

NATURE CALLS

Following the global success of *March Of The Penguins*, animal films are the hot new genre. But is there a market for theatrical wildlife documentaries?

MELANIE RODIER
reports

From meerkats to elephants, turtles to polar bears: in the post *March Of The Penguins* marketplace, a host of animal-based nature documentaries are trying to recreate the magic of a film that grossed \$77m in the US and picked up the best documentary Oscar in 2006.

And the theatrical wildlife documentary boom shows no sign of slowing. Even with a range of major features in the works (see sidebar, right) Cannes this year demonstrated that distributors are still hungry for new projects.

ContentFilm International closed a raft of deals on new project *Elephants Of The Okavango*, about a family of African elephants crossing the desert to reach the wetlands of the Okavango Delta. Meanwhile, distributors on the Croisette also circled Nick Stringer's UK documentary *The Turtle's Song*, about a loggerhead turtle and her journey from a beach in Florida.

Penguins may have uncovered a potentially huge market for ambitiously mounted wildlife pictures, but it remains to be seen whether that success can be emulated by a pack of documentaries. Sophokles Tasioulis, one of the producers of *Earth*, a forthcoming feature version of hit BBC series *Planet Earth*, believes the trend will continue but could edge towards smaller films.

"There's room for two or three natural history movies a year, not 10 or 12. It's important not to damage the market by doing a project that isn't right for cinema. If we have one viewer saying, 'Could we have watched that on TV?', we've failed."

He suggests one of the reasons behind the growing interest in theatrical wildlife projects is an ageing cinema-going demographic. "The over-50s don't go to the cinema to see *Spider-Man*," he says. "But they're used to going to the cinema. They have time and money to experience something new and fun."

The development of hi-tech cameras and

advances in exhibition, particularly 3D, have also increased theatrical interest.

THINKFilm's Mark Urman, the US distributor of *The Story Of The Weeping Camel* insists that nature films only work theatrically if the story is right. "It's not about finding cute creatures on four legs," he says.

Joe Oppenheimer, producer of BBC Films' Weinstein-backed *The Meerkats* says: "Natural history documentaries are about the richness of photography and the immersion in another world." The cinema, with its big screen and dark room, "feels like their natural home".

This migration to cinema means broadcasters such as the BBC — internationally recognised for its TV work in the area — are now looking at the synergy between television and theatre. Inspired by the success of *March Of The Penguins*, BBC Films conceived *The Meerkats* as a theatrical project, and plans to subsequently release it as a TV series (see case study, right).

Meanwhile, the BBC feature *Earth* shares some footage with the broadcaster's series *Planet Earth*, which has already been shown on TV in various territories, including the US. While the TV series is made up of 11 one-hour information-driven episodes, the film focuses solely on three characters. The combined budget of the film and TV series is \$47m, with \$15m for the feature.

Tasioulis points out that a related TV series can make it easier to attract backers to a costly nature documentary feature. "We needed the TV series to be greenlit first before we seriously started thinking of raising money for the movie," Tasioulis says. "Without the series the movie would not have existed, and without the movie the series would not have looked as spectacular. It's a symbiotic relationship."

Berlin-based Greenlight Media, which co-produced *Earth* and is handling all rights, is coordinating sales with BBC Worldwide, both to

respect the broadcaster's existing relationships on the TV side and to co-ordinate theatrical and TV windows. In Spain, for example, the series will be shown on pay-TV, then the film will be released on DVD, and finally on free-TV. In France, the feature will first be released theatrically and then shown on TV. The movie will roll out theatrically in France, Germany, Spain, Switzerland and Greece in October, and in early 2008 in Japan.

"We see the TV series as an 11-hour promo for the movie," Tasioulis says, pointing out that the series was fact-based and the feature is driven by character. "Nobody buys cinema tickets to learn."

The long migration

Potential revenues from TV sales and theatrical release can be great, but the journey to the screen is often an arduous one. Film-makers agree there is a lot at stake when making a nature documentary. *Earth* took five years to make, and Luc Jacquet spent 13 months in the North Pole filming *March Of The Penguins*.

