

## EOC podcast episode 9 script

You're listening to the Eyes on Conservation podcast, episode 9....

Welcome to the Eyes on Conservation podcast, where we bring you engaging conversations about wildlife conservation issues from all across the globe, I'm your host Matt Podolsky.

On today's episode of the show we're going to take a bit of a different approach. All of our previous episodes have featured interviews with wildlife professionals, some of whom have stepped outside of their shell to learn about wildlife filmmaking. In this episode, I'll explain how I first stepped outside of my shell and made the transition from field biologist to filmmaker. Along the way I'll be providing tips for all of the fellow aspiring filmmakers out there.

I graduated college in upstate NY with degrees in both Environmental Studies and Cinema/Photography – I had no intentions of becoming a documentary filmmaker when I graduated. I wanted to write screenplays, but the barrier to break into that industry just seemed to insurmountable to me, so I pursued work in field biology. I already had two summer field jobs under my belt, and when I graduated I landed a field tech position in Jamaica that lasted for 6 months. I did not even own a video camera at this point – I took my old school slr film camera with me to Jamaica (and used it rather infrequently).

This job was fun and rewarding in many respects, but also quite frustrating – mainly because the structure of the work was very rigid. So with a month or two left on the Jamaica job, I was starting to think about what I'd do next, and I got a lead on a job working with California condors. It turned out that a former professor of mine from Ithaca College has several of his former students were already working on this project and the project director had actually asked my professor for a recommendation. I was in, and started to make plans for a move across the country to Northern Arizona as soon as I returned from the island.

The California condor job was light-years different than anything else I had experienced. After just one week of training I was given my own vehicle and complete freedom to go anywhere in pursuit of these condors – all of which were outfitted with radio transmitters. I spent countless hours out in the N. Arizona deserts, up on the forested plateaus and down in the canyons following the blip, blip of transmitter signals from these birds.

Now as important as this job was – monitoring the health of this condor population and assisting in the release of new birds into the population – After about a year of this I started to get frustrated. The work I was doing was wildlife management – I was performing the tasks necessary to maintain this population of endangered birds – but I wanted to have a more substantial impact. I wanted to show people WHY condors were dying and what had caused their decline in the first place. All the biologists on the crew knew the answers to these questions, but it seemed like the general public was completely unaware.

This was the seed of my interest in documentary filmmaking, and it brings up the first lesson that I want to convey to all of our listeners out there – you must be passionate about the topic that you choose for a documentary film. This is the case whether you're thinking about a feature length film as I was at this time, or just a 3 min web release doc. If you don't care passionately about the topic it will show through in the final product (if you even get there...). I had been working with condors for a year when I started shooting for my feature length film, and it would take me another 4 years to finish the doc. There were countless times when I could have given up, when anyone who was less passionate about the idea and the topic would have given up, but I cared so deeply about these birds and getting this message out that I continued, regardless of the cost. This is not to say that I had a model approach towards producing this film – far from it. But by walking you through all of the steps, and mis-steps, that I took along the way, hopefully I can reduce this learning curve for other aspiring filmmakers.

So the first step towards producing a documentary film, and the first step that I took all those years ago, is to get your ideas down on paper. This is absolutely essential, as it helps you organize your thoughts and ideas and start to develop your story. I mention story development before talking about shooting equipment or techniques because story development is SO much more important. There is simply nothing more important than the storyline of your doc film. You can get away with pretty low video quality if your story is compelling.

Simply brainstorming ideas is a good first step – get any and all ideas down on paper and just that process will get you thinking about the connections between these ideas and how they might fit together to create something cohesive. Share these ideas with other people – don't be afraid to share your rough story outlines. Feedback from others can be extremely helpful and allow you to see different perspectives.

One thing that I see a lot in story outlines for EOC videos that I review for aspiring filmmakers, especially those who are coming from a biology background is a tendency to forget about the most basic information. I did this with my condor doc – I was so engrossed in the world of condor recovery after spending the past year working on the project, that I just assumed other people would know about the natural history of the condor. I forgot that I needed to make people care about this animal species before I would be able to convince them to take action to protect them.

These are the first two things that you should be thinking about as you take those rough stream-of-consciousness notes and start to organize them into a coherent story – 1. What is the central problem, issue, or question that you are trying to address in the story? And – 2. Why should the viewer care about this issue or problem?

