

THE BBC NATURAL HISTORY UNIT: PUBLICLY FUNDED BROADCASTING  
IN THE UNITED KINGDOM AND ITS ADVANTAGES FOR  
THE PRODUCTION OF NATURAL HISTORY FILMS

by

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ABSTRACT

The British Broadcasting Corporation's Natural History Unit (BBC NHU) is the most successful producer of nature television. Even though other public and independent organizations produce nature television the BBC NHU continues to dominate the genre and the global market. The public funding of the BBC and the NHU is the foundation for the NHU's consistent international success.

## INTRODUCTION

In 1995 I journeyed to England to accept employment at the BBC Natural History Unit. For eleven years as the only American on NHU staff, I worked and developed as a filmmaker. While at the NHU I was involved in the production of nature films that varied from shorts to major international series. During this time I gained insights into the British and their sensibility of nature film. The British people have an exceptional appreciation for nature and an insatiable appetite for natural history television. I learned the business of BBC operations as I became familiar with the British public funding system. The BBC's public funding impacts the success of the NHU and its television production output in terms of both quantity and quality. Even though other production companies make nature television, no other entity consistently produces the annual number of films or award winning content. Public funding is the key to the consistent success of the BBC Natural History Unit.

## OVERVIEW

Nature television is big business with budgets for top end projects running over a million dollars (Evans). The nature television genre is host to a number of production companies that produce natural history content to a worldwide audience. The BBC Natural History Unit is the largest producer of nature media annually producing between seventy to one hundred hours of television, one hundred and twenty hours of radio; web based interactive media and an occasional feature film (Fothergill). The BBC NHU dominates the world market in the international sales of its films with nearly every film produced selling to other major markets, many being produced with outside co-production funding in place before filming begins (Fothergill). Why is the BBC NHU so successful and why are there no real competitors on its level?

There have been competitors but in recent times many have closed up shop. Historically successful British companies such as Survival Anglia and Partridge Films have fallen on hard times being absorbed by larger companies. UK<sup>1</sup> based Granada TV, a large player in the British market bought out Partridge Films and its library also created its own nature production division. Many natural history projects rely on some library material; hence, a good library is indeed a valuable asset. But as broadcasters made the switch to high definition older pre-1980, 16mm film footage did not meet the high definition standards rendering much their library worthless. Granada closed its nature production doors after only a few years of operation. Non-British players that once competed, such as the long running Natural

History Unit of ABC Australia headed by Dione Gilmore -- who notably started out as a researcher on the BBC Life on Earth (1979) series -- closed in 2007. The ABC NHU was a small group and the switch to HD origination to satisfy co-producers proved too expensive (Dyer). One survivor is Television New Zealand's Natural History Unit (NHNZ). NHNZ was bought out in 1997 by Los Angeles based Fox Studios and as a result produces very little natural history today. The nature programs it does make are often low-end presenter led expeditions that are inexpensive to produce. These projects sell well to the large cable channels such as Discovery, the National Geographic Channel and the Travel Channel (Waterworth). The less costly projects of NHNZ are rarely high-end animal behavior films that would offer competition to the BBC NHU. Clearly, market forces, changes in technology and other factors had a hand in these events but the NHU survived and prospered. High budget filming projects produced by competitors such as *Microcosmos* (1996), *Winged Migration* (2001), and *The March of the Penguins* (2005) do exist but are not the norm. These films were successful blockbusters; however, they are one time-hit projects and not consistently produced by a single entity as in the case of the NHU. I argue that the success of the NHU is a result of a unique model of public funding.

## THE FUNDING OF THE BBC

As a public broadcaster the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) has a charter set out by the British government. Its mission is “to enrich people's lives with programs and services that inform, educate and entertain” (BBC). The BBC’s mandate is to provide programs for all of its viewers<sup>2</sup>. In order to fund this mandate, every household or business that has a television in England, Wales, Northern Ireland and Scotland pays a yearly television license fee of approximately 230 U.S. dollars.

The license fee guarantees the BBC a yearly operating budget of approximately \$4.7 billion (BBC Annual Report and Accounts 2007/2008). From this money the NHU internally receives approximately \$80 million annually to operate and make programs (Fothergill). This substantial funding affords the NHU many benefits that are shared by no other production entity such as a large, specialized, stable, work force and the ability to take creative and financial risks. Comparatively the U.S. public broadcaster PBS has an annual operating budget of \$71 million for all of its television programming of which nature television is but a fraction (CPB 2009 Annual Report). PBS is structured so that individual broadcast stations must do additional fund raising themselves so this comparison is by no means equivalent but the fact that the BBC NHU’s annual funds eclipse the entire annual PBS budget adds perspective to the significant annual amount bestowed on the NHU.

Major NHU series like Life of Earth (1979) have become global success stories, viewed by over 500 million people worldwide (Paxman). The international critical acclaim and tremendous financial success of the NHU has proven useful to BBC executives. The mandated television license fee that funds the entire BBC is supervised, administered and reviewed by the British government. The large base budgets allow the BBC to pursue high-end film production that few broadcasters can match. Natural history film is specialized production that requires not only significant funding but the support of experienced production staff as well.

