

Meet Graham Dickson: essential Arctic tour guide

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NATIONAL POST

WEDNESDAY, APRIL 21, 2010

Nature documentaries used to be the domain of television, with the occasional wildlife film getting a straight-to-classroom release. These days, however, studios are spending big money on the genre.

Take today's release of *Oceans*, from DisneyNature. The film required a year of prep work, followed by two years of shooting and the largest budget for a feature-length nature film to date - all for the sake of capturing the finest possible images of walruses, whales and narwhals.

It may sound crazy, but considering that the studio's previous nature epic, *Earth*, pulled in over US\$100-million at the box office, the numbers more than add up.

But what does it really take to make this happen? Three things, according to industry experts: Money, talent and a heck of a lot of patience.

Graham Dickson can attest to this. He works at Arctic Kingdom, a Toronto-based organization that coordinates film shoots in some of the coldest, harshest places on the planet. He helped with all of the logistics for the *Oceans* crew, which included flying cameramen and their equipment from Paris to Ellesmere Island, setting up rails and dollies over top of glaciers and ensuring that nobody - from either the ground, aerial or underwater crews - was injured.

"We had a post-production black-out tent, a kitchen and dining area in another tent with water supply, medical facilities and an emergency physician on site," Dickson says. "Just to survive and run a camp in a remote location, let alone film there, requires a huge amount of equipment - it was approaching a military scale."

While the tents themselves were heated, on raised beds and large enough for people to stand up in, the exterior conditions weren't as cushy.

"Everything that we shot was obtained the hard way," he says. "We'd be setting up rails on the ice while looking out for polar bears, while also sending out a crew on a boat. The logistics to move that number of people, supply them, feed them, have enough fuel, choose the right locations, making it all safe -- it's gargantuan.

"Furthermore," he adds, "figuring out the right locations and right times to go is challenging. Climate change doesn't help, nor do shifting migration patterns and ice floes, so it can be very unpredictable."

Arctic Kingdom staff worked closely with local Inuit communities to get feedback on where animals were moving, what the weather was doing and so on, but certain environmental factors weren't cooperating: One issue that frustrated the crew to no end was water visibility. Murkiness doesn't translate well onto the big screen, no matter how great the shot is, so certain animals get less time in the spotlight.

"Snow melting and algae blooming are what make the water murky," Dickson says. "The one shot we just couldn't get was of narwhals in clear water. We put filmmakers in situations where they could feel them going by - almost into the thousands - so it wasn't for lack of being in the right place. But if the water isn't clear enough, it doesn't work, and producers won't compromise on it."

It's also difficult capturing an animal at precisely the right moment, such as when it bursts out of the water or gets devoured by a shark. Much of the filming process in *Oceans* required sitting around for hours, even days or weeks, hoping that a certain whale or polar bear would show up.

"That explains why there was over 400 hours of footage in the end," Dickson says. "What doesn't end up making the final cut is almost a story in and of itself."

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Published: Wednesday, April 21, 2010



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