I knew what my central problem was – this is what was driving my passion for the project – the fact that condors were dying from lead poisoning from ingesting carcasses laden with lead ammunition fragments. This was the controversial issue that I knew I needed to address in my story, but I forgot (at least initially) to come up with a reason for

other people to care about this issue. For me it was obvious – condor populations can't be successful unless this issue is resolved – but for people who have never seen a condor and know nothing about the animal's natural history, this isn't so obvious. I had to teach people about the condor and show them why this species is so unique and worth saving.

Another very important factor to consider at this stage is who your target audience is. While it's very easy to just say that your story is for a general audience – I think it's important to narrow this target group down and to figure out who might have the strongest interest in your story, but also who might be able to have the greatest impact on the central issue or problem that will be addressed in your film. For me, in the development of my condor documentary, hunters were the obvious target group. Hunters were the target group for my film because this was the group of people that could have an immediate and direct impact on the film's central issue. If hunters were to stop using lead-based ammunition, and switch to non-lead, the problem at the center of my film would be solved! Of course there are always complexities, and as my ideas about the film progressed I ended up identifying additional target groups and goals for the film. In addition to convincing hunters to switch to non-lead ammo, I also wanted to break down some of the stereotypes associated with the hunting community – so a secondary target group for me was environmentalist non-hunters who maybe had a negative opinion about hunters. Balancing these two opposing target groups proved to be one of my greatest challenges with this film, and I'm not entirely certain that I would had taken the same approach if I were to do it all over again. That said, the lead ammunition issue is a particularly complex conservation issue – for a shorter web release doc these considerations about a target audience should be less complicated.

So let's say you want to make a short doc about a masters or PhD research project. The central question or issue at the heart of the video should be pretty clear – it will be the same as the hypothesis that is being tested in the research. But trying to explain why this is an important question to answer – this can be a bit more tricky. But it is an important process to go through, and one that will provide benefits beyond just the short doc that you might be working on. There are too many scientists out there who are unable to communicate to the general public why their research is important – you don't want to be one of those scientists! This is one of the most central lessons that many of the aspiring filmmakers that we work with on EOC films walk away with – even if they don't continue making films they have a much better understanding of how to communicate their research and conservation goals to the general public.

Of course your target audience will have an impact on how you go through this process as well. Maybe your target audience is limited to other scientists who already have an understanding and an inherent interest in your central problem or issue. Your approach will be different, but you still have to show and/or explain why your research question is important – you'll just be doing this in a different way given the existing knowledge base of your target audience.

So once an audience both understands what the issue or problem is, AND they care about the outcome – we can delve into the meat of the story. I find it helpful to think about

what questions someone from your target audience group might have after learning about the problem or issue that's being addressed in the film. Communicating with and asking questions of people from your target group can be extremely helpful at this stage. For Scavenger Hunt, my film about California condors, I was able to spend lots of time talking with hunters about the lead ammunition issue and its impact on condors and other scavengers. Every hunting season, our job as condor biologists shifted from keeping track of the birds, to outreach and education with hunters. I spent many days driving through the Kaibab national forest, stopping at every hunting camp I came across, and chatting with the hunters I encountered about the lead ammunition issue. This was absolutely fantastic research for my film – after explaining the basics of the issue, I was fascinated to hear what questions hunters had. One of the most common questions I got was – if this is such a problem, why hasn't lead ammunition be banned? This became one of the central questions addressed throughout the film as we looked at different approaches towards solving the lead ammo issue and compared areas where lead ammo had actually been banned to areas where efforts were only voluntary.

I would strongly recommend making a point to talk to members of your target audience. Conversations like the ones that I was able to have with hunters on the Kaibab plateau can be extremely helpful in the development of your story. The questions that come up can highlight important issues that should be addressed in your film, and these are often issues that you wouldn't have thought of on your own. I was truly surprised by a lot of the responses I got from hunters when talking about the lead poisoning issue, and these conversations definitely had an impact on the direction of my film.

Now we are at a point where that initial list of ideas should be developing into a legitimate story outline. But how to organize this story outline in a way that is helpful to you? Ultimately there are two important purposes for your story outline or treatment for your film. The first purpose of the story outline should be to provide you with a shooting guide as you head into the production stage. So how to develop this story outline to make it most helpful for you down the road while shooting? I like to break my outline into descriptions of each specific scene that you hope to see in the final film. For each scene you should be thinking about two things – what information do you want to convey, and HOW will it be conveyed. The HOW is particularly important here – if just the straight information was all that mattered all you would need is narration or an interview or two and you'd be done. This wouldn't be compelling to any audience however – we need to take advantage of the medium that we are working with here, which is a very visual medium. We want to SHOW this information as much as possible, rather than just TELLING people via narration or talking heads.