### The Role of BBC Worldwide

Nature films that focus on animal behavior and lack people speaking on camera are known as 'Blue Chip' films.<sup>3</sup> Blue Chip films are one of the mainstays of the NHU and sell well internationally (Fothergill). The BBC NHU capitalizes on its ability to produce broadcast and distribute its films exemplified by large blockbuster series such as Planet Earth. After transmission in the United Kingdom the BBC sells the films throughout the world via the BBC's commercial division, BBC Worldwide (BBC WW). BBC WW markets NHU films as a package with script music and effects thus insuring they are easily revised to any market and language. New films in production receive the bulk of BBC WW sales proceeds. The strength of the funding fosters internal confidence within the organization. BBC WW co-produces NHU films in production with the knowledge the additional funds will increase production value making for a better end product that will in turn result in larger sales (Fothergill).

## THE EFFECT OF FUNDING ON PRODUCTION

### The Talent Base

The production of nature films requires a specialized group of creative talent. The BBC funding model allows the NHU to build and retain an unrivaled talent base; including producers, directors, cinematographers, editors, writers, music composers, computer graphic animators, post production personnel and skilled support staff. As a result Bristol, England, the home of the BBC NHU, is recognized as a major center of film production (Grant, BBC News, Clarke). The NHU boasts a stable and experienced work force whose focus is solely on producing science and nature based documentary film. The majority of NHU employees are on permanent contract (Davies). By comparison industry personnel working outside the NHU are usually independents contracted short-term on a project-to-project basis. The NHU gains both continuity and strength from the permanency of its work force. Employment at the NHU is selective. The majority of the work force is comprised of practiced and skilled field biologists with advanced science degrees, many with excellent academic credentials (Martin). They enter employment as researchers pursuing stories and typically direct film sequences in conjunction with experienced cameramen and camerawomen on location. The apprenticeship may last up to six years, after which they may be promoted to assistant producer and on to producer. The process of selection, advancement and mentoring at the NHU is unique within the industry and encourages developing nature filmmakers to be their very best.

The permanency of the work force facilitates significant internal training and development. Due to the BBC's long standing as a broadcaster, it has many established departments that complement the NHU such as news, music and the arts, drama and feature film, each of which offers a multitude of training classes to improve and nurture internal talent. Employees take training classes in everything from journalistic rigor, to filming in hostile environments, to storytelling, to handling on camera talent. Other BBC classes span a multitude of communications disciplines including television, new media, broadcast technology, radio, film, journalism and location health and safety. The cross pollination between the departments and genres creates a healthy, stimulated creative workforce.

As NHU production teams return from all parts of the globe, they bring with them countless story ideas for the next project. The end result is a thriving workforce with a built-in on-going research and development process that constantly feeds in fresh ideas for new projects.

### Pushing Production Boundaries

The NHU has been a distinct leader in innovation and pushing the boundaries of the nature genre. As NHU department head Neil Nightingale explains, "We have not sat on our laurels. We have no real competitors so in a sense we have become our own competitors. We draw on other genres across the BBC; drama, entertainment, reality, other factual and BBC films to continually reinvent natural history." Programs such as The Private Life of Plants (1995) and the recent Planet

Earth (2006) pushed established technical boundaries. Both series set new standards for time lapse, high speed/slow motion and aerial photography not only in nature television but also for the filmmaking industry. Bold film series like The Private Life of Plants challenged the technical aspect of filmmaking as well as narrative storytelling. As David Attenborough, the narrator of many famous NHU films and a name synonymous with the NHU, noted of The Private Life of Plants “How could you construct the dramatic narratives needed for a successful television documentary series if your main characters are rooted to the ground and barely move? Thinking about this, it suddenly struck me that plants do move and very dramatically” (Attenborough). I contend no other production company would have taken a chance on such subject matter for single program, let alone a major series, and no other production company had the talent or skill to deliver it because of the risks both financial and editorial.

The BBC funding model is also critical to the long production timescale required to produce the best natural history film. Films that feature animal behavior are difficult to produce. Due to the unpredictable subject matter, the production of this type of natural history television in particular demands large amounts of money to be spent on location filming. “That requires endless days of shooting, high “shooting ratios,” lots of editing, slow motion work, computerized edit suites, and high definition cameras, which are very expensive” (Dyer). Most competitors of the NHU cannot support enough field time because of comparatively under funded budgets. Many BBC fifty-minute projects take two years to craft and large series

such as Planet Earth may take twice as long or longer. In contrast many of the films made by competitors such as German, French and American companies are produced within a much shorter timescale, often a year (Mark-Savoie). Stylistically the films of the American broadcasters are typically in sharp contrast to the British Victorian ideal to better one's self through education usually reflected in the didactic nature of both script and voice of God narration common to BBC documentary film. Although this style is arguably dated at times the scripts are well crafted, brimming with information and the formula successful. American broadcasters answer to advertisers and ratings, which has led to a much more commercial approach to nature film often sensationalizing and over dramatizing the natural world as evidenced by the Discovery series offerings of Shark Week (1987) and the current Whale Wars (2008).