"The most inspiring moment was when we knew we had the material after 13 months," admits Emmanuel Priou, one of the three producers of *March Of The Penguins* along with Christophe Lioud and Yves Darondeau.

Tasioulis adds: "Half our budget [for *Earth*] went on failure, but we'd factored that in. It's quite normal in natural history. You send a crew out and they return after a few weeks or months empty-handed, since they did not get the behaviour we wanted to film. You cannot do a nature documentary for cinema in three months. If you want killer shots, you must be prepared to spend a long time there."

Producers across the board agree the main thing driving them on while shooting in extreme locations — and the ultimate success behind nature documentaries as with any dramatic feature — is the story.

"We were never crazy about animals but Luc Jacquet had everything inside him when he pitched us his project," says Bonne Pioche's Christophe Lioud. "The project had all the things we were looking for — challenge, potential of story, and a fantastic director."

But the expense and logistical difficulties can make the financing of a nature documentary difficult. "I believe that unless you're a well-established nature film director/producer, it is still very difficult to finance nature documentaries," says Linda Saetre, who oversees business development at Bonne Pioche's New York office. ■

TOP 10 WILDLIFE DOCUMENTARIES

Film	Year	w'wide gross us\$
1 <i>March Of The Penguins</i>	2005	127m
2 <i>Deep Sea 3-D</i>	2006	40.7m
3 <i>Winged Migration</i>	2001	32.3m
4 <i>Bugs!</i>	2003	28.9m
5 <i>Dolphins</i>	2000	27.4m
6 <i>Galapagos</i>	1999	26.2m
7 <i>Deep Blue</i>	2005	19.3m
8 <i>Africa's Elephant Kingdom</i>	1998	13.5m
9 <i>Aliens Of The Deep</i>	2005	12.7m
10 <i>Microcosmos</i>	1996	7m





CREATURE FEATURES

Forthcoming nature documentary projects

Animals In Love (Fr)

Dir: Laurent Charbonnier
French director Charbonnier, who was the DoP on the Oscar-nominated documentary *Winged Migration*, makes his directorial feature debut on the \$10m *Animals In Love*, which explores courtship and love in the animal kingdom. Produced by Jean-Pierre Bailly for MC4 Productions, *Animals In Love* will start rolling out later this year. Philip Glass composed the score.
Int'l sales: M6 DA/SND, (33) 1 41 92 68 66

Arctic Tale (aka Call Of The North) (US)

Dir: Sarah Robertson
National Geographic Films, which was behind Oscar-winning documentary *March Of The Penguins*, has partnered with Paramount Vantage on *Arctic Tale*, which follows the life cycle of a polar bear and a walrus. Director Sarah Robertson worked on TV series *Nature*. The narration is written by Mose Richards and Linda Woolverton, whose credits include *The Lion King* and *Mulan*. Queen Latifah is narrating. Premieres at the Silverdocs (June 12-17).
Int'l dist: Paramount Vantage, (1) 323 956 2000

Earth (UK-US)

Dir: Alastair Fothergill
Following their collaboration on the hit TV series and feature documentary *Deep Blue*, the BBC and Greenlight Media team up on *Earth*, which follows three animal families' migration. *Earth* was made in parallel with the *Planet Earth* TV series. Both are directed by Alastair Fothergill. Lionsgate has US, UK and Australian rights.
Int'l dist: Greenlight Media, (49) 307 262 000

The Meerkats (UK)

Dir: James Honeyborne
BBC Films has joined forces with the BBC's Natural History Unit for the first time to make *The Meerkats*, looking at one family's daily fight for survival. James Honeyborne, a producer with the unit, is directing with Trevor Ingman and Joe Oppenheimer producing. The film is slated for a September 2007 theatrical release, with a subsequent play on TV.
Int'l sales: The Weinstein Company, (1) 646 862 3400

Elephants Of The Okavango (UK)

DoPs: Richard Jones, Martyn Colbeck, Mike Holding
Produced by UK-based Waterstone Westwood, the film follows a family of African elephants as they cross 300km of desert to reach the wetlands of the Okavango Delta, focusing in particular on the youngest of the group, an eight-week-old calf, and her mother. Wildlife veterans Richard Jones, Martyn Colbeck and Mike Holding are DoPs on the film, which is in pre-production. ContentFilm has already made a number of sales on the project, including Germany, France and Latin America.
Contact: ContentFilm, (44) 20 7851 6500

