

ReelWest

MAGAZINE

WESTERN CANADA'S FILM, VIDEO &

TELEVISION INDUSTRY

SHOOTING FOR THE MOON

Once in a Blue Moon's producing/directing team kept the faith and made their film despite losing out in a funding competition.



CORPORATE STRATEGIES

Western Canadian production companies are making money and winning awards with educational and corporate videos.

OUTSIDE CHANCE

Outdoor filmmakers are turning out international hits with little if any government funding.



Plus: *The Future of Independents, the Battle for Cable Subscribers and the Selling of the Trade Forum.*

Beauty In The Beast

by Heather Conn

You will find them huddled in the forest, stretched out across the tundra, perched on a windswept ledge in the Rockies. Often silent and elusive this western Canadian animal species is rarely visible in the autumn months. Why? Because its prime shooting season and they know where to hide.

They are the patient souls who film Canada's wild west, the ones who bring spectacular outdoor footage into our living rooms. They lie in wait for grizzlies, track the paths of wolves, and film the graceful sweeps of whales in flowing motion. They can spend hours watching a woodpecker or wait days, even weeks, to capture the mating ritual of bison.

But once they have obtained their coveted wilderness images; how big is the public demand and need for these nature moments? Huge, according to John Panikkar, director of programming at Toronto-based The Discovery Channel. "Nature programming does better for us than any other programming," he says of the channel's science and nature, technology, adventure and world cultures content.

"Feedback has been really, really positive. People tell us that our nature shows are lovely family viewing. They are delighted that their whole family can watch and it's the only channel where they don't have to worry about what's on." Relief. No sex and violence for the kids.

Within the industry, Panikkar says that producers now tell him that they are grateful to have a specialty channel as an outlet for outdoor and natural history subjects. "They are really relieved to have a forum for the kinds of films they have always wanted to make."

But last year, things were different when Panikkar attended the Showcase film festival in Regina, Saskatchewan. "I didn't detect that a lot of people in the audience were just bursting to do nature films" he says. However, when he returned to Regina this year, he says that producers expressed far greater interest in outdoor and wildlife subjects. (That could have something to do with the fact that the Discovery Channel started in January of this year.)

One filmmaker who does burst with passion for wildlife filmmaking is Albert Karvonen, founder of Karvonen Films in Edmonton. He has made natural history films for 20 years. According to Eve Convie of the Athabaskan newspaper, "{Karvonen} knows what it's like to feel deathly cold, painfully stiff from holding stealth-like, hunched positions, defeated by fleeing subjects and elated by the resigned co-operation from animals who tolerated the intrusion of cameramen." Although Karvonen was filming in the wilds of Alaska and thus unavailable for interviews, his office manager Darrin Clausen said the company has an unquenchable market in Europe and Asia.

"People in Japan and Germany are wild about Canadian wildlife," says Clausen. "They just eat it up." Karvonen is still awaiting Telefilm funding approval for a 13 part *Wild Encounters* series shot all over western and northern Canada. It highlights animals from wood bison and beavers to cougars, wolves and wapitis. The Discovery Channel is reviewing a rough cut of Karvonen's new *Treasure of the Wild* series, which highlights southern Alberta's hoodoo lands, grizzly bears and northern remote landscapes.

Whales, wolves and bears have been perennial favorites for National Film Board audiences, says Al Parsons, project manager of the NFB's Pacific



Europeans and Asians are wild about western Canadian wildlife. Above: Alberta buffalo featured in Albert Karvonen's *Wildlife Encounters*.

Centre studios in Vancouver. "Whether they're tourists from Asia or audiences here, people have always been intrigued by Canadian bears," he says. "They're as much a part of Canada as the maple leaf."

Parsons, who has been with the NFB for 19 years, says he thinks that the demand for wildlife film remains constant. But the Pacific Centre's executive producer Erik Eriksen adds that if the NFB had more wildlife films, they would do well. "There's a lot of market out there. But we still depend on filmmakers approaching us and a lot of filmmakers aren't interested in nature or wildlife."

