





# NATURAL WONDERS

*New perspectives and innovations are driving increased demand for natural-history programming.*

*By Neil Crossley*

**W**hen it comes to instilling a sense of awe and wonder in audiences, few genres deliver quite so dramatically as natural history. The opportunity to glimpse rare and spectacular natural sights in remote locations holds increasing appeal.

According to a study published in January 2018 by Parrot Analytics, natural-history documentaries experienced a surge in global demand in 2017, fueled by “high-profile and high-demand” productions. The study concluded that natural history is now second only to biography in terms of documentary sub-genre, with Ireland experiencing the highest demand per capita for natural-history documentaries, followed by New Zealand, the U.S., Canada, Israel, Australia, the Netherlands, Sweden, Malta and the U.K.

In the last year, there has been a resurgence in the number of productions offering unique contexts and perspectives. Limited event blue-chip productions, in particular, have dominated, with producers and distributors reporting strong sales.

“The one-off or two-parter blue-chip or the four- to six-part landmark series are the formats that do best for us,” says Ralf Rückauer, the VP of unscripted at ZDF Enterprises, who cites the recent success of *Big Pacific*. “It’s one of those massive international program events that only appear on the market once every couple of years,” he says of the project, a co-pro involving NHNZ, PBS, ARTE, CCTV, Discovery, Nine Network, ZDF and ZDF Enterprises.

Rückauer says that limited, well-crafted portraits of a region and natural habitats—such as *The Greater Caucasus*, *The*

*Lesser Caucasus: Between Ararat and the Caspian Sea* and *Wild Italy: Mountains, Coasts and Deserts*—have also been hugely successful for ZDF Enterprises, unlike the longer-running productions. “Long-running monothematic wildlife series have proven hard to program for most of our international clients,” he says.

## BLUE-CHIP STOCK

Blue-chip productions have also yielded brisk business for BBC Studios. “Without a doubt, our blue-chip landmarks have been our strongest sellers,” says Patricia Fearnley, the head of natural history, factual content, at BBC Studios. “This is always the case, but the success has been even more dramatic over the last couple of years.”

In February of this year, BBC Studios launched the series *Dynasties* to international buyers. Presented by Sir David Attenborough, shot in Ultra HD and filmed over four years, *Dynasties* examines the power dynamics among lions, hunting dogs, chimpanzees, tigers and emperor penguins. It followed on from the colossal success of *Blue Planet II*, which galvanized audiences on the state of the oceans and pushed the issue of plastic waste up the global political agenda. Fearnley believes that conservation will remain a core element of natural-history programming.

“The most significant change in natural-history programming is in audiences embracing content that doesn’t just touch on conservation issues but deals with them in a very direct way,” Fearnley says. “The *Blue Planet II* team couldn’t possibly make a series about the oceans without tackling it head-on. Nobody anticipated quite what an impact it would have. I think moving forward we will



ZDF Enterprises' portfolio of successful wildlife properties includes the two-part *Wild Italy: Mountains, Coasts and Deserts*.

see a lot more development of programming around conservation issues throughout the world."

It's a view shared by Sabine Holzer, the head of specialist factual at Terra Mater Factual Studios. "Only a few years ago escapism dominated the genre and the 'C' word was guaranteed to put audiences as well as commissioners off. But in the last year, ecology, conservation and environmental topics seem to have reconquered the linear and nonlinear platforms. Conservation is making its way back into prime time."

## RAISING THE BAR

One of the most significant challenges for producers and distributors is matching and surpassing the high expectations of audiences who yearn for ever more spectacular experiences.

"I think the biggest [development] in the last six months is that the bar of editorial storytelling is so much higher," says Solange Attwood, executive VP of international at Blue Ant Media. "Producers, storytellers and creators are coming up with compelling, thoughtful, smart, emotional and connective stories. Especially in the natural-history world, it's so important to get all of your senses involved as you go through the journey of watching these stories."

ZDFE.unscripted's Rückauer stresses that broadcasters, DVD publishers and VOD services still look for time-tested topics, species and habitats within the catalog that work well with audiences, such as lions, zebras, elephants, sharks, penguins, the African savanna and the Amazon rainforest.

