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Local screening

Young Kenyan and Tanzanian film-makers are learning to make challenging movies for local audiences and shift their attitudes towards the environment. Report by Louise Tickle.



On the shores of Lake Bogoria in northern Kenya, six aspiring young film-makers have been learning how to shoot and edit footage on environmental topics. These range from the illegal poaching of endangered wildlife for export, to land erosion due to the disastrous drought now affecting their country.

It's part of a project being led by Dr David Harper, senior lecturer in Leicester University's biology department, together with renowned television producer Richard Brock, who made the BBC wildlife series *Life on Earth* and has worked with Sir David Attenborough on many others since. The idea is to train young environmental and biological science graduates from Kenya and Tanzania in the directing and camera skills required to make short natural history films that will be used in conservation education in local schools and villages.

Funded by a Darwin Initiative grant from the UK Department for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, the fact that these films are conceived, produced, directed, shot and edited by local graduates rather than by foreign film-makers will be crucial to their effectiveness in getting their environmental message across, says David Harper.



Wildlife documentaries made for northern audiences by western TV companies don't deal with the dilemmas faced by village communities in Africa as they interact with their surrounding environment in what is often a daily struggle to survive, he explains. "Our films, made for local audiences, have people in them that pupils can recognise and relate to. It means that an empathy is instantly created."

Jackson Kipkoech Komen, 28, is the education officer for Lake Bogoria National Reserve and is also being trained on the project. He says he has already noticed a difference in audiences' response.

"As an environmental education and community liaison officer, one of the methods of teaching we use is through awareness creation. However, we used films from other geographical areas which were sometimes irrelevant. When I used to show films made in other areas, people were never serious in watching," he explains. "They took everything to be unreal and thought that it was just television work. Since I have made my own films and shown them, communities appreciate [the issues] because they saw themselves, saw an environment they recognised and respected the opinions in the films."

Richard Brock, who is a trustee of the Elsamere Education Centre on the shores of Lake Bogoria where the workshops take place, notes that if a conservation officer in Kenya or Tanzania currently wants to use the immediacy of film to illustrate an environmental point, he or she tends to rely on one or two western wildlife documentaries. These typically last for 50 minutes – far too long to keep a young child's attention in a classroom setting, and just as unsuitable for showing to a packed and lively community meeting in a remote village.

By contrast, the short films made by the young film-makers-in-training are designed to run at between just three and 12 minutes. There is time for a proper discussion and – because they tend to deal with a single, highly salient point – local people are keen to chime in with their opinions.

It's all very well, of course, to have a cohort of trained-up and mustard-keen young film-makers pumping out short films that passionately expound upon the region's environmental problems. But the challenge is getting them seen in the most remote and poorly-connected parts of Africa.

This is where Richard Brock's work on finding novel ways of distributing the films comes in. "An extensive 'mix and match' library of 300 or so of these short films will be created for use across Africa," he says. "Educators could then use this film library to build, for example, a 'conservation curriculum' tailored to local children's environments that could run for a school year, or which could, perhaps, contribute to a community education project on the effects of forest clearing on the longer-term environmental health of a specific area."

In looking for alternatives to projectors – which require reliable power and dictate a certain format for the film showing – Brock is testing out options such as mobile phone screens, laptops and memory sticks.

The key to the success of the project, he says, is creating a big enough library of films covering a wide range of subject areas. With an extensive film resource, educators will be able to structure a bespoke teaching programme that is highly relevant to their audience. This November, Harper and Brock intend to invite a large gathering of all environmental and educational NGOs to show them the newly-created film- library, and display the various means of selecting, transporting and showing the shorts in the most remote locations.

A demand for more films will of course mean there's a need for more film-makers. There are currently just over 50 Kenyans and Tanzanians trained up, and by the end of 2009 another 40-odd will have attended the preliminary workshop. Sessions for the current batch of trainees are now being carried out by those Kenyans – the first group to be trained – who showed particular talent in directing and editing, overseen by the trainers who trained them. Once enough Tanzanians have been through the workshops, they in turn will train future participants, supported by their more experienced Kenyan colleagues.

This means, says David Harper, that when the Darwin Initiative funding runs out, "there is in place a network of local people who can make conservation films inexpensively for communities and NGOs."

