

Conservation Filmmaking by Chris Palmer

This article appeared on the website: filmmakersforconservation.org in 2008.

Chris Palmer is Director of the Center for Environmental Filmmaking at American University in Washington DC, President of the MacGillivray Freeman Films Educational Foundation in Laguna Beach, CA, and CEO of VideoTakes, Inc. in Alexandria, VA.

These are his reflections on thirty years in conservation filmmaking.

1. What Is Green/Conservation Filmmaking?

Probably the best environmental documentary success story to date is Al Gore's Oscar-winning film, *An Inconvenient Truth*, directed by Davis Guggenheim. The film, which has grossed more than US\$60 million, played a key role in publicizing the issue of climate change and making it mainstream. It won a "Best Documentary" Oscar and played a large role in Gore being co-honored with the Nobel Peace Prize in October 2007.

An Inconvenient Truth is one example of conservation filmmaking. There are thousands more. The field is characterized by great diversity, from expensive Hollywood movies on penguins to US\$10 million 3D IMAX giant screen films on coral reefs, from controversial HBO documentaries on toxics to *Planet Earth* and *Blue Planet* produced by the BBC, from *Nature* on America's PBS Network to short films on YouTube showing buffalo, lions and crocodiles in aggressive predatory action. All this plethora of programming comes under the umbrella of conservation filmmaking.

2. Why are Films about Conservation Important?

We humans are "fouling our own nest" to an unprecedented degree. Frogs are disappearing, dead zones in the sea are growing, sharks are being killed by the thousands for their fins, the population is skyrocketing and we are heating up the planet. The many ways we are polluting and damaging our environment are startling and depressing. To combat these menaces to the world's future, we need to use every tool at our disposal, including film and new media. In fact, Filmmakers For Conservation emerged from the feeling among wildlife and environmental filmmakers that not enough was being done to promote conservation. Many of us felt that too many films distracted audiences with entertaining footage without raising viewers' awareness of the dire environmental problems facing the world.

3. Blue-chip v. Conservation Programs

While there is a tremendous amount of diversity in wildlife and nature films, networks often want to stay away from issue-driven films about conservation, as opposed to "blue-chip" films, because the controversy can scare advertisers. By blue-chip wildlife films, I mean those films that steer clear of environmental issues for fear of the controversy, focus on charismatic species like bears and sharks, rarely involve people, typically avoid politics or policy debates which could date the film, often contain a compelling story

focused on a specific animal, have budgets in the area of US\$1 million per hour or more, and feature magnificent, pristine landscapes with power lines and fences carefully hidden. But do blue-chip natural history films inspire conservation? Blue-chip films raise viewers' awareness of the beauty of the natural world and the solace to be found there. They might even get a person started on a path which impassions them and which eventually leads to real engagement of some kind.

But blue-chip films can also lead viewers to feel complacent about conservation because such films show plenty of untamed wilderness for wildlife. Blue-chip films, by definition, present unspoiled and inspiring landscapes. Anybody watching a heavy diet of these films might be excused for wondering why environmentalists constantly complain about loss of habitat when evidently from the television screen there is plenty of it. These films can give a false sense of security, a false sense of endless bounty.

Conservation films, in contrast to blue-chip wildlife films, address conservation issues, feature people, deal with policy and show despoiled landscapes. They alert us to a problem, examine it, point to a solution and call us to action. Typically conservation films get modest ratings (*An Inconvenient Truth* being an exception), and the people who watch them likely already agree with the film's conservation message.

This challenge places environmental and wildlife filmmakers on a precipitous edge where they must balance the pressures of broadcasters and distributors who want to appeal to mass markets with the responsibilities they have as filmmakers to produce meaningful media.

Does a blue-chip series like *Blue Planet*, which revels in the breathtaking beauty of the natural world, mislead us because it avoids the tough stories about loss of habitat, global warming and toxics? The jury is still out. In my view, we need both kinds of film—blue-chip and conservation—as part of a multifaceted and comprehensive campaign that spans genres and mediums.