A new fall release from the NFB's Pacific studio is *Seven Crows A Secret*, a look at crows and their relationship to mythology and literature. The Film Board's Green Video Guide currently offers dozens of titles under categories such as Eco-Philosophy, Ecology, Endangered/Threatened Species, Marine Life and Wildlife.

Stories of endangered species and environmental tragedies fill today's mainstream media. Eco-tourism is one of this country's fastest-growing industries. One might think that with nature and environmentalism as the "sexy" or "in" subjects, western Canada's wildlife filmmakers would gain easier access to financing and recognition from mainstream broadcasters.

Not so, says Karen Henders, associate producer at Waterhen Film Productions Ltd. near Regina. She says that Waterhen had difficulty finding a mainstream broadcaster for their four part series entitled *Home Place-Exploring Human Ecology*. She thinks that the series' philosophical and non-traditional approach scared potential backers away.

"It was an impossibility to get Telefilm to see the significance of *Home Place*" she said. "I think that for their dollar, they felt that their money was better spent on a television movie.

"It's frustrating. Without a significant broadcast window, it's hard to put a deal together." Waterhen operates from the home of Robert Long, a zoologist who has been making natural-history-based educational films for 27 years.

But Waterhen has received a major licensing commitment from Toronto-based Vision TV for *Home Place*. Sponsored by Parks Canada, the series gained its name and inspiration from a collection of essays by natural historian Stan Rowe. "They (Parks Canada) view him as a national treasure" says Henders. The series will appear in the federal parks system and be used as a

training tool for parks staff.

The series pilot, which Henders produced, received an excellent response at the Oakland Educational Film and Video Festival in 1993, she says. Geared to an international audience, *Home Place* offers alternative perspectives on humanity's relationship to the planet, offering a sense of oneness with the environment, rather than compartmentalization. "Environment is a word that separates us," said Henders, an avid bird-watcher and member of the Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society. "People don't have a good idea of what ecology and environment is."

Wildlife filmmakers are still struggling to gain product credibility with Canada's major broadcasters, agrees Jerry Krepakevich, a producer with NFB Edmonton. "It seems that the broadcasters do not feel that there is enough demand. They run wildlife stuff on Sunday afternoon. It's filler as far as they're concerned."

It still remains tough to finance films on natural history, agrees Krepakevich, and such documentaries are expensive to make. Henders says, "With more and more specialty stations, there's a need for more product but they want it for less. You can't do it for less with natural history filmmaking."

However, quality stations such as The Discovery Channel still remain an ideal platform to create exposure and draw larger audiences for nature films. An excellent example is *The Nature Nut*, hosted by John Acorn. A popular show which began regionally on Edmonton's CFRN, it has now gained a national audience through The Discovery Channel. The station has commissioned a second run of 13 episodes. "It did phenomenally well," says Panikkar.

With bird-watching as Canada's fastest-growing hobby, another documentary success story on Discovery Channel is *Twits and Pishers*. The station has commissioned 13 more episodes of this popular series. Both of these hit nature series are distributed by Great North Releasing Inc. in Edmonton. Claire Verret, Great North's promotions manager, says: "We know that in overseas markets, wildlife films translate really well. They don't need much dubbing, they're very vivid, and you get the impact of the film quite easily." She says that she has not noticed an increase in production of such films in western Canada, but recognizes a demand for them. Great North is

looking for more wildlife films and would like to offer competition to the ever-popular National Geographic documentaries. Currently, nature films comprise one of 10 genres in their catalogue.



The NFB's tradition of outdoor filmmaking continues with Seven Crows A Secret, a look at crows and their relationship to mythology and literature.