The Turtle's Song (UK)

Dir: Nick Stringer
Sold by Germany's Sola Media, the film tells the story of a loggerhead turtle who is born on a beach in Florida, rides the Gulf Stream all the way to the frozen north and ultimately swims around the entire North Atlantic to Africa and back to the beach where she was born. The documentary is in production and directed by Emmy winner Nick Stringer. The UK's Film And Music Entertainment and Big Wave are producing the picture, which will be delivered in November 2007.
Contact: Sola Media, tel: (49) 711 479 3666

CASE STUDY THE MEERKATS

Billed as a coming-of-age tale, BBC Films' *The Meerkats* is an attempt to mount a resolutely big-screen experience. **MELANIE RODIER** reports

Now in post-production, James Honeyborne's *The Meerkats* is the first theatrical nature documentary from the UK's BBC Films.

Co-financed by The Weinstein Company (TWC), the film is a collaboration with the BBC's Natural History Unit, the broadcaster's acclaimed department which has had plenty of experience in the field, including features such as *Blue Planet* and the upcoming *Earth*.

"At BBC Films, we'd been talking with the natural history department about ways to work together on a documentary," says producer Joe Oppenheimer. "It was the success of *March Of The Penguins* that pushed us. We were thinking about animals that would pull people in. People loved penguins, as they walk on two legs and have an anthropomorphic quality," he says, pointing out that meerkats have the same 'human' feel. "They're very charismatic, characterful mammals. They have fascinating parallels with humans. Physically, their behaviour, how they work as a family unit."

Oppenheimer suggests that meerkats have been seen often on TV, but they have never been shown in context. "Usually, you just see how they interact with each other, but you never see what their neighbourhood is like too."

In the film, audiences will be able to observe the wild meerkats interacting with rhinos and giraffes.

Honeyborne, an experienced wildlife documentary film-maker, and Oppenheimer wrote a treatment where they explored the general behaviour of meerkats and looked at what might happen if they filmed them.

The Meerkats started production in November last year and shot for several months with multiple cameras in South Africa in the Kalahari desert, on the largest private reserves in the country.

"It's all about holding your nerve,

constantly making decisions about calculated risk, trying to minimise the risk," Oppenheimer says of the filming. One particularly difficult moment was when a jackal moved into the meerkats' neighbourhood, making them skittish and difficult to film. But there were also highlights, such as capturing on film an eagle chick hatching in a nest.

Oppenheimer says that during the filming, it was essential to be aware of the difference between film and TV. "We filmed a lot of 35mm, in scope, which doesn't happen in TV. We were also trying to raise our game in sound and take it to the next level," he says.

Last year the film-makers cut a two-minute promo and took it to Cannes, where it generated much interest. TWC came on board as a co-financier and international distributor.

"The Weinsteins had been keen to do a documentary for a long time. They have a very eclectic mix of films. This type of nature documentary was a particular passion for Harvey. He seized on it happily," says Oppenheimer.

He prefers not to disclose the budget — which he describes as "more than has ever been spent on a film like this before, but still equivalent to a low-budget drama."

The film is planned to start rolling out theatrically around the world in September. It will then be screened on TV.

Oppenheimer counts Japan and France as potentially some of the biggest territories. The producers hope *The Meerkats* will match the box-office success of Luc Jacquet's film but they are not pitching it as the next *March Of The Penguins*.

"We want to sell it as its own thing," he says.

At the end of the day, it's a "family film about a cute hero surviving against the odds", Oppenheimer says. "It's closest to a coming-of-age tale for kids."

'It's about holding your nerve, constantly making decisions to minimise the risk'

Joe Oppenheimer, producer

Earth was shot in parallel with BBC TV series *Planet Earth*; (below) *March Of The Penguins*



'There's room for two or three natural history movies a year — not 10 or 12'

Sophokles Tasioulis, producer, *Earth*



The first theatrical documentary from BBC Films, *The Meerkats* is co-financed by The Weinstein Company