4. The Dreaded "C" Word

Sadly, despite the recent upsurge in interest, broadcasters still widely regard conservation as a ratings killer because many conservation films can be boring, too one-sided or little fun to watch. Viewers, upon being presented with yet another environmental crisis, tend to come away feeling depressed, demoralized and powerless. They often feel small and insignificant in the face of looming environmental problems. Tim Martin, a veteran BBC wildlife film producer says, "For most of the last 15 years that I've spent in television, the stupidest, most naïve idea for a wildlife film you could suggest was one about environmental and wildlife conservation. It is the dreaded "C" word."

5. What Is In The Future?

Thankfully in the last couple of years, egged on by the popularity of *An Inconvenient Truth*, it has suddenly become "cool" to be green. Conservation is no longer a tedious topic. If you own an SUV, you're considered not only obnoxious, but ignorantly self-

centered. As the public has become more interested in knowing how they can contribute to solving the world's environmental crises, the market for conservation films has grown.

Conservation-minded film producers now have more freedom to think in terms of "campaigns" rather than just films. People want more than entertainment. They want to see results, to see real impact. After watching a film, they want to be able to go to a website for more information and for guidance on how they can do something to help.

6. What Does All This Mean for Someone Starting Out in the Industry?

While new technologies and new internet possibilities are exciting, make sure to remember the fundamentals. These include networking, constantly learning new skills and improving those you have, working diligently, being creative and entrepreneurial, raising money, and improving your storytelling skills. Let's take a closer look at two of those fundamentals: first networking, and then storytelling.

7. Networking

Networking is about building relationships and trust. It is an essential skill for professionals who want to grow their careers. Making new business friends can lead to fresh ideas, useful information, new partnerships and increased income. To improve your networking skills, try these suggestions:

- Seek long-term connections, not short-term gains. Networking is about being authentic, unselfish, genuine and honest. The key to successful networking is to be a decent and honorable person even when you're not networking.
- Act with confidence even if you feel shy and intimidated. You may feel understandably self-conscious and uncomfortable when meeting people more powerful and successful than yourself, but successful networking requires you to do it anyway. Do your best to appear self-confident. Try and ignore any negative self-talk.
- Reach out to people in a warm and sincere way. Risk rejection. Be friendly and generous. Smile, shake hands firmly, make eye contact and ask them open-ended questions (questions which require more than a yes or no). Resist the urge to dominate the conversation. Listen intently. Be present. Focus on their concerns, not yours. Learn their name and use it so you begin to associate the name with the face.
- At meetings or conferences, go out of your way to meet people. Physically move around and work the room. Don't get stuck talking to one person just to be polite. (Say to the person, "I enjoyed meeting you and learning about your work. Let's both meet some of the other people here. I hope to run into you again later," shake hands and leave.) Show genuine interest in everyone you meet and form relationships that are meaningful. Exchange business cards. Find out about other people's interests and concerns.
- Become a resource to others. Introduce new friends to old friends. Look for ways you can help other people make useful contacts. Put in a good word for others. Build a reputation as an unselfish, decent person, the sort of person that others want to work with. Treat everyone with respect and courtesy, especially those less powerful than you.

- Before attending a conference, think strategically about your goals. What specific results do you want to achieve? Write them down and have a game plan. Make a list of who you want to meet. Write or call them ahead of time to schedule a meeting. Prepare specific questions and offers of assistance.
- At conferences, don't compare yourself to others. Don't waste time and energy fretting over someone else who may be having more success at networking than you. We all go through up and downs. Just concentrate on being the best you can be.
- When you talk about your work, talk passionately. Prepare a one minute description of what you do or want to do so that you are ready to talk in a succinct, enthusiastic and inspiring way about your work and ideas.
- Take good notes and soak up as much learning as you can. Be a sponge. Write down all the inspiring ideas and information you gather so you don't forget them.
- After meeting an interesting person, send him/her a thank you note. Suggest ways you might be able to help. Fulfill any promises you made. Show people that you actually do what you say you're going to do.

8. Storytelling

A compelling story can make a film entertaining-and without entertainment, the audience will go elsewhere. Sometimes a great story gives us new and deeper insights into our own lives and the lives of other people, and thus changes our understanding of the world. Stories help make sense of confusing information and contain a mysterious power to appeal to audiences. Telling a story about wildlife is especially valuable if it opens the doors of perception and helps deepen our understanding of nature and the need to protect and conserve it. For that, sometimes we need a hero.

