out and save a slug? . . .

Nevertheless, TV natural history is unique in one all-important respect. It actually enhances reality. Most football supporters would rather see a match live than on TV. But nature films show you things you really wouldn't see: a wolf giving birth, a woodwasp injecting its egg into a tree, a cell dividing, a flower growing or a dead bird disintegrating. Most wildlife filmmakers perceive their role as being to highlight nature in this way. They are trying hard to get better at it. It is the role of organizations like Greenpeace, FoE and BANC to highlight the threats nature faces. They are definitely getting better at it. This is an effective partnership that should be nurtured.

But if, having appreciated the limitations of the medium and the financial constraints of film-making, conservationists still believe wildlife films could do a significantly better job for them, there are at least three steps they should take. First, they should talk to wildlife cameramen and women, most of whom are committed naturalists, and share their ideas and opinions. Around 150 leading photographers can be contacted through the International Association of Wildlife Film-makers. Second, they should employ the potent weapon of flattery. When Heinz Seilmann's historic woodpecker film was first shown by the BBC the switchboard was jammed for hours with messages of appreciation. That was about 1955, and people in the BBC still remember it. Think of all the criticism they've forgotten! Finally, as money is likely to become more critical than outlets, conservation organizations should consider financing mainstream TV programmes themselves. After all, as Confucius said, you get what you pay for.

Reference

1. John Sparks wrote about 'Broadcasting and the corporation challenge' in *Ecos* 8(4), 2–6, 1987.

Stephen Mills is an independent film producer, and is on the committee of the International Association of Wildlife Film-makers.