One may argue that these non-NHU films are of good quality -- and indeed some are -- but to produce top quality nature films successfully and consistently requires significant amount of time, which is costly. The average fifty-minute BBC animal behavior Blue Chip film has a budget of approximately a half a million dollars. This size budget typically allows for six months of location photography. By comparison for the same type of film budgets of the main U.S. based cable broadcasters -- Discovery, National Geographic and the PBS Nature strand are rarely this high (Burns).

The funding and associated budgets are also the key as to why NHU films are attractive to co-production buyers. Foreign broadcasters can buy co-production

rights for transmission in their own territories for two NHU films for the same amount it would cost them to produce one lower quality film. By co-producing they have the benefits of editorial input and the BBC takes on all the risk associated with the production. With the injection of the co-production funds, NHU films receive a larger budget that is needed for extended field photography with the end film benefiting all parties.

### Development and Risk-Taking

In today's multi platform commissioning, a long documentary film production timeline is a plus. BBC executive Lisa Sargood notes, "Factual [programs], like natural history, history, and science tends to [take] longer in the researching and the filming. That gives you more planning time, which means that you can really look at the scope of the opportunity" (Anderson).

In both the development and production the public funding model allows NHU executives to encourage fresh thinking and innovation within production teams. As exemplified in The Private Life of Plants, it allows for the ability to take chances and creative risks. Alex Graham, a BBC alumnus of ten years and now a director of a major independent UK production company, agrees that the BBC is in a unique position because of its funding model.

The fact that the BBC is not directly answerable to the commercial market has bred an attitude of mind that makes it open to risk-taking. There are certain kinds of programming that just wouldn't get made without that financial freedom to innovate. The BBC is a benchmark, which forces everyone to raise their game (Fry).

### Birth of the Nature Blockbuster Series

The natural history genre has its share of blockbuster films that are very popular on both sides of the Atlantic. The BBC NHU was the first to produce these ambitious projects and they continue to lead in this area. These series are large budget productions, such as Life on Earth (1979), Living Planet (1984), Trials of Life (1989), Private Life of Plants (1995), Life of Birds (1998), Blue Planet (2001), Life of Mammals (2002), Life in the Undergrowth (2005), Planet Earth (2006) and most recently Life in Cold Blood (2008). These expensive productions are marketed as “event television.” They command the highest budgets and demand the longest production time. The BBC NHU is the only company worldwide that produces blockbuster series on this scale and with such consistent financial success. Filming for Life on Earth took place in 39 countries featured over 650 different species and involved over one million miles of travel (Sparks). Similarly, Planet Earth utilized 71 camerapersons (myself included), filmed in 204 locations in 62 different countries on all seven continents shooting more than 2000 days in the field. (Arnold) With a budget of over \$26 million, it is the most expensive natural history project ever produced (Sherwin). Planet Earth is predicted to earn more for the BBC than any other project to date with speculated gross earnings of \$40 million (Robinson). Keenan Smart, head of National Geographic NHU notes,

Thanks to the good old reliable UK license-fee taxpayer, the Beeb (BBC) has brimming, overflowing coffers that allow the BBC NHU to splurge on specials and epic globetrotting series like "Planet Earth". It is well-invested money making money, with very little competition in the high-end product being marketed.”<sup>4</sup>

The BBC NHU continues their tradition with the blockbuster series.

Now in post-production, Life, their most current offering, is a project encompassing ten one hour programs filmed at international locations.

Judging by past series it too should be a worldwide success.

## CONCLUSION

No other production entity has the history annual production output or successful track record of the NHU. Public funding has allowed the BBC NHU to become the world leader in natural history television. Its funding model provides significant advantages and is the key to the consistent success of the BBC Natural History Unit such as maintaining a skilled stable workforce, risk taking, innovation and as a result the production of the highest quality nature programming. In contrast PBS and other American commercial broadcasters do not have the funds in place for the significant investment required to produce the modern natural history blockbuster series. As a result the NHU persists in pushing the technical and artistic boundaries of the natural history genre.

## END NOTES

<sup>1</sup> United Kingdom: England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland

<sup>2</sup> “The BBC is paid for directly through each household TV license. This allows it to run a wide range of popular public services for everyone, free of adverts and independent of advertisers, shareholders or political interests. The BBC provides 8 interactive TV channels, 10 radio networks, more than 50 local TV and radio services, the BBC’s website, and the on-demand TV and radio service, BBC iPlayer. See a full list of BBC services. BBC World Service is funded by government grant and not the TV license fee. Profits from separate BBC commercial services help to keep the license fee low.” (BBC, British Broadcasting Corporation. License fee information from the BBC website, <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/info/licencefee/#information>>)

<sup>3</sup> The term of phrase “Blue chip” is attributed to former Natural History Unit Head John Sparks. "It just means basically that kind of film, you know, which has got no people in it. Lovely, natural history. Nature in the raw. Beautifully filmed. High production values, good editing, good photography that sucks you into a place". (John Sparks, interviewed 6/13/95 cited by Davies 1997)

<sup>4</sup> Smart, Keenan. “The Opening Shot”. Wild Film News. April 2006.

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