"Hero stories" feature brave souls who undertake difficult and dangerous tasks. The hero gains favor with audiences because we like to cheer someone on who is struggling against the odds and displays courage despite his or her fear or failings.

The hero's journey has a beginning, middle and end. It has compelling characters, rising tension and conflicts that reach a resolution or denouement of some kind. The story engages the audience on an intellectual and emotional level, inspiring viewers to want to know what happens next. This is the essence of a great story and what audiences hope to find.

9. Breaking Into The Business

If you want to break into conservation filmmaking, remember the following:

- Select a topic that you are passionate about. Make sure the topic has a hook which will grab an audience and hold their attention. Research every aspect of the topic so you truly understand the issues. Talk to experts.
- Write a treatment that excites you because of its innovative blend of purpose, entertainment and education. Tap into people's yearning to hear great stories (the language of learning) and to fall in love with compelling characters. Surprise your audience. Don't be predictable. Offer them hope, inspiration and solutions.

- Work as hard on marketing, outreach and distribution as on the film itself. Find out what networks and broadcasters are looking for and what is likely to be selling in the future.
- Get to know your audience well and what kind of films they like. Think about the actions you want them to take as a result of watching your film. You want to truly change the lives of your viewers.
- Think multi-platform (PBS, YouTube, DVD, etc.) and how to deliver the same message multiple times. Understand and use all the modern tools of information and communication. Make sure all rights are cleared for any third party materials like photos, archival footage and music.
- Become a persuasive speaker so you can pitch your films, campaigns and projects in the most exciting and dynamic way possible.
- Network relentlessly (as already noted) so you are in a strong position to hear of new opportunities, hire the best people, and tap into the best financial resources. Attend festivals, screenings, conferences and workshops. Join organizations like FFC.
- Constantly initiate actions and make things happen. Be entrepreneurial, seize opportunities and work hard. Learn how to run a business. Persevere despite setbacks and rejections. Stay focused.
- Mold yourself into a person with great integrity, decency and ability so that people want to work with you.

10. How Can You Start Working on Your Ideas and Passions?

Wear more than one hat. Do a job to pay the rent, but in the evenings and weekends become a writer, or entrepreneur, or cinematographer, or money raiser. Instead of watching soap operas or the Monday movie, start brainstorming about an idea for a film treatment. Reach out to mentors and get to know the key people at the relevant nonprofits. And learn how to pitch.

11. Learn How To Pitch

Pitching is one of the hardest things you'll ever have to do. Often no one else cares about your idea. You believe in it and must let that belief show in your voice, posture and body. If you don't care, no one else will.

Your pitch will delve into budgets, talent, logistics, characters, story and other important issues, but if you don't capture an executive's interest within the first couple of minutes, the meeting is essentially over and the pitch has failed. Pitching isn't hyping your project. It does not involve raising your voice or shouting. It is essentially a conversation-warm, inviting and engaging-in which you convey your film concept clearly and concisely.

12. What To Aim For in Distribution?

When thinking about how to distribute your film, ask yourself the following types of questions:

- For whom are you making this film? A nonprofit? Festivals? Democrats? Animal Planet? Children? Legislators? A Senate subcommittee? The general public?
- What are the demographics of the target audience?

- Can you identify a core audience?
- What other films is your target or core audience watching? What is your competition?
- How do you intend to reach your target audience?
- If you are aiming at getting your film broadcast, how will you approach the network to get a pitch meeting?
- Who do you need to add to your team to get you in the door?
- How will you distribute your film and get it in front of people? A major network in your country or internationally? Schools? Homes? Create a web doc? Websites? Mail a DVD to key people? Terra? YouTube? My Space? Facebook? Streaming video on cell phones? Launch a video blog? Video distribution via flashdrives?
- Can you design a speech around it and give presentations about it to college audiences?
- Can you sell it with a book on the same topic?
- What about distribution companies like Parthenon and Off the Fence?
- How about approaching school distributors such as Bullfrog about the school market?
- How about partnering with a nonprofit and getting your film distributed through their website and at the grassroots level?
- What about the International Wildlife Film Festival in Missoula, Montana? Or the Jackson Hole Wildlife Film Festival in Jackson Hole, Wyoming? Or the Wildscreen Festival in Bristol, UK?
- What about a theatrical release?

