

Disney's secret weapon: Canadian Arctic footage in new doc 'Oceans.'

BY CTC NEWS STAFF

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Five minutes. That's the sum total of the Arctic footage in DisneyNature's new eye-popping, globe-spanning documentary "Oceans," released on Earth Day (April 22, 2010). But those Arctic scenes provide some of the biggest "Hey, Martha!" moments in the film. They show Canada in ways no one has ever quite seen it before. Or maybe they just confirm stereotypes: Canada's North is some kind of magic. Even our marine mammals are really, really nice.

Lots of people are talking about the walrus segment. We see a mama walrus, under and around bobbing curtains of ice, teaching her pup to swim. Gently she supports him to help keep it afloat. She tenderly enfolds him in her huge flippers. For a second you forget she's a two-ton carnivore who could chomp the cameraman in half like a Cheese Nip. For that instant, she is all goey maternal love.

"Walrus are not only potentially dangerous, but the mothers tend to be protective of their young. So finding one, in clear water, that keeps doing her thing naturally, was pretty incredible."

That's Graham Dickson speaking. He's the founder of Arctic Kingdom Marine Expeditions, a Canadian tour and expedition company based in Toronto, ON, which helped exclusively organize and support the Arctic portion of the film. The scene was filmed in the Canadian territory of Nunavut, just off Cobourg Island, which is about halfway between the south shore of Ellesmere Island and the north shore of Devon Island. The crew hung around for a month there, amid the calving glaciers, to get that one shot.

Arctic Kingdom is an outfit that Dickson started in 1999, when he was only 23. (Precocious? He was a diving master while still in high school. At U. Penn he founded a dive club that ran dive trips for a couple hundred students, and he funded an Ivy-League education that way.) Arctic Kingdom has worked with groups like National Geographic, Outdoor Life, the national broadcasters of Britain, Germany, Korea, Spain, France, Brazil—heck, pretty much all the big documentary makers, helping them to get "the get."

The secret of its success? Two words: local knowledge. "Capturing that walrus footage," Dickson says, "took the support of the community of Grise Fiord."

See, Dickson has learned that when you're filming wildlife in the world's most remote corners, you're a piker—no matter

how many expeditions you've put together. There's a group that knows way more than you do. They know because for generations they have observed and absorbed the rhythms of the animal migrations, the complicated calculus of weather change and pack-ice movement, the dozen different ways that that ice can break up. That group is the Inuit.

"They have the strongest connection of anyone to the wildlife," Dickson says. Roughly half of Arctic Kingdom's field personnel team comes from the local native communities. "We work not only with youth but with very old elders who don't speak English. We're a 'southern' company that has spent enough time in the North to actually know some Northern ways. We bring the sophisticated logistics, but we still plug into the local community network and everything the Inuit hold near and dear."

Dickson, who has himself dived with every large Arctic marine mammal, including polar bears and bowhead whales, speaks in terms of trying to "find the right animal at the right time." It's as if narwhals and belugas and walrus are individuals with unique personalities, not call-ups from central casting.

"The challenge is to find meaningful connections" between the animals, he says. Some animals are frankly too self-conscious; they're so aware of the dive crews that they aren't ... themselves. Sometimes, strangely enough, the most intimidating animals make the most fittingly Zen subjects. Like, for example, a big alpha-male polar bear, caught at a moment when he's well fed and king of all he surveys. Bears in such conditions "are almost blasé," Dickson says. "They don't care that you're around. They don't fear you. You're not part of their food chain."

Without the help of the locals, maybe Arctic Kingdom finds some of those Lana Turners at Schwabs. And maybe some of them let the cameramen near. But no way does it have the same level of success. That's the North's gift to the south.

What Arctic Kingdom gives those locals in return—and Dickson is more proud of this than anything else—is good jobs. Not just "well-paying" good but good good.

"This is employment that's actually consistent with their traditional knowledge and values," Dickson says. "It lets them spend more time on the land. And I know for a fact that exposing them to these tourism and film industries provides some hope for the future." In these communities, "we're building something together that hasn't existed before."

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Disney's secret weapon: Canadian Arctic footage in new doc 'Oceans.'

Nunavut, never-before-seen-footage and cute walrus make some of the film's best moments. Ontario-based Arctic Kingdom made it all happen.

by CTC News Staff 1 June 2010

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