‘Quiet on the set’ quickly dying out

Action-packed footage full of razor teeth and dagger claws devours TV airtime these days. As **Guy Hand** reports, the bold genre is driving films with lush landscapes, grand music and godlike narration toward extinction, and experts worry that science and natural history are being distorted.

Grand Teton National Park, Wyo.

THE robotic shark sat on a pedestal at the far end of the room, its metal teeth gleaming in the soft glow of the Jackson Lake Lodge's grand lobby. As a hundred-some wildlife filmmakers, producers and TV execs sipped cocktails, Phil Fairclough, senior vice president of production at the Discovery Channel, signaled his assistant to slide a whole raw salmon between the life-size shark's mechanical jaws. "So let's give you a little taste of what the shark can do," he announced into a microphone, then hit the "on" button.

This was Fairclough's way of building a buzz for shows like "Anatomy of a Shark Bite," one of the most popular wildlife films he's produced for the Discovery Channel. But as ragged bits of salmon arced through the air, some delegates at the Jackson Hole Wildlife Film Festival were not amused. They consider Fairclough and his flailing metal shark as a sign that things are not right in the business of natural history filmmaking.

Ever since a two-man film crew trailed Teddy Roosevelt through Africa in 1909, people have argued about the nature of nature films and how much education or entertainment, science or sensation they should include. Next month, at the Jackson Hole Wildlife Film Festival's Tech Symposium in Santa Barbara and the international Wild Screen festival in England, filmmakers will argue the subject with a sense of urgency. Ratings for nature TV have fallen in recent years as cable channels fracture audiences, and viewers tire of lions lounging on the Serengeti. Production companies have closed, filming budgets have dwindled, and people making wildlife films wonder how to bring audiences back. Fairclough, a bespectacled Englishman with a loud shirt and a boyish face, took the microphone at the festival's first seminar: "How to Stop Wildlife TV From Going Extinct."

"Traditional wildlife documentaries of the let's-show-beautiful-places-and-interesting-behavior type are an endangered species. ... People in the wildlife industry need to learn the lessons of nature. Adapt or die," he said. "And I don't have any trouble saying that. Of all the people, they should understand what happened to the dinosaurs."

Fairclough believes, as did many at the festival, that nature shows of old — films full of lush landscapes, grand music and godlike narration — have lost their luster and consume too much cash to thrive in today's lean TV environment. Fairclough likened his brand of wildlife film to the ship rat, which "is invasive, opportunistic and lives in the gutter. We at Discovery are trying to acquire a few more ship rats."

His soft-spoken delivery and slightly nerdish demeanor belied his combative nature. He enjoys rankling traditional filmmakers. "It's very easy to be seduced by the wonders of nature," he warned, "but I think we grow overly fond of nature at our own peril in TV."

He should know. Fairclough has worked in documentary television for 20 years, at the BBC, Granada Wild — one of Britain's largest wildlife production companies — and now at Discovery, where he oversees such programming as "Anatomy of a Shark Bite" and "American Chopper."

Such shows seem worlds apart from the Tetons, where cinematographer Shane Moore grew up and developed a conservation ethic that imbues his work. He's done more than 100 nature films for Discovery, PBS, National Geographic and the BBC. He thinks the drive for higher ratings puts too many industry people in charge. He believes love for nature is what wildlife TV needs.

Up before dawn, Moore lugged a tripod over his shoulder and looked for a place to set up in Grand Teton National Park. "I'm working on a grizzly bear film," he whispered as breath hung on the morning chill, "and what I need are a couple of shots of elk. They're a big food source for bears."

He set up behind a pine tree a few miles from the Jackson Lake Lodge, the film festival and Fairclough's shark. During the fall rut, bulls bugle and Moore swung his telephoto lens toward the sound. "You can just see that guy on the ridge way out there," he said as the elk moved into silhouette against a ruby sky. "He's probably a lone bull wishing he had some female attention."

As the elk moved closer, he brushed aside his blond hair and peered through the camera. "If we get lucky," he said, "just about the time the sun pops over the ridge, he'll be passing through here, and we'll get steamy, backlit bugling."

Fairclough said he loves nature too. He has a degree in zoology, but his loyalties lie with TV viewers, not filmmakers. He believes, with evangelical glee, that American audiences want more than beautiful, backlighted photography; they want their natural history shaken, super-sized, blood-soaked. His film "Anatomy of a Shark Bite," which aired last summer, is a case in point.