And that, says Richard Brock, means that there will be a compelling visual medium through which educators in the most remote parts of Africa can inform communities of the effects of human actions. This, he hopes, will influence their decisions, which in part will help decide on the future of "the wildest and most splendid parts of the world we all depend on for our survival."

“Our films can change behaviour”

Elsie Kariuki, 30, from Nairobi, an environmental studies graduate employed as project officer for the organisation Community-based Biodiversity Conservation Films.

I previously worked for the Born Free Foundation, and was involved in the production and distribution of a Swahili docudrama about the illegal bush meat trade in Kenya. Mobile cinema was used to show the film to thousands of people living in bush meat ‘hot spots’. The aim was to educate while entertaining. The great reaction from audiences made me realize the power of film as a medium for promoting conservation.

In countries like Kenya where the environment is tightly intertwined with people’s daily lives, many take it for granted and see the environment as an endless resource. Conservation films are not very popular in Kenya: we were not brought up watching National Geographic or BBC natural history programmes and many people just don’t feel that connection within nature. The language used, the expressions, the style of presentation, may sometimes hinder the audience from really getting the message. I think that films made with a good understanding of the audience, and better yet, with personal experience of the subject matter, have the power not only to promote public awareness and interest in conservation issues but also to elicit changes in attitudes and behaviour.

I think the pressure on Kenya’s water resources is critical, from pollution caused by dumping waste into and close to rivers, to the clearing of forests in water catchment areas, the excess abstraction of water and human settlement and agricultural activities on riparian land.

There needs to be a mental shift: people need to realise that they themselves are often the cause of those problems. They must understand that our natural resources are not infinite, and that they must make a conscious effort towards the resources’ regeneration and sustainability.

I have recently made a series of short films on ecological survey methods in the Lake Natron Basin. In future I hope to get involved in bigger film projects and perhaps even collaborate with a local TV station to create a conservation-related series.

“People can tell their own stories”

Caroline Kang’ahi Lumosi, 25, an environmental science graduate from western Kenya works as a project officer for the Ecological Society for Eastern Africa.

In Kenya, environmental topics are not given much airtime. Very few journalists are willing to work on these issues, and those who do so are either foreigners or have the wrong motives, such as making money.

I am now learning how to simplify highly technical environmental information without distorting the

message, and presenting it in a way that children and community members can understand.

Kenyans have had a negative notion of films produced by foreigners – to them, the foreigner could not tell their story better than themselves. These films give a chance to local communities – and those affected by various environmental calamities – to tell their stories from their own point of view. They play a role in awareness creation, and through this, hopefully communities’ attitudes can be changed. We have already shown some of the films to schoolchildren and their response has been tremendous!



In Kenya, our natural resources – water, forest etc – are managed by the government. Communities have not been given the opportunity to be a partner in managing these resources sustainably. As a result there is wanton destruction, and a lack of an appreciation for the richness of our land.

It has been wonderful to be able to network with other conservationists who are passionate about film-making, and I will continue to partner with my colleagues to produce more short films. I hope to use this skill as a source of income and also to help other upcoming conservationists to use film to educate children and community members about the value of the environment they depend on.

“KENYA”

POPULATION 37 million

AVERAGE LIFE EXPECTANCY 53 years

AVERAGE PER CAPITA INCOME \$580



While 46% of the population live in poverty, more children are now in school, HIV and AIDS is falling and there is more access to clean water and sanitation. The UK provided £52.1m in aid in 2007/8 with a focus on education, governance and health and HIV and AIDS.

Find out more at

<http://www.developments.org.uk/articles/local-screening/www.dfid.gov.uk/kenya>

“TANZANIA”

POPULATION 40 million

AVERAGE LIFE EXPECTANCY 52 years

AVERAGE PER CAPITA INCOME \$400

Tanzania has been peaceful and stable since independence in 1961, despite having one of the widest ranges of ethnic and religious diversity in the world. In 2007/8 DFID provided £125m in aid to Tanzania, with a focus on governance, education and growth.

Find out more at

<http://www.developments.org.uk/articles/local-screening/www.dfid.gov.uk/tanzania>

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50 minutes is too long for children and communities – our films are 3-12 minutes.

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