

Films starring nature

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Like most forms of film-making, the success of a natural history documentary hinges on good story-telling.

Flinders University is one of only three institutions in the world to offer a course in natural history film-making, and according to Course Supervisor Cole Larsen, mastering the fundamentals of researching, scriptwriting and editing is just as important for any aspiring Attenborough as learning to wield a camera.

The course, which commenced this year, is run at Masters level over two years and is a collaboration between the Department of Screen Studies and the School of Biological Sciences at Flinders.

The course has been devised to equip scientists from a range of backgrounds with skills in visual media. Mr Larsen said students of the course include graduates in biodiversity, professionals from Government Parks and Wildlife services, and marine biologists.

The applications for the skills taught in the Flinders course extend well beyond film and television, Mr Larsen said.

He said that as well as the growing array of visual platforms on the internet, museums and other institutions, such as local councils, are increasing their use of visuals in information kiosks and educational galleries.

"There are many sorts of screens," Mr Larsen said.

"Our job in the screen production end is to take the scientists and teach them producing, writing and directing, along with some basic camera, editing, sound recording and post-production sound skills."

The approach is very practical: students make a range of short videos during the course, which is divided between biodiversity and screen production topics, with major online and screen projects highlighting the second year of the course.

The students are instructed in production techniques by lecturer Helen Carter, a professional cinematographer and experienced natural history film-maker.

Ms Carter said that students frequently find that they have a special aptitude for certain aspects of the course, such as scriptwriters, producers or cinematographers.

She said success in making a natural history documentary relies on factors that are common to documentaries about people and even to drama productions: good storytelling is captivating no matter what the subject or genre.

"You need to have a story, structure and style, as well as being technically proficient, and knowing your audience is very important."

There are, of course, significant differences between human and animal films.

"The key difference is that in drama or human documentary, the subject can be manipulated," Ms Carter said.

"Humans can act on instructions or requests. In the natural world you can't ask an animal to do it again, or change a prop in a natural landscape."

Ms Carter said that the students' scientific knowledge provides a basis on which they can build their practice.

Dr Don Driscoll, who coordinates the biodiversity component of the course, said that scientists are often stereotyped as hopeless communicators.

"Unfortunately, many scientists do fit that model," he said.

"The new course will help to break down that stereotype as our students build careers based on both science and film-making.

"To make a convincing science documentary, you really need to understand the science underpinning the topic. To be able to recognise and interpret an important science story, it is crucial to have a good science background in addition to the ability to make a film. That's why we've combined our biodiversity topics with the outstanding film-making capacity in the Department of Screen Studies."

Many of the students who take up this course are committed conservationists looking for new ways to communicate their existing knowledge and research, Mr Larsen said.

"We can make relevant material for the educational market, shorter TV time slots, as well as segmented programs and new media for on-line distribution," he said.

While most students opt to use a narrative style that enlists experts or field workers to provide a commentary, some are exploring different approaches, Mr Larsen said.

He said that while serious scientists and natural history documentary-makers generally frown on anthropomorphism - imposing human-like characteristics on animals - the technique does have its place, particularly in engaging children.

"Used well, it can be a really strong structural device, and there are examples where it has been used with scientific integrity," Mr Larsen said.

As well as enlisting guest film-makers to supplement the practical teaching, the course is establishing links with external organisations such as SARDI, which can provide research projects where documentary-making skills are required.

"SARDI has commissioned our students to make a series of short videos on marine biodiversity which will be used for education, community and corporate promotion of our unique marine environments," Mr Larsen said.

He said that given the lack of international models, the new course has proved remarkably successful, and that the first intake of students were showing high levels of both commitment and satisfaction.

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