So before I even start writing my outline or treatment for a film, I like to list, on a whiteboard or with sticky notes, all of the ACTION scenes that might help tell my story. For example – in Scavenger Hunt it was particularly important to SHOW that California condors are dying of lead poisoning. We shot a scene in which one of the condor biologists revisits and recounts the story of a condor sick with lead poisoning that literally died in his arms. Rather than just telling the story, we hiked down into the canyon where the sick bird was found and had the biologist SHOW us how and where the bird was

found and how he was able to determine it was dying of lead poisoning. Of course it would have been even more powerful to have been there, with my camera, when this biologist had actually found the sick bird, but because I wasn't there in the right place at the right time, I had to find an alternate way to show this in an active way.

It is very important to convey as much of the information as possible through active scenes rather than narration or talking heads. SHOW, don't TELL your target audience how things work and your story will be much more compelling. It's important to be thinking about HOW you will show this information to your audience before you start shooting, because this will play a huge role in coming up with your shot list and scheduling your shoots. I knew that I needed to set aside an entire day to travel out to this canyon where the sick condor had been recovered and I had to work with the condor biologist who recovered the bird and find a time that fit into his schedule.

So, let's recap on what we've talked about so far.

- We've learned that we need to establish our problem or issue right up front, and that it is equally important to show why this problem or issue is important and why our target audience should care about it.
- We understand that the body of our story will be spent analyzing this problem or issue and answering questions that our target audience might have about this issue.
- We know that a story outline or treatment is an essential tool for organizing our thoughts about our story, and that this outline should be broken up into ACTION scenes to convey the information.
- We've learned that in these action scenes we have to SHOW our audience what's important rather than just TELL them whenever possible, and that this requires some foresight and planning.

NOW – let's do some thinking about the unexpected circumstances that might arise while shooting. No matter how much planning you do before going out to start shooting, you will always encounter unexpected situations in the field. One of the most important skills to develop as a doc filmmaker is the ability to think on your feet and be ready to capture unexpected, but important moments on camera.

While shooting for our half hour documentary, Bluebird Man, we were out in the field with our main character checking bluebird nest boxes. I had already gotten all the shots I'd hoped to for the day, and was just helping our character Al check nestboxes, when we encountered a nestbox that had been knocked off its fencepost and was laying on the ground. The nestbox had young chicks in it, which were still alive, indicating that it had fallen very recently. I immediately recognized the importance that this incident could have for our story – it showed how important Al's work was – if he hadn't been out there checking nestboxes these chicks would have surely died. I started rolling right away, and captured Al putting the chicks back into the box, re-mounting the box on a nearby fencepost, then observing from a distance to see if the parents would return and continue caring for the chicks (which they did!). Even though we weren't rolling audio and the

footage was a bit shaky, that scene ended up in the final film and was a powerful way to show how important Al's work is.

So the bottom line here is: do your best to prepare and plan out all your shoots, but also be ready for anything because often the most powerful scenes in a film happen when you do happen to be in the right place at the right time and have the wherewithal to capture that moment however possible.

Now there is another very important reason to have a well thought out story outline or treatment before you start shooting. You need to be able to share this story with other people, even before you have any footage in the can. If you are seeking funding for your film – this is an absolute must. Potential funders are going to need to be able to visualize your story before they agree to give you any money. In fact a full project proposal, which would include your film treatment along with some additional information, is going to be necessary when reaching out to potential funders. WE'll have More on that in a future episode focused on fundraising.

But you're also going to want to share your story outline or treatment with everyone who will be involved in the production of your film. The first thing that I did upon finalizing my initial draft of my story treatment for Scavenger Hunt, was I printed out copies for everyone on the condor crew and handed them out. The importance of this step cannot be overemphasized – you need other people to successfully produce a documentary – even a very short one. Even if you're shooting, recording audio and conducting interviews all by yourself, you're subjects need to believe in your story if you're going to get them to participate!

The response that I got from the biologists on the condor crew after sending around that first story treatment was hugely positive. I learned that my fellow biologists working on this project shared a lot of the frustration that I had that inspired me to initiate the project and they were all very excited that I wanted to take this message to a larger audience.

