



NATURE IN FOCUS

A research on the state of nature programmes today
and its future challenges

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Summary

The aim of the *Nature in Focus* report is to provide topical information about the state of nature programmes in Finland and in the rest of the world and to find out what challenges, possibilities and new formats and contents the future will bring. The report is based on the views and practical suggestions of professionals working in the field. This information was collected through two surveys which were sent to nature film professionals from Finland and the rest of the world including filmmakers, funders, distributors and commissioners. In all, 94 people answered the survey. 59 of them were Finnish and 35 from other countries.

The results of the research show that while the Finnish professionals working with nature film production are talented and committed to their work, there is much to be done in terms of project management and funding. Lack of support and cooperation between filmmakers and their funders was mentioned as one of the main obstacles in nature film production. More international cooperation was also called for. On the other hand, filmmakers and other professionals seem to agree on the future directions of nature programmes: they would like to see more innovative nature films and they all showed also interest in new media.

New formats and contents were seen as keys to capturing today's audiences. Traditional nature programmes which pit humans against animals were seen as old fashioned. Films showing humans as part of the ecosystem and films about humans' relationship to nature were seen more appealing. In addition, the respondents felt that nature films should pay more attention to the current environmental problems, most obviously climate change, but also the loss of biodiversity and the extinction of species. Attracting and influencing the next generation of viewers through innovative programme formats was also seen important.

The changing media landscape sets new requirements for nature films. In order to adapt to these requirements, nature programmes must move towards new formats and contents that also make use of new media. This can be achieved through better communication and cooperation between nature film makers and funders from all over the world.

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1 Nature in Focus – Why, what, how and when

Nature is an integral part of our lives. It is the basis for our well-being, for our culture and for our economy. It is everywhere around us; even the most urban environments have their origins in nature. For Finns, nature has always held an exceptional meaning in everyday life. Finland is most of all known for its nature: the vast forests, the thousands of lakes, the beautiful archipelagos and the wild frontiers of Lapland.

Despite the inseparable relationships between people and nature, nature is little seen in Finnish film and television productions. What makes this fact even more peculiar is that audience research indicates that Finnish television viewers are fond of nature films. Unlike all other documentaries, nature programs are popular regardless of factors such as age, place of residence or social class. In other words, nature films appeal to a wide audience, from children to adults and from workers to academics.

Traditionally, film funding institutions have not been very active in supporting films about nature. They are not considered as artistically ambitious as other documentaries. It seems that filmmakers, commissioners and funders often forget that nature could also be seen as a metaphor for human life itself, and its social progress. In other forms of art, this metaphor has been prominent throughout their history – humans as part of nature and nature as part of humanity.

The *Nature in Focus* project was started to find answers for the following questions:

- **What** kinds of format and content should be developed for nature films, series and other programmes using elements of nature?
- **How** do filmmakers, commissioners, funders, distributors and other professionals see the state of nature films today and how do they assess its future?
- **What** should be done in order to increase the appreciation of nature films? **Which** way should the nature documentary be headed in order to become more appreciated?
- **Which** actions should be taken to make Finland a model country in nature film making?

The *Nature in Focus* project consisted of two separate surveys. One focused on describing the state of nature film making in Finland today, investigating its future potential and on finding out the needs and expectations of professionals in the field. This survey was sent to 87 people. Among them, 45 were commissioners, buyers and representatives of institutions and foundations (hereafter called Funders), while 42 were makers of nature films (hereafter called Makers). Altogether 59 people answered the survey. This gives a response rate of 68%, which is high for this type of survey. The results of this survey are discussed in Chapters 2 to 4.

The Finland-focused survey was completed by another one whose aim was to examine new contents and trends for nature program productions across the world. This survey was sent to 61 people, including commissioners, buyers, funders, distributors, filmmakers, festival representatives and researchers. 35 of them responded by the deadline. Their answers are discussed in Chapter 5.

The *Nature in Focus* project was coordinated by the Finnish production company DocArt, with backing from the Finnish Broadcasting Company (YLE), the regional development program for media and visual art (Polte), and the Finnish Cultural Foundation. The survey was conducted by Irjaleena Eriksson, Johanna Lampi and Petteri Saario, all of whom are active in nature productions in Finland.

This translation, by Juha Nurminen and Marja Ollila, is a summary of the original Finnish report. The quotations from the English responses are given as they were, with some modifications in square brackets. The quotations from Finnish responses are all direct translations.

2 Finland: talented filmmakers with budget issues

Finland's nature film scene is small but dynamic. More than a half of all Finnish respondents were active in a production at the moment of the survey. In addition, 43 out of 59 respondents believe that they will continue to work with nature films also in the future; however, fourteen of them, both Funders and Makers, said they did not know whether they would be involved in the future. This echoes the uncertainty of the profession.

