

Education or entertainment? Television's relationship with the oceans

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Of all television genres natural history is perhaps unique in its appeal. All countries, all cultures tend to value the natural world and wildlife television delivers it to their living rooms. It is cross-generational and, generally, uncontroversial. And, from a purely commercial point of view, it is easy to tweak for a new market; change the voice-over and you have a product to transmit. Natural history television at its best, then, reaches audiences of hundreds of millions across the world. Why then could natural history television not play the role of spokesman for the oceans, not help educate and inform the public about the oceans?

To a certain extent it can. A BBC production, Blue Planet, an eight-part series specifically on the oceans, was also sold to over 100 countries after it was first broadcast in 2001. Yet however as much as the makers of Blue Planet wanted the series to raise awareness of the oceans and to educate the public, to the commissioners at the BBC1 and to all the other buyers it was primarily entertainment. It was a series to compete against dramas, soap operas and football matches. Nothing illustrates that better than the fact that the environmental programme that accompanies the series in the United Kingdom was relegated to less popular time on a secondary channel.

Since then the battle for audience share has become even more intense. With the proliferation of channels, the major channels get smaller audiences for big event transmissions than they did a decade ago. However, at the same time it is evident that audiences will seek out good content through different media – by download from websites, on YouTube and through streaming to mobile devices. This allows the possibility of opt-in additional educational content being offered. Meanwhile as awareness of global warming has risen, so has the demand for information. Broadcasters can be a little bolder in putting natural history into an environmental – and educational – context.