

Ocean

Behind *the Scenes*

HOW THE PROFESSIONALS SHOOT NATURE

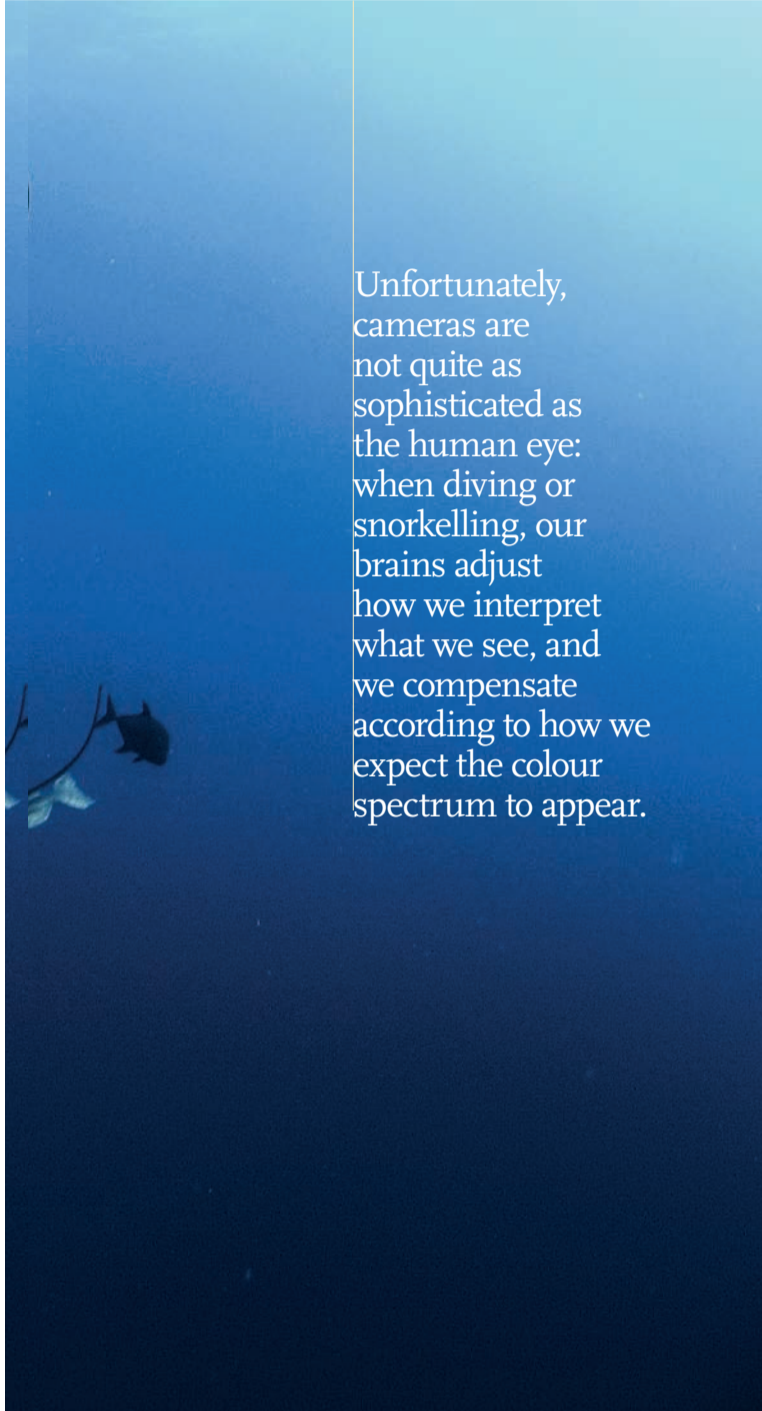


▲ This videographer had the experience of a lifetime with a manta ray in the cold waters of the North Pacific, where the mantas are famous for being huge and also extremely friendly.

► Catching the perfect light for filming a sequence may involve starting around dawn and dealing with less than favourable weather.

It is almost impossible to appreciate the lengths – and depths – that underwater camera crews go to. But for anyone who has taken in the beauty and artistry of an underwater documentary series, it is fascinating to know a little about the challenges of shooting moving pictures beneath the surface of the ocean. Indeed, cruising the tropical seas of Asia and the Pacific is an unforgettable experience for the few who can afford to do it. However, for those of us without the budget to enjoy this firsthand, the only way we can capture a glimpse of these areas is through nature documentaries and travel films.