The respondents thought that Finnish nature films are generally interesting. Finland's nature boasts many assets: the four seasons, the varying landscapes, the underwater world, and the diversity of species, from bugs to beasts. Nordic nature has not yet been completely covered in nature programmes, and many interesting stories of Finnish nature remain to be told.

Another positive characteristic of Finland's nature film scene is the high level of commitment from the makers, from passionate and recognized cinematographers to skilled editors and sound engineers. Finnish commissioners and funders were in turn given thanks for showing confidence in the Makers and allowing them to work in peace, which confirms that there is faith in Finnish filmmakers' talent. The filmmakers' enthusiasm with their work and their in-depth knowledge of nature were also seen as assets.

Despite the generally positive remarks, some criticism was also given to Finnish nature professionals. All in all, the number of people working actively with nature films is too small. Several respondents pointed out the lack of collaboration between the Makers, as well as the weaknesses of "one-man productions", where a single person assumes responsibility for every task from the beginning to the end. Such productions were seen as having no chance of international breakthrough. Other issues raised by the respondents included the lack of research, the relatively low level of expertise, and an unscientific and biased approach to the subjects. Clumsy screenwriting and poor direction were also mentioned as obstacles to high-quality results.

Nevertheless, the chief problems of Finnish nature films seem to be related to project management and resources rather than to the level of expertise of the Makers. The low technical quality, the use of old and cheap equipment, and excessively tight schedules were also mentioned. Due to the small scale of productions, Finnish filmmakers rarely have the occasion to participate in major projects, and they do not develop working routines in the same way as their counterparts in other countries

do. It is also obvious that Finnish nature films very seldom make it to the international film market because of an almost nonexistent distribution network.

2.1 *Little money, many projects*

Compared to other European countries, Finnish nature productions are characterized by low budgets. Most productions mentioned in the survey responses had a budget of 50,000 € or less. Bigger budgets mean fewer projects: a small number of series or feature-length nature films have had the biggest monetary backing. Not a single production with a budget over 500,000 € was reported.

One reason for the low budgets is that the majority of Finnish nature films are short, the typical duration being 30 minutes or less. This is due to the requirements of television channels: most of the program slots at the main broadcaster, the Finnish Broadcasting Company (YLE), are for 30-minute programmes, and shorter inserts with nature are also often included in longer magazine programs. This preference for shorter programmes may reflect a way of thinking where short length means better quality. Feature-length programmes are mostly shown during the festive seasons. In addition to television, nature programmes are screened in museums and in nature centres.

Another explanation for the low budgets is the limited funding. Budgets are often planned to ensure just enough funding for getting started with the production. The commissioners are probably aware of the risks related to low budgets but choose to ignore them in order to be able to fund as many films as possible. YLE is involved in most Finnish nature films in one role or another, while the commercial channels show nature programmes rarely and are not active funders. YLE also participates in international coproductions more frequently than the other channels.

3 What the Funders think

Finnish Funders make decisions guided by the requirements of their organization or network. In addition to the requirements of the slot and its profile, the filmmaker's track record, teamwork abilities and language (Finnish / Swedish) were mentioned as important factors. Overall, it seems that Funders pay more attention to high quality and audience expectations than to specific subjects or themes being covered in the film. They also appreciate a personal approach to the topic and a potential to appeal to international audiences.

Although the programme's subject is not the most important criterion for the Funders, they did mention some suggestions as regards the content of programmes. The Funders would like to see films that include new points of view and which analyze their subject on different levels. They felt that films should show viewers how nature relates to their everyday lives, describe the diversity of nature, analyse the relationships between different species – including humans – and provoke thoughts and emotions. These opinions are very similar to those obtained in the international survey, as will be seen in Chapter 5.

The European Funders thought very much along the same lines as their Finnish counterparts, as regards funding criteria and the quality of programmes. However, a major difference is that their budgets are considerably higher: between 300,000 and 500,000 € on the average. Perhaps because of this difference in the size of productions, European Funders tend to be involved in international coproductions more often than their Finnish counterparts.

4 What the Makers think

The responses to the Finnish survey confirm the conception that in a small country such as Finland, the nature film scene is run by a small number of people. Only a handful of professionals seem to be familiar with the whole field, whereas most Finnish nature filmmakers seem to only work with their own crew.

Financing is seen as the biggest challenge in making nature productions. Due to limited funding and means, most Makers are forced to take second jobs alongside nature film making. Economic demands of everyday life are seen as hindrances to professional development. Besides, the lack of financial resources hampers the purchasing of modern equipment and complicates building and maintaining international relations. Because of the economic problems, it is difficult to build careers in the nature film field. Some of the Makers had only participated in one nature film production. A small group of more active Makers had been involved in two productions per year on average over five years.