"In the course of making a program about bull sharks," Fairclough said, "we were present when a very unfortunate incident happened. The scientist who was talking to our presenter about bull sharks was bitten by a shark and in a few seconds he essentially lost his calf. It was almost accidentally captured on film, and we at the Discovery were faced with a dilemma: Do we use this, and if we use it, how can we use it?"

Not only did Fairclough use the gruesome footage, he used it and used it and used it.

"Yeah, we had 296 bites" scattered through the two-hour show, he said, replays of the unscripted bite mixed with shots of his snapping robo-shark. He paused, then added in the non-conflicted tone of a man whose cinematic approach is backed by hard numbers: "It might have been about 313 bites."

"Anatomy of a Shark Bite" was the highest-rated show of Discovery's annual Shark Week specials in the last 10 years. In July, Discovery aired "Anatomy of a Bear Bite," about Timothy Treadwell, a self-styled bear expert killed by a grizzly in Alaska, and "Anatomy of a Tiger Bite," about Roy Horn, the Las Vegas entertainer attacked by his white tiger.

Ken Hively *Los Angeles Times*

GO GATOR: *Steve Irwin's mix of gonzo naturalist and snappy commentator on "The Crocodile Hunter" is popular with viewers and producers alike. Production costs are lessened by focusing on human interaction with animals.*

But ratings reality hits Derek Joubert like an instant migraine. "[Fairclough] was proudly saying that he had 50 seconds of shark attack footage," said Joubert as he put a hand to his forehead, "and managed to turn it into a two-hour film. I would never say that with a clear conscience and be able to sleep."

Derek and his wife, Beverly, sat in a room off the festival lobby, looking at once aristocratic, outdoorsy and worried. They are two of the world's most renowned wildlife filmmakers, having shot a dozen traditional, high-budget films, spending months at a time in the African outback with lions, elephants and other imperiled species. They make films, they said, because they care about wild animals and have no desire to adjust their morals to the current cinematic mood.

"I have very strong feelings on this," Derek said as Beverly nodded. "While certain broadcast companies are turning $600-million to $700-million profits, they're spending less and less on decent programming. I have a real ethical issue with pumping out the lowest-common-denominator rubbish to audiences in yet another shark attack moment or some guy in tight shorts jumping on crocodiles. ... This is television that's just going to dumb down America and anyone else who watches it."

The new outdoor documentaries are cheaper to make. By highlighting on-camera personalities such as Steve Irwin of "The Crocodile Hunter," a popular program on Discovery's sister channel Animal Planet, or Lisa Ling of "National Geographic Ultimate Explorer," producers focus on snappy dialogue and human interaction with animals and less on the animals themselves. The result: fewer costly and often futile searches for cooperative critters, pristine habitat and glorious light.

Some filmmakers argue new programs cut scientific credibility as well as costs. Many wildlife experts question the science of "Living With Tigers," another popular Discovery show that Fairclough helped create. One of its filmmakers admitted faking the program's final scene, but Fairclough disputes that.

Fairclough said the new documentaries are not stupid but push the genre's stylistic envelope. He described his robotic shark as a tool of scientific research. Its jaws were copied from a bull shark down to its serrated steel teeth. "In building these mechanical sharks," Fairclough said, "the audience learns a great deal about sharks. It's a new way for us to look at animals."

And "because it involves welding, grinding, casting, molten metal and sparks," Fairclough said, it also attracts "beer-swilling 30-year-olds," as he jokingly called Discovery's core audience. That boys-with-toys formula works for such Discovery shows as "American

ROBERT GAUTHIER *Los Angeles Times*

KEEPING IT REAL: *Jacques Perrin's "Winged Migration," a big-screen hit with American audiences, undercuts today's convention in the wildlife film industry that birds and bugs don't sell in the United States. Big-toothed predators have been getting the lion's share of attention on film and television these days.*

"Chopper" and "Monster Garage," so Fairclough asked, why not for wildlife?

Most filmmakers celebrate the technical and stylistic innovations of the new nature films — from high-definition camera work to sophisticated computer graphics to edgy wildlife cinéma vérité. It's the content they find troubling. While sipping cocktails one evening at the lodge, a delegate from National Geographic admitted sheepishly that the channel dwells on predation and often shies away from subjects that might lower ratings or alienate advertisers — ecology, environmental issues and passive plants and animals.

Eugene Linden, author of nature and animal behavior books and the only nonfilm industry judge at the film competition at the Jackson Hole festival, lamented that too much emphasis is on big-toothed predators.

Linden sees this new cinematic world — where the rare is common and the common rare, where everything is eating everything else — as a place that portrays nature incorrectly. "I was kind of amazed and alarmed by some of the concepts in these films. In terms of the mosaic of nature, we weren't getting the interlocking parts," he said. "We were getting the spectacular scenes but not a lot on the simpler behaviors and the incredible laboratory that is evolution in creating animals that are the best at what they can be."

