

ENHANCING THE VALUE OF CONSERVATION MOVIES

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There comes a time in every field of endeavor when it is necessary to stop and evaluate the success or failure of such endeavor . . . a time when it is necessary to take a backward look to see just what has taken place. And in the case of the Tennessee Game and Fish Commission's movie production program, we have recently done just that.

Here are some of our findings and conclusions :

When the Game and Fish Commission of Tennessee embarked on its intensified movie program in November, 1953, there was an urgent need for getting something on television in the quickest possible manner. Television had just come into its own in Tennessee. The Game and Fish Commission itself was in the process of expanding, and there was public demand for more information concerning activities of the Commission. All these facts combined to necessitate the beginning of a good, solid movie program. So, less than one year after the first scene was shot, a series of thirteen, twelve-minute, sound-color movies was completed and subsequently appeared on television.

But, what effect did such a speeded-up production process have on the overall value of these movies? Actually, that is not an easy question to answer. We know this, however: The production of those thirteen movies was accomplished mostly through the efforts of one man, and that under such circumstances, the Commission should have taken three times as long to complete the movies.

In any case, I believe that it can be safely stated that the value of a conservation movie can be greatly increased by being properly produced—That is to say, by having all the equipment, labor and time necessary to complete such a movie.

Of course, in speaking of the value of conservation movies, we cannot afford to overlook the role television now plays in enlarging that value. Before the advent of TV, the documentary-type film, at best, had a very limited use. In the great majority of cases it failed to reach the non-captive audience. And even when it did, it was in very small numbers. Now, television makes it possible to reach more people in one showing than formerly could be reached during the entire life of the film.

Looking further at Tennessee's thirteen movies, we found that, for the most part, they were presented in a straight forward manner and with very little action or drama. In short, the movies said, "This is your Game and Fish Commission. Here is what we are doing. We hope you will stay tuned to this channel." Many sportsmen and others interested in conservation—that is, the captive audience—would likely stay tuned. But considering the fact that at the very same time another channel might be carrying Arthur Godfrey, Ed Sullivan, Elvis Presley or Roy Rogers, or a hundred other different programs, we were asking a lot, even of our captive audience.

When we start getting into television—and I certainly believe that the conservation movie should be designed to TV use—we find out pretty fast that competition is the backbone of the television industry. And in view of this competition, it seems obvious that entertainment would be a prime factor to consider in enhancing the value of conservation movies. For without entertainment I believe that it is virtually impossible to hold a non-captive audience. And the non-captive audience is certainly what we in conservation education should strive to reach, whether it be through movies, radio, publications or public appearances. I might also mention that in my opinion it is through television that we can best reach that non-captive audience.

The question then arises as to how we can best achieve entertainment that can compare with big network productions. Here again we have a question that is not easy to answer. It would truly be an ideal situation if a state would have the facilities and know-how to go into big time production. Even so, there are many techniques which any state should be able to employ.

No doubt, drama can be a very effective means by which movie entertainment can be achieved. One merely has to look at a Walt Disney production to see the impact of drama in wildlife and conservation films. And, incidentally, Disney is one of our biggest competitors.

Action, too, can make or break a movie. And in many respects, this is the most difficult technique to employ—"Well, now," you say, "who ever heard of a movie that didn't have action?" True, it would be impossible to make a movie without some kind of action. But try getting a shot of a Cooper's hawk swooping down on a quail or a battle of two buck deer during rutting season or, for that matter, a thousand other aspects of nature that are so essential to good conservation movie production, and you begin to see the difference between dynamic action and static action.

The most effective means of increasing the value of the conservation movie, perhaps, would be through good and carefully planned use of both drama and action.

Now what about the point-of-view technique used in conservation movies? How does this affect their value? I am sure that everyone in conservation education work is familiar with this phase of public relations. Generally speaking, there is a tendency on the part of many states who produce films to pat themselves on the back to a point of becoming monotonous. We in Tennessee are no exception. That's one of the things we saw when we took that backward look. A good change of pace or off beat movie once in awhile might prove surprising in a great many ways. A worthy goal to shoot for might be to light the way rather than to lead the way.

Of course, all this does not mean to imply that the thirteen movies produced by the Tennessee Game and Fish Commission were of no value—Far from it. Any conservation movie any state can produce at any time is certainly of great value. Neither does it mean to imply that we should go on a Hollywood production scale. But I firmly believe that any state interested enough in producing movies in the first place should be interested in using the most effective techniques within budgetary limitations to make those movies.

Summarizing, I believe that these six points can greatly enhance the overall value of conservation or any other type of movies if seriously considered:

1. *Proper Production*—Strive to make the most effective use of time, labor and materials.
2. *Use by Television*—Design every movie with the view of having it shown on TV. This is the best way to reach the non-captive audience.
3. *Entertainment*—Consider this the most important goal to achieve in your movie production program.
4. *Entertainment Through Drama*—Use the dramatic approach. This will hold the audience.
5. *Entertainment Through Action*—Use dynamic or unusual action whenever possible. No audience will become bored if you do.
6. *Point-of-View*—Try to get away from self praise. Light the way rather than lead the way.

All in all there can be little doubt that the conservation movie is an important tool in the overall conservation education program, but, in the final analysis, the true value of the conservation movie, like any other service or commodity, depends entirely upon its acceptance by the general public.