Building international contacts is also seen as a major challenge among them. The non-existent connections with foreign television and production companies, alongside the lack of domestic cooperation with other Makers are considered as the main barriers to career development. Finding the right partners early in the planning phase is seen as an essential requirement for a successful production.

In summing up the respondents' answers, the following questions arise:

- How can the making of nature films be turned from a hobby into a professional activity?
- How to generate new ideas and approaches that could result in first-rate films made by newcomers and more experienced professionals together?
- How to find openings for productions which are both educational and artistically challenging?

Some of the Makers feel that their relationships with the commissioners and buyers are problematic one - communication does not seem to work between them. Therefore the Makers would like to have more cooperation with them, especially when starting a project. Some respondents believe that the commissioners and buyers lack the will to cooperate with domestic filmmakers. The Makers

wish that the television company representatives paid more attention to local filmmakers making local films.

The Makers feel that their future prospects are uncertain. This is partly caused by the commissioners and buyers' limited knowledge of the potential of new media. This makes it difficult to approach them with novel and innovative productions. Financing is becoming increasingly problematic, and finishing 1.5–2 productions per year, which is the minimum requirement for making a living, is more difficult now than before.

4.1 *What should be done*

Nature film Makers are looking for various kinds of support. First in the list is sufficient long-term financing and support for finding potential new financiers. In the future, Makers would like to have good contacts with both financiers and distributors at home and abroad.

Mentoring and work-in-progress training programs are mentioned as concrete solutions for support, especially during the initial stages of a project. Expanding the cooperation between the companies active in the field of nature filmmaking is also seen as a potential booster for motivation and encouragement. In addition, nature film festivals and workshops are seen as fruitful meeting places with others in the field. Better contacts with other filmmakers are also considered important.

Many of the respondents would prefer to make films about subjects they have developed themselves but unfortunately this is seldom the case. The Makers are often compelled to work with ideas which are given to them by the commissioners and buyers. Adventurous nature films that combine fact and feeling are projects that the Makers would most willingly participate in. Other favored subject matters are films that philosophically ponder the relationship between people and nature and films that show a humanely positive outlook on nature. In general, the Makers would like to make films which are entertaining but educational and which help people to notice the nature around them.

4.2 *New channels, new media*

The heyday of digital media affects nature programmes like other genres. Most likely, it will create new ways of distribution and a greater availability of programmes. Many of the respondents believed in a cross-platform approach: different content and formats will be used in different media and channels for different target groups.

Many respondents, in particular Funders, saw the internet as an important channel for nature documentary distribution in the near future. It allows Makers to reach their audience directly without intermediaries, opening the door for productions that would not fit in the traditional distribution channels. It also creates an opportunity to reach new audiences. However, television is still seen as the most important channel by both the Funders and the Makers. Movie theatres and mobile media are seen as the least appealing channels for nature films, although the respondents from abroad recognized opportunities in these technologies as well.

5 International survey: The nature programmes of today and tomorrow

The respondents of the international survey were asked to share their views about nature programs today and in the future. When looking at today's nature films, the majority – 75% – of the respondents saw considerable room for improvement. Nature films tend to follow the same format. Some of the respondents went as far as criticizing the entire genre: *“The genre has become very staid. We need different styles to expand what audiences think of... the environment.”*

In the future, the respondents hope to see more experimental films with a variety of approaches. Such development might be slowed down at least at first by the commissioners' unwillingness to take risks and try anything new, but in the end this kind of diversity would serve the different and fragmented audiences of the future. Judging by the responses to the survey, the limited range of current styles is not due to a shortage of new ideas. This final chapter lists some of the nature stories that we may see in the future.

5.1 From listing the facts to evoking emotions

One common criticism of current nature output is that they resemble schoolbooks in motion pictures. The archetypical nature films are fact-laden, use a scientific approach, and address adult audiences. This has become the “patent formula” of the genre. More imaginative approaches towards nature would help revitalize it. Programmes could be scientific, quasi-scientific, artistic, or idealistic; they could show nature through the eyes of a bird, a fly, an old person, or a child. They should evoke emotions, grab their audiences, create a sense of intimacy, offer experiences, and make their audience laugh.

5.2 Forget reality shows on animals

More than half of the respondents expressed their weariness with nature programmes that pit humans and animals against each other. This sensational “jaws and claws” approach was sharply criticised as giving a false picture of the animals' characters. Several respondents were irritated with programme hosts who engage in close and dangerous contact with animals in front of the cameras. This “*crocodile wrestling*” trend, as one of the respondents put it, may result from the growing reality show trend all over the world. Another motivation for these programmes is the networks' desire to attract young audiences. As the future custodians of the planet, young people are clearly an important target audience. Therefore it is all the more important to find more attractive ways of

appealing to them. One respondent suggested making programmes based on “*visions of the future tailored to the young people’s interests (food, climate, energy...)*.” Such visioning and showing of alternative scenarios could be one way to style new types of programmes.