You don't have to look far in western Canada to find recent natural history films. Missing Link Productions in Calgary, Alberta has produced such titles as *Birders of A*

Feather, For the Birds, Night Moves, and Singing in the Rain Forest, all airing on The Discovery Channel. Vancouver producer Chris Bruyere has a *Champions in the Wild* series underway. And

Watervisions outside Vancouver offers *A Last Wild Salmon* by Pauline Heaton.

But the genre still remains problematic. Nervous wildlife

distrust camera operators. As Laird quips: "It's not like you're cueing animals." Many natural habitats are disappearing as towns and cities grow. As more people in western Canada seek wilderness for recreation, animals and birds become harder to find. "A lot of people don't understand how hard it is," says Laird. "You can spend eight hours in the bush and get nothing."

As all filmmakers know, less money is available in today's lean and mean economy. Most production houses in western Canada that do wildlife films rely heavily on selling stock footage for survival. Demand for such images is constant at the Edmonton NFB office says Krepakevich. They recently received a request for stock footage in the Yukon for a National Geographic documentary to be aired on PBS in Seattle.

(Krepakevich shares Karvonen's secret about wildlife stock footage: use Roman numerals for the

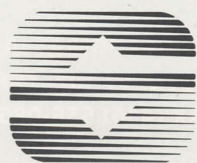
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copyright date. Most people don't know what date it stands for and don't realize that the image could be 20 years old.)

Yellowknife Films also receives constant demands from across Canada for stock footage for northern-content documentaries, says production coordinator Charles Laird. His office has received an increase in calls for northern scenics and northern lights. Their documentary *Northern Lights*, co-produced with the NFB and released in 1992 has been selling extremely well in the United States, he says.

However, the film almost put producer Alan Booth out of business because it ran way over budget he adds. (Booth, who has lived in Canada's north for 15 years, was on location and unavailable for comment.) "He is sick of shooting out in the cold," says Laird. "He wants to do quirky films, not solely northern content."

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Laird thinks that interest in Canadian subjects has increased in the last few years. He cites the television shows *Due South*, *North of 60*, *Northern Exposure* and the recent Molson Ice concert in Tuktoyaktuk. "Marketeers are capitalizing on the north these days."

Yellowknife Films is currently making a documentary on Inuit art and the environment entitled *Masters of the Arctic*. But their bread and butter work rests with government and industrial videos. "It's a bit frustrating up here because the centres of this industry are nowhere near us," says Laird. "We don't hear about who's looking for what. I don't have a sense of what people want."

Henders says that several years ago, there was almost no Canadian presence at the Jackson Hole Wildlife Film Festival in Wyoming. "Every country was there flying flags out in front of the hotel lobby. But nobody was tooting their horn for Canadian filmmakers. It has been frustrating."

In the future, Henders says that Waterhen's goal is to offer a "blue chip nature program" on the British Broadcasting Corporation. "We are trying to do international calibre products of international significance out of Saskatchewan. It can be done, but it needs significant broadcasting support."

In the meantime, you can watch Waterhen's 13 part series *West Wind* on Discovery Channel this fall. Hosted by Sheldon Turcotte with music by Liona Boyd, it offers "a selection of ageless films about the landscape and wildlife of western Canada."

The NFB's future look at nature will be on CD-ROM technology, says Parsons. "The environmental concern is already there. People want to have an interactive look at the environment. For example, what wildlife live in the alpine meadow?"

Such hands-on experiences with outdoor images is a far cry from the crude film days of *Nanook of the North*, the 1922 Arctic film classic by Robert J. Flaherty. Today's sophisticated audiences are demanding, and getting, a vast new look at the minutiae and majesty of western Canada's wilderness. As Henders says, "People are finding a new way to relate to nature. We want to show people the diversity of life in their own backyard."

As more international viewers continue to turn to Canada for outdoor documentaries, it's unlikely that today's choices will disappoint them.

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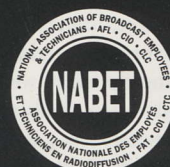
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