At the end of one of the festival's seminars, cameraman Timothy Barksdale confronted a panel of nature film executives and said, "There are 73 million bird-watchers in this country — one quarter of the entire country — and when I propose a bird film, the first comment I hear is, 'We're not interested in bird films.' "

"Birds are not entirely *non grata*," countered panelist Charles Foley of Animal Planet. He mentioned a show under consideration about a species of tern that poops on people who wander near the nest. "I think it's a really interesting defensive behavior," he said through a slight grin, "and people will want to watch it.

" . . . Discovery [and Animal Planet] should be credited with doing one thing very well, and that's knowing their audience," Foley said. "It's Billy banjo player who's deciding whether or not bird programs are going to be a mainstay."

But ratings don't paint a complete picture of the popularity of nature films. Venerable programs such as the PBS show "Nature" surpass some Discovery and Animal Planet wildlife programs by millions of viewers per episode. Such big-screen movies as "Winged Migration" and "MicroCosmos" don't jibe with the industry-held belief that birds and bugs don't sell. And BBC nature programs regularly sweep U.S. contests with content more cerebral than domestic fare.

BBC filmmaker Jeremy Bristow knows how hard it is to break through industry convention.

He knows his "Ape Hunters" show, a film about native Africans hunting wildlife to near extinction, isn't going to get American broadcasters drooling over rights. Bristow believes U.S. broadcasters want more frenetic fare than do Europeans and programs stripped of troubling subjects such as extinction, pollution and climate change, themes common in European nature television.

As Bristow walked down the steps behind the Teton Lodge, an executive from one of the networks congratulated him for winning the award for best environmental film the night before. "Thank you so much," he said, and asked with feigned seriousness, "Would you like to air it?"

"Well, Jeremy," she scolded softly, "you know it's really not right for us." Then she smiled and continued up the stairs.

"I do fear," said Bristow, "that there is a limited set of criteria being used by people who decide what natural history programs go on the air, a kind of straitjacket beyond which there is a really fascinating and interesting world out there and a fascinating story that isn't being told."

"Ape Hunters" has won eight awards since it was made, yet no North American channel has shown it. At the 2003 Jackson Hole Wildlife Film Festival, nine of the 12 top awards went to foreign or independent filmmakers. Of those nine, few if any of their films will likely make it to American living rooms.

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FIRST PERSON

Bring blood; I'll be there

ONCE we shared so much, "Shark Week" and I. For years, I awaited the Discovery Channel's 168 straight hours of reeking buckets of fish guts, shot-glass-sized serrated choppers, surly sea captains, poorly acted dramatizations and overly simplified moral lessons that make no sense. (Remember: Sharks don't kill people; people kill sharks who kill people.) It was a glorious mix of comfort and fear, knowing that for seven straight days I could hit "power" and score made-for-TV gore.

7:12 a.m.

Click! The Crocodile Hunter's Cro-Magnon predecessor, Rodney Fox, humanity's largest living chew toy, shows off the massive side wound donated by a white shark during a spearfishing tourney in 1963. Four hundred sixty-two stitches of baseball-like underbelly sure to twist your stomach in knots.

3 p.m.

Click! All right, cage match time! In this corner a 20-foot whitey flosses its teeth with 3-inch steel. And in the other corner — way down in the other corner — a cameraman panics in his wet suit.

2:34 a.m.

Click! It's Valerie and Ron Taylor, Australia's Siegfried & Roy, happily swimming with a school of blue sharks, the ocean a powdery sanguine as Valerie teases the beasts from inside a thin skin of titanium links. You want sexy? Try a chain-mailed blond with fish swinging off her forearm.

But then something went wrong. This season, the bite-light programming included a documentary focusing on *the least deadly sharks*. "Did you know that of the more than 500 species of shark only five are known to attack and that most specimens are under a foot long?" As a matter of fact, I did — I just don't care. Nobody does.

So perhaps the Discovery marketing team will benefit from the words of this one-man focus group: Shark freaks want to see VW-swallowing submarines that frappé lifeguard boats. That's not to say we don't care about the fate of these magnificent eating machines. We care more than anyone; it's part of the reason we watch the shows and inevitably absorb the lessons. But we don't tune in to be educated; we tune in to be scared. The TV-ratings sharks could learn something from their equally ravenous seafaring kin: If you want to start a feeding frenzy, make sure you bring plenty of blood.

— MATT WALKER