The production time for shooting nature films can be impressively long, and even more so when it involves underwater filming. Camera operators have limited filming time due to increased nitrogen uptake at depth; they must



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Text & Photos
SIMON BUXTON

Getting to a location can be a logistical nightmare. An “A-roll” camera – the primary, highest quality filming equipment – can weigh up to 50 kilogrammes. Add to that diving equipment, backup cameras and topside filming equipment, and you have a recipe for excess baggage charges and stress at the airport. Then, on location, boat and guides must be chartered for the shoot and it can often take days or weeks to get to the chosen filming spot. This is all before the “work” has begun.

Once at the chosen site for filming, a subject which is at depth needs to be found in a location that is conducive to filming, or if it is a surface-dwelling marine species, then it must be around at a time of day when the sun is in a favourable position for shooting. All of these factors make filming on a schedule a matter of perseverance and stress-testing. The knowledge of having to achieve certain goals in a one- or two-hour period can really make the blood pressure rise! Depending on the budget of the production, the scriptwriter and/or creative director may be on location. If they are not, the same sequence may have to be shot multiple times from many different angles to ensure that when the footage arrives on the cutting room floor, there is a sequence that fits with the producers’ vision for the final product.

These days, post-production of footage takes place on powerful computers. In addition to cutting the clips into sequences, and then arranging the sequences to fit the story, each clip has to be digitally colour corrected to fine-tune the different colours experienced underwater. At depth, the full spectrum of light isn’t available; once approximately below 10 metres, the red end of the spectrum is absorbed rapidly by the water column – causing a blue cast in the footage.

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be wary of staying down too long because of the ever-present risk of “the bends”. Filming a cohesive one-minute sequence can take weeks when you take into account depth, currents, water conditions, in-water visibility and available light – not to mention finding a co-operative subject.

The first stage of filming a documentary begins with the creation of a script. Once that is in place, a creative director will assemble a shot-list and set of sequences for the camera operators to film on location. Certain behaviours may only occur once annually for just a few hours, so there must be adequate preparation to ensure that there are no mistakes or equipment malfunctions. An excellent example of a fleeting phenomenon is coral spawning, which happens on only one night a year – and may not even occur at all.





Did you know

Do It Yourself!

Making a finished product takes a great deal of time and effort, but there's no question that it's extremely rewarding. Although shooting underwater scenes is rather involved, shooting nature out of water is something you can try your hand at without necessarily requiring all the fancy gear that professionals use. It's a great way for a family to learn something new together and get out into nature for one day a week.

- Simple, decent quality digital video cameras are quite affordable; patience and a good eye are the more important ingredients.
- Find an interesting subject or habitat in your local area – birds nesting in the park; the forest across town; somewhere on the coast.
- Spend an afternoon observing the wildlife in your chosen location and think of a story. Read up on your subject and start scripting and “storyboarding”.
- Once you have a plan, go out and shoot some video in your free time. Over the course of a few weeks or months, you should be able to collect enough shots to start putting together your clips on a computer.
- Nearly all the techniques you will learn on land can be applied underwater at some time in the future.

cameras, we can adjust the “white balance” – as you would with a digital still camera – but for professional productions it is preferred that these adjustments are made manually instead of letting the camera “decide” how the subject or scene should look. For that reason, editing and “post” can take a year or longer in the production house, and depending on the distribution plan and rights, it may take several years from the first shooting session to the final airing.

Shooting underwater nature films is a time-consuming and costly business. When one compares the profitability of nature documentaries to other kinds of programmes that television stations and networks broadcast, it is a wonder that they are made at all. Still, as much as their monetary worth to television networks might be relatively minor, their educational value cannot be underestimated. More importantly, nature films play the crucial role of inspiring viewers to do their part to preserve the beautiful, fragile ecosystems that are brought to our screens. ■

SIMON BUXTON, a graduate of the Marine Biology/Zoology department (Liverpool, UK), spent his educational time focussing on studying subjects such as Oceanography, Fisheries Biology and Marine Ecosystems. His final year specialised in the bioaccumulation of pollutants in marine ecosystems. Simon is currently based in Asia where he runs photographic seminars and workshops aimed at underwater photographers. www.buxtonphotographic.com