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## **BBC Earth targets theatrical world**

### **Pubcaster's natural history arm has four features on deck**

By Adam Dawtrey

The hottest project at last fall's AFM was a \$65 million movie with no stars and two directors no one had heard of.

Bucking the prevailing mood of caution among buyers, "Walking With Dinosaurs 3D," a co-production between BBC Earth and Reliance Big Entertainment, sold out within four days of being launched by Reliance's sales arm IM Global.

Such boffo pre-sales for this big screen reboot of a 12-year-old BBC factual series were a strong endorsement of BBC Earth's decision to launch a concerted push into the theatrical arena.

BBC Earth, the natural history arm of BBC Worldwide, was set up two years ago to find new ways of exploiting the pubcaster's brand and expertise as the world's biggest producer of nature programming.

Managing director Amanda Hill and creative director Neil Nightingale (co-director of "Walking With Dinosaurs" alongside Pierre de Lespinois) quickly identified the big screen as a key area for potential growth.

They were encouraged by positive returns from the BBC's previous experiments with theatrical nature docs, "Deep Blue" and "Earth," both re-cut from epic TV series. Far from limiting their theatrical potential, that TV exposure only seemed to fuel demand in many territories, notably Germany and Japan. "Earth" became the third-most successful theatrical documentary ever, grossing \$92 million worldwide, behind only "March of the Penguins" and "Fahrenheit 9/11."

"Both 'Deep Blue' and 'Earth' were in profit before they left the cutting room, so we knew that audiences want to see natural history on the big screen, and we could do it in a way that was low risk for us," Hill says.

BBC Earth now has four features in various stages of development and production.

"One Life," a \$15 million movie adapted from the hit TV series "Life," is nearing completion.

"Walking With Dinosaurs," with CGI creatures in live-action settings, is shooting in Australia, co-produced with Evergeen Films and financed by Reliance. Nightingale describes the project as "mainstream entertainment" rather than natural history, with a script by John Collee, but draws accurately on the latest discoveries in paleontology.

"Enchanted Kingdom," a \$25 million African 3D project also involving Evergeen and Reliance, will be launched to buyers at Cannes by IM Global.

Last month, BBC Earth announced plans for a theatrical film about Virgin Oceanic's "Five Dives" expedition, which will visit the deepest parts of the sea over the next two years.

"We only do films when we believe there are big subjects and big opportunities," Nightingale says.

It's not simply a question of projecting TV footage onto a larger screen. Although "Deep Blue," "Earth" and "One Life" were all based on footage from TV series, the BBC has become increasingly sophisticated about rethinking the material from a theatrical perspective.

In the case of "One Life," it brought in a film producer and editor, Martin Pope and David Freeman, with no natural history experience, to help co-directors Mike Gunton and Martha Holmes shape a cinematic narrative.

"We saw a story about our connectivity with animals, a big theme that didn't come out in the TV series," Nightingale says. "What you get by fusing an editor and a producer from a cinema background with very talented natural history directors is a unique product that neither side could make alone."

Despite its success in recutting TV series for theatrical release, "Walking With Dinosaurs," "Enchanted Kingdom" and the "Five Dives" film are all being shot from scratch.

"Repurposing TV series is too much hard work, and we probably won't do it again," Hill says. "The first reason why not is 3D, because the whole way you conceive a story for cinema in 3D is very different from how you can conceive it for television. Then the second reason is that the windowing of TV series and theatrical is really hard."

IM Global topper Stuart Ford says his job is to persuade buyers that the films are going to offer something different from TV fare, as well as an alternative to other family product in the market.

"There's no shortage of this stuff on TV, but in a world of 3D, Imax and Surroundsound, natural history features can offer something different. And parents are happy to steer their children towards entertainment with this kind of ethos, which is less rampantly commercial in its mentality, and a little less clinical, than the Hollywood tentpole franchises which are the staple diet in this market."

His sales pitch is clearly working. "One Life" is already sold "in pretty much the whole world, because 'Earth' was so successful," Ford says.

The financial model for big screen nature docs is less reliant upon the North American market than many other genres of commercial filmmaking. Germany, Japan and France can be as lucrative as North America.

That enabled BBC Earth to finance the conversion of "Life" into a feature film by key pre-sales to Germany and Japan. It attracted India's Reliance into a deal to finance "Walking With Dinosaurs" and "Enchanted Kingdom."

"Reliance's ambition is to be a global film brand, and these are truly international projects," Ford says.

With this international perspective comes a creative freedom. "Natural history has always sold to 180 countries, so we always had the liberty to create a truly international product, rather than a product focused on America," Hill says.

The success of pics such as "Earth" is attracting other producers, sales companies and financiers to eye up the theatrical potential of nature docs. But the BBC's creative credibility, and its 50-year track record, is a big competitive advantage.

"We will see production costs come down, and we may see a glut of this kind of material in the market," Ford says. "But the BBC has a reputation for refusing to compromise on their scientific integrity and their production sophistication. It's the major brands which will dominate this arena, and right now I think BBC Earth is head and shoulders above anyone else. They recognize there's clear blue water between themselves and everyone else, and they are looking to consolidate that."

"There's an incredibly small talent pool that can deliver projects of these ambitions," Hill says. "Does that stop others from trying? No. Does that worry us? From a competitive point of view, no, but from a market saturation point of view, yes. The concern would be if a lot of mediocre projects came along and didn't work, then people would lose faith."

However, Hill suggests the barriers to entry are too high for the market to be swamped with cut-price nature movies. "This stuff is still very expensive. It's easier to do drama on a low budget than a natural history epic. So who else is

out there who is going to do it? There are numerous projects we're aware of that have been on the market for a long time and have never raised the finance."

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