13. Ethical Issues

Issues about how animals are filmed in the wild have become increasingly controversial. While many wildlife filmmakers behave responsibly, the industry has its share of producers, directors and camera operators who continue to put a great shot ahead of the welfare of the animals they are filming. Some filmmakers "stress" an animal by getting too close. Others stage phony scenes to make wildlife seem more dangerous than it really is. Networks and corporate sponsors may exert undue influence on film content as they try to "get their money's worth" from every scene. Because of this, animals are being endangered and audiences are being deceived.

The proliferation of wildlife shows and the ubiquity of cameras have created a kind of "wildlife paparazzi" that harass and endanger animals to capture "money shots." Amateur videographers, influenced by wildlife documentaries, venture too close to their subjects. The aggressive tactics filmmakers use to draw animals to a film site and capture dramatic, sometimes even unnatural scenes on tape - think man-made feeding frenzies - have created "wildlife pornography." Animals are exploited for viewers' pleasure.

Viewers often assume that everything in wildlife films is natural, which often isn't the case. Sometimes scenes are contrived, animals are captive and stories are invented. Pressures are put on filmmakers by networks to obtain eye-popping footage, whatever the

cost. This encourages them to "stage" behavior in order to obtain the breathtaking action scenes that viewers have come to expect.

Wildlife films feed a strong curiosity people have about the natural world, and audiences want the portrayals to be authentic. They want to see wildlife and wilderness untainted by the hand of man. Audiences don't want filmmakers to do any harm to those beloved animals or their environment. When audiences discover that something they see in a natural history film is packaged, inauthentic or contrived, they feel cheated, misled and fooled. But the line between authenticity and artifact is thin and easily crossed. Filmmakers debate where the line is and where unethical behavior begins.

On location, there is often little time or inclination to focus on ethical issues, such as whether wild animals are being unfairly harassed. Looming deadlines, bad weather, budget problems, equipment breakdowns, contract disputes and logistic crises often take precedence. Nevertheless, ethical issues are important and can be grouped into four categories:

- Getting too close
- Staging
- Misleading and lying to audiences
- Animal harassment.

Examples of irresponsible filmmaking in recent prime time wildlife films include television hosts taking hot spring baths with snow monkeys, scientists sticking their hands into snake holes and then bragging about their wounds, and a television host plunging around in dense brush along a river bank while attempting to get close to a grizzly bear.

These shots are a desperate attempt by networks and filmmakers to attract viewers and get good ratings. If a show receives a low rating, it will likely be cut from the schedule and the film producer's income will take a beating. The pressure for ratings explains the emphasis in wildlife films on predation, sex, aggression and violence; and the lack of airtime focusing on cooperative and nurturing behaviors, habitat preservation and conservation. To be heard above the noise and to win big audiences, networks feel they need to shock and surprise their audiences.

Television wildlife host and scientist, Brady Barr, from the National Geographic Society says scornfully that all audiences and networks seem to want today is a "highlight" reel. By that, he means a program with relentless and supercharged excitement. The intense competition for ratings pushes hosts and filmmakers to go to extremes in the quest for bigger audience shares.

Concerns over wildlife film ethics have been with us throughout the history of wildlife filmmaking. But it was an Englishman, Jeffery Boswall, who first began a systematic study of the issue starting in the 1970s. Boswall, born in 1931, spent nearly three decades as a producer for the BBC Natural History Unit. Boswall's seminal paper on wildlife

ethics, *The Moral Pivots of Wildlife Filmmaking* (1988) discusses two main moral pivots of wildlife filmmaking: first, the obligation to the audience and second, the obligation to the animals. He translates these into three commandments: Thou shalt not harm animals, Thou shalt not deceive the audience, and Thou shalt be willing to disclose how the film was made. He warns that it is easier to preach these admonitions than it is to apply them. In my book from Sierra Club Books, I add a fourth commandment: Thou shalt not meaninglessly sensationalize an animal.