"But, on the other hand, it can't only be 'more of the same' as audiences become more and more demanding," he says. One production that is breaking new ground, says Rückauer, is *Equator: The Line of Life*, made by Spiegel TV and Primitive Entertainment for ZDF, ARTE, NHK and Discovery Canada. The virtual one-day journey around the equator shows how many extraordinary wildlife and people stories take place simultaneously in Ecuador, Brazil, Gabon, Kenya, Uganda, Indonesia, Kiribati and numerous other countries.

"We are constantly looking for new perspectives, new contexts to give a different insight into these spectacular wildlife worlds," he says.

The importance of new perspectives is reinforced by Natalie Lawley, the managing director of Escapade Media, which represents productions such as *Australia: Kingdom*

*of the Quokka*. A new title that is attracting much interest, she says, is *Walking Points*, a cross-genre natural history and science 4K special that examines how the keen olfactory senses of dogs can be used to detect cancer in human beings. It succeeds, says Lawley, because it offers the audience "brand-new information against the backdrop of a bread-and-butter genre." It also reflects a trend across the natural-history genre for innovative approaches to programming.

Innovation is critical, she says, and increasingly the most important element is the storytelling. "The storytelling aspect of each wildlife project is the essence of the [show] because the audience needs to be advised about what they are seeing."

On what clients are looking for, Blue Ant's Attwood observes, "You have to have everything these days. The market is demanding premium content that requires strong narrative, unique settings, compelling access and innovation in approach to production. Our natural-history offering is a genuinely global opportunity. We have stories that come from every part of the world, whether that's in Borneo through *Orangutan Jungle School*, or *Africa's Hunters*, set in Zambia. Audiences want to be drawn in, they want to feel an emotional connection to the wildlife stories that are being told, and have a deeper understanding of the world around them."

## NATURAL NARRATIVE

Terra Mater's Holzer agrees that storytelling development has become key to natural-history productions in the last year.

"Storytelling becomes more and more important," says Holzer. "It's not enough to string together sequences, even if they are beautifully and lavishly shot. You need to develop a storyline throughout. Moreover, wildlife programs more often need a single or several main characters that the audience can follow, just as they do in the fiction genre."

The use of scripted storytelling techniques is increasingly prevalent in the wildlife space. BBC Studios' *Dynasties* was conceived as an "intimate animal drama," with a clear beginning, middle and end, a hero or heroine with a problem, a twist, a peak of drama and hopefully a pay-off for the main character. "*Dynasties* sees many of the tools used in drama applied to natural history," says Fearnley. "This series takes real-life animal stories, shot across approximately 600 days in the field per [episode], allowing the audience to get to know and care for the individual





Terra Mater arrives at MIPCOM with the holiday-themed special *It's A Wild Christmas*.

characters they are watching in a way they never have before. As a viewer, you will absolutely be invested in that character. You'll get to know the relationships they have with those closest to them and appreciate the challenges they face in an effort to stay alive."

## SCREEN INNOVATION

As storytelling gains in importance, so too does the technology driving it. In recent years the visual "wow" factor for audiences has been enhanced by advances in screen resolution, such as HD, 3D, UHD and 4K. Escapade Media made the decision back in 2016 to future-proof content by offering all genres in 4K and it now also provides some titles in HDR.

At Blue Ant, which has been rolling out 4K docs for the last few years, HDR is a significant new opportunity. "The addition of HDR makes for a compelling and beautiful story," Attwood says.

Likewise, Terra Mater began originating all its programs in 4K. "Everything else doesn't make much sense when you think long term," says Holzer. BBC Studios is now taking delivery of its landmark series in UHD and HDR, says Fearnley, and Rückauer at ZDFE. unscripted acknowledges the benefits of UHD across its natural-history titles.

"Wildlife is always the early adopter genre for technical innovation," says Rückauer. "More than any other factual genre, wildlife lives on the stunning beauty of the images, so the advantage of a higher resolution and truer colors is obvious here. While we do not have a strict UHD-only policy yet, we can proudly say that a very large share of our new wildlife and nature output is now UHD."

In an age of rapid technological advancement, numerous innovations have been utilized that are transforming the wildlife space, offering audiences never-before-seen opportunities and access. Drones and submersibles predominate, enabling filmmakers to push creative boundaries, accessing locations such as the deep sea, volcanic craters and previously inaccessible footage of animal behavior. Indeed, multi-camera and multi-format shoots are also changing the wildlife space.

BBC Studios' new natural-history title *Earth's Great Rivers*, which launches at MIPCOM, utilizes split underwater and water-level filming. Drones as aials, cranes and

GPS lock-off posts enable time-lapse transformations across its natural-history programming.