5.3 *Evolving climate story*

As one might expect, climate change and its consequences were mentioned as one of the most important topics for today’s and tomorrow’s nature programmes. They should analyze global warming and its impact on different ecosystems – particularly in the Polar Regions –, on biodiversity, as well as on local environments, and human cultures. The current boom of climate-related topics is expected to persist in the future. In order to prevent fatigue, programmes must be innovative and find new angles on the subject. One of the respondents suggested approaching climate change in the spirit of the popular *Mythbusters* series!

5.4 *Beyond the favourite species*

Most nature programmes focus on a few favourite species, such as predators and big mammals. This gives a narrow view of nature’s incredible diversity. There is clearly room for films with a more holistic approach that would describe nature as an intricate web of relationships and connections, placing individual species in a wider context. Future programmes could also use as their subject some of the species that have been often neglected including reptiles, invertebrates, and amphibians. Especially important is to show stories focusing on endangered and extinct species.

5.5 *“Nature and I”*

To balance the tendency to portray nature and humans as separate categories, several respondents hoped to see more programmes focusing on human relationships with nature. In the past, the individual-centered approach has meant adopting the viewpoint of a “hero”: a researcher, a gamekeeper, or an environmentalist, who challenges human abuse of nature. The respondents called for a wider variety of perspectives and for bringing ordinary people into nature documentaries. In this way, local “backyard” environments and familiar domestic species could be introduced to nature programmes, as was done in the BBC’s *Springwatch* series, which has succeeded in arousing people’s interest in local nature. Indigenous people were cited as particularly interesting protagonists, as their ways of life are often based on a deep understanding of their environment.

5.6 People and nature: humans as part of the ecosystem

Beyond the individual approach, there is also demand for programmes showing wider connections between culture and nature. Instead of “*see[ing] wildlife as isolated from people*”, more programmes are needed that “*balance human beings, animals, and the environment in equal importance*”. The ecological angle – reflecting on our position on the planet and impact on it – will become more prominent. In this context, it would be important to show nature as it is now. Nature programmes tend to be shot in national parks, zoos, and other protected places which gives a biased view of the state of the environment.

5.7 Calls to action and giving encouraging examples

It is often thought that nature films inspire their audiences to protect nature – but is this really the case? Some of the respondents wished or expected to see more films that would take a clear position towards their subject and invite people to take action instead of giving neutral information, with an aim of genuinely changing people’s attitudes. The campaigning approach should, however, avoid being overly pessimistic. One of the respondents pointed out that placing guilt on people does not inspire them to act. Instead, programmes should propose solutions while maintaining a critical approach. Suggestions are needed e.g. for effective nature protection, for the restoration of destroyed habitats, and for personal action that can make a difference.

5.8 More room for nature – new formats and contexts

Nature-related topics are commonly seen as the exclusive domain of the natural history genre. This may derive from the kind of thinking where nature and human culture are seen as opposites. However, as suggested in many responses, nature and people belong together. For this reason, nature-related topics should not be restricted to nature films. They would quite naturally fit into many programme types: news, feature films, economics programmes, talk shows... In other words, nature could be included in almost any kind of TV programme. It is however vital to make sure that nature is a fully functional part of the content and that it is not marginalised. Speaking about nature in an appreciative tone in new arenas would also bring information about nature to audiences that are not already interested in nature. In times like today, when vast changes are taking place in the environment, nature should be part of our everyday media.

6 Conclusions

This study set out to find answers to four distinct questions: **what** formats and content should be developed for nature films, **how** do Makers, Funders, Commissioners, Distributors and other professionals see the state of nature films today and in the future, **which direction** should the production of nature films take and **what** actions should be taken to make Finland a model country in natural history productions.

The results of the *Nature in Focus* study show that new thinking and new formats and content are required for nature film productions to adapt to the changing media landscape. The problem with today's output is that nature programs tend to use a uniform, schoolbook-like approach, portray people and nature as opposites, and focus on too few species. In addition to technical quality and good stories, nature films should have human depth and be close to nature. A wider variety of perspectives would give the genre a boost. Films should evoke the audiences' emotions and make them reflect on their own relationship with nature.

In this time of ecological problems and nature in crisis that our Earth is currently going through, it is important to try to influence people through nature films, and to inspire them to care for nature. In the end, this would result in new audiences for nature programs.

The Finnish nature film field is a small but vibrant one. The scarcity of resources and slots is a discouraging factor for new filmmakers, but on the other hand, Finnish professionals are passionate in their work. Increasing international cooperation is seen as a significant challenge for the natural history field in general. More financial, technological and emotional support was called for by the Makers, especially at the start of a new project. In Finland today, there are talented and motivated professionals working hard to make nature films. Encouraging them to take up new projects and new approaches to nature could provide a major boost for the whole field. This could in turn create more interest towards nature films in general.