FFC has published Ethical Guidelines for wildlife filmmakers with which everyone in the business should be familiar.

14. Presenter-Led Programs

Today television has become intensely ratings driven. As a result, there has been an increase in sensationalism in wildlife television programs as producers feverishly compete for ratings. Many presenter-led programs have gotten out-of-hand as hosts will seemingly do anything to try to achieve high ratings with super-charged and constant excitement. They often goad dangerous animals into dangerous confrontations, which are extremely stressful for both parties, even if highly entertaining.

This new trend was ultimately responsible for the unfortunate and untimely death in 2006 of Steve Irwin who was killed by a bull stingray while shooting a film for Animal Planet in Australia. It is likely the stingray felt harassed and trapped by Irwin and his cameraman and responded in self-defense by stabbing Irwin in the chest with its tail barb. His death was caught on film, but Irwin's wife Terri destroyed the footage. A few of his fans retaliated by killing sting rays, a reaction that Irwin would have found horrifying and deplored.

Irwin's prolific body of work raised viewers' awareness and love for animals, particularly reptiles. As a *New York Times* op-ed piece stated on his death, Irwin inspired many youngsters to take an interest in the natural world. But there is clearly a dark side to this kind of entertainment-cum-education. Animals and presenters are put at risk while also provoking "copycat" harassment of animals by members of the public. Viewers watch charismatic personalities on television get close to wild animals and are tempted to try to do the same themselves.

We have reached a state in the wildlife filmmaking industry in which the very animals we mean to protect may be compromised or hurt in the process of capturing them on film.

When we look at the early years of the wildlife filmmaking industry, we can see there has always been temptation toward exploitation. Yet, the modern explosion of reality television has only increased this temptation, making it more appealing for broadcasters to air reality shows with questionable and ill-advised content. Hosts today manhandle animals for the sake of ratings rather than education.

Documentary films can be dull if not done well. Presenters like Brady Barr and Jeff Corwin can play a very constructive role in livening up the format. By expressing their

own feelings and enthusiasm, they allow an audience to understand the animals more intensely. Viewers recognize themselves and their own feelings through the animals they view on the screen. Presenters can share their passion, bring viewers deeper into the story, and if they are articulate, inform the viewer about the fascinating science or politics behind the issues. A strong, engaging presenter can make the story (or the argument, if one is being made) more convincing and fresh, while also bringing humor and energy to a topic that might otherwise seem pedestrian. He or she also brings in viewers who would not otherwise watch a nature show or conservation documentary.

That said, we are still left with the ethical issue of how wild animals are treated. A few months before Steve Irwin was killed, Michaela Strachan, a British presenter of wildlife programs, noted, "Presenters are now trying to out-do each other in how close and dangerous they can get to wildlife." She emphasized that she is not like that herself, and continued, "It seems the presenters are trying to be champions over the animals instead of championing the animals. Someone will get seriously hurt soon and sadly it won't be the presenter that's shot as a result."

15. Green Filmmaking

The smell of hypocrisy would be everywhere if environmental and wildlife filmmakers made films and new media promoting conservation while making films in a polluting and unsustainable way. FFC, the Center for Environmental Filmmaking and the Center for Social Media are jointly developing the "best practices" for green filmmaking, defining standards for "green" production for professional documentary producers. Filmmaker Andrew Buchanan from England made a film for the National Geographic Society called *Earth Report 2006* without, in effect, any carbon emissions. Al Gore did the same with *An Inconvenient Truth*. Of course there *were* emissions during the production of both films, even after following the "reduce, re-use, recycle" rule. But those emissions were tracked and the film production budget paid the money needed to buy the film's "carbon offsets." The money built wind turbines on a Native American reservation. This is the direction in which the industry must go - better late than never - if it is to be credible.

16. Personal Reflections

I've worked in the area of environmental filmmaking for an incredibly fulfilling thirty years. I've met extraordinarily fascinating people, made a lot of close friends, and seen amazing wild animals and sites in far away places. But most important, I've been able to join with others who feel the way I do about the importance of conservation and become part of a great community of filmmakers who want to make a difference and leave the world a better place.