"Innovation in technologies allows for more intimate storytelling," says Escapade's Lawley. "The more innovative the visual is, the more interesting the story arc becomes because the audience is presented with new discoveries and experiences."

## DEMANDING VIEWERS

Rückauer stresses the importance of ensuring that images captured via drones and submersibles are shot in the best possible UHD quality. As audiences become more and more demanding, he says, showing inaccessible locations "as if these things were shot in a controllable environment in front of your own doorstep" is paramount.

"For example, we are the European distributor of the NHK and ZDF co-production *Deep Ocean: Lights in the Abyss*, where the specialized Japanese UHD high-tech underwater cameras show the bioluminescent wildlife of Monterey Bay in all its stunning bright colors. And with our friends from True to Nature in Bristol we are in the middle of production of the big *Volcano 24* special [a ZDF, ARTE and WNET co-production] that will include amazing drone shots from volcano craters."

One technology that is injecting real excitement and value into natural history is virtual reality. The immersive experience that it offers puts audiences right at the center of natural history, enabling them to become active participants in the story. "VR allows us to provide our audiences a level of immersion unparalleled by other mediums and to tell stories of the natural world in new and exhilarating ways," says BBC Studios' Fearnley.

The value add-on of VR has strong potential, says Lawley. "These VR journeys can provide entertainment, education, allow a direct voice in terms of conservation, expand demographic appeals and so on. The value-added elements are provided as web experiences or VR goggle experiences."

Lawley highlights the potential of 360-degree cameras that allow the audience to experience the location "just how the host is seeing the environment" and can be planted to gain insight into habitats on land and underwater.

ZDFE.unscripted's Rückauer believes VR is "great for producers who want to tell a different kind of story, for broadcasters commissioning 360-degree clips as add-ons to attract an additional audience and for users experiencing this in museums, specialized festivals or downloaded to their own devices."

For distributors such as ZDF Enterprises, however, it is not the top commodity right now, he says. "A B2B distribution market in the classical sense, with reasonable license fees paid for VR productions, has not been established yet," he says.

## ADDED VALUE

While innovations in technology and storytelling are driving the genre forward, the value of presenters in natural history is in serious doubt. With the clear exception of an icon such as Sir David Attenborough, selling presenter-led programs globally is an ongoing challenge.

"As an international distributor we prefer presenter-free programs, as they are much easier to sell," says Rückauer. "As soon as you have a presenter you will always have the language problem."

It's a view shared by Lawley, who says most of Escapade Media's programs are presenter-free. Audiences need to identify with the host on a global scale, she says, and when a project is hosted, it minimizes the interest across global markets. But she does not rule the possibility out.

"Our position is always led by what is best for the project and how we are able to maximize sales. While a project that is steered by a presenter can create challenges for global sales, if a presenter can genuinely provide introductions and summaries, this can work very well, and if needed, even illustrate the interaction of human and animal."

BBC Studios' Fearnley acknowledges that presenter-free wildlife programming is much easier to exploit commercially. But she says BBC Studios will always be interested in trying to find presenters that work for a U.K. and international audience. The challenge, of course, is finding a presenter who will engage audiences across the globe.

## PRESENTED BY...

"We have quite a few presenter-led series, such as *Guardians of the Wild*, that have been incredibly successful," Blue Ant's Attwood says. "And we have a strong blue-chip slate that excludes humans within the context of the editorial. I think it's important to have both. As a distributor, you want to have a compelling offering that can tell stories in ways that will have broad appeal to people around the world. We want to make sure we have stories that are compelling for all viewers. We won't shy away from presenter-led stories, even though you often hear that some [buyers] prefer the ease of natural-history stories that don't necessarily include people, that are evergreen, that are easily versioned. There are pros and cons for each. As a distributor that wants to have a compelling offering, you need to have a diversified approach."

Terra Mater Factual Studios also produces both presenter-led and presenter-free wildlife programs. When recruiting presenters, the company sets out to find the perfect match between the topic of the film and the expertise of the presenter.

"Ideally the host is a key scientist, conservationist or ranger who is closely involved in the topic," says Holzer. "We believe strongly that audiences feel and notice when you add a celebrity presenter to a program just to boost up the show. Credibility and authenticity are key." ■

*Orangutan Jungle School* is a docu-soap that has been a strong seller for Blue Ant.