Now although the story outline was the central feature of this document that I handed out to everyone on my crew, I did have some additional information in there. This is because I wanted help from people on the my crew – I didn't want to spend a bunch of money hiring a video crew – I wanted to enlist the volunteer effort of my colleagues, and I was hoping that I could inspire them to collaborate with me on this project.

So what additional information did I include in this project proposal in addition to my story outline? First of all I had a short, one paragraph introduction, explaining why I wanted to make this film – now this introduction should be personal – maybe use an anecdote that you feel demonstrates your passion for this story. A Production Plan was an essential piece of that document because it told everyone when and what I would be shooting. Most people need some warning and mental preparation before you shove that camera in their face, so its really important to let them know ahead of time when you might be there with that camera hoping to capture the action. You don't have to get too

detailed, but you definitely need a start and end date for a production timeline, and any ideas that you have for the timing of when you'll need to get certain shots will be helpful.

A Distribution plan is important to have in there as well – and again this does not have to be too detailed, but you do need to explain to people where this film will end up. You need to show them that it's worth their effort and participation. This is a good spot to explain who your target audience is, as this will direct in many ways how you plan to distribute the final film.

And lastly, a personnel list with a short bio and info on past projects. This may seem silly when producing a document for people who already know you, but I decided to include it in my proposal for one simple reason. My colleagues on the condor crew knew me as a biologist, not as a filmmaker, and I felt like they needed to see that I had a background, however limited, in filmmaking as well. I needed to convince them that I had the ability to follow through on this project if I was serious about enlisting their support and participation. If you have other folks who will be helping you out on shoots, this would be a good place to provide some background info on them – show that you have some outside support and also let people know that there might be another person or two tagging along on your shoots.

One final point to make here is the importance of talking with the crew leader, supervisor or primary investigator on the project that you are hoping to document. It might be a good idea in certain situations to share your project proposal with this person FIRST, before handing it out to everyone that you want to be involved in the project. Some organizations will be overjoyed to have a film documenting their research or conservation work, while others might be a bit hesitant. It's best to know this as early as possible – definitely BEFORE you start shooting – so that you're not wasting everyone's time pursuing a project that you can't get approval to release!

Although I did follow these guidelines when getting started on Scavenger Hunt, I ended up dealing with a very tricky situation regarding the organization managing condor recovery in Arizona. This however, didn't come until a much later stage in the process and we'll get to that in a future episode. For now, we'll end on the very positive impact that my initial project proposal had on all of the folks who I hoped would be involved in the project.

To recap:

I took the time to get all of my ideas down on paper and then organize them into a cohesive storyline. I got feedback throughout this process from friends and family whose opinions I trusted. I used the story outline that I came up with to create a formal project proposal, which I shared with all of the people who I hoped at the time would be involved in the film in any way. The immediate result was a group of people who were energized about my idea and willing to help out in whatever way they could to assist in achieving the end goal of producing a documentary with the potential to affect change.

So there it is – the first step in my transition from field biologist to wildlife filmmaker. Of course at this point the transition was far from complete – I was still working full time as a biologist and spending all of my free time developing this film idea – but hopefully explaining each stage of this transition will be helpful to other folks out there in similar situations – working full time jobs and getting started on a film project in their free time.

That said – I am very curious to hear from our listeners about how helpful this episode has been. This is a different approach than I have taken on the podcast thus far, and I would love to get some feedback on how interesting and/or helpful you found this episode to be. So if you loved it, or if you hated it – let me know! Shoot me an email at [matthew@wildlensinc.org](mailto:matthew@wildlensinc.org) with PODCAST EPISODE FEEDBACK in the subject line and let me know what you think. I'll even throw in some incentives – First - I will randomly select two people from among everyone who responds – and these lucky folks will win a Scavenger Hunt NON-LEAD ammo t-shirt. Second – anyone who would like to see a copy of the original Scavenger Hunt project proposal that I wrote up all those years back – request this in your email response and I will happily send this your way. So shoot me that email letting me know what you thought about the episode and if you have any ideas on how I might improve these HOW-TO segments on the podcast moving forward.

And as always we'll have show notes up on the website which will include links to watch the Scavenger Hunt trailer and the full film. I'll also have links to some additional resources up there – a list of a few books that helped me out a lot when I was first learning the ins and outs of doc filmmaking – so definitely check out those show notes at: [wildlensinc.org/blog/eoc9](http://wildlensinc.org/blog/eoc9).

And as always, I'm your host Matt Podolsky signing off.