

From Field Biologist to Filmmaker, part 4 – the international shoot

Script:

You're listening to the Eyes on Conservation podcast, where we bring you engaging conversations about wildlife conservation from all across the globe, I'm your host Matt Podolsky. Today on the show I'm sharing another installment of our ongoing series – From Field Biologist to Filmmaker – in which I share personal stories about lessons that I've learned along my journey towards becoming a full-time filmmaker.

Now some of our listeners are probably aware that I've been in Mexico on a shoot for our new feature length documentary, *Souls of the Vermilion Sea*. I was in and around the small town of San Felipe, Mexico for about three weeks on this shoot, and it was a really wonderful learning experience. I learned a lot about the issue that will be the central focus of our film – the struggle to save the vaquita from extinction. This small species of porpoise is in serious trouble, with somewhere between 50 and 70 individuals likely remaining in the Northernmost part of the Gulf of California.

In addition to gaining a wealth of information about the issue at hand, I also learned some hard lessons about working on a documentary shoot outside of the US. I did have some relevant experience working internationally before this recent trip to Mexico – I living in Jamaica for six months working as a biologist, and I spent 2 weeks in Kenya, during which time I shot much of the footage used in our East African Vulture series – one of our first EOC videos. That said, I'd never worked on a feature film project outside the US, and as you might imagine, there are new challenges (and benefits as well of course!) associated with every different country that one might work in.

Possibly the most significant obstacle for me was language. I took Spanish in high school, but haven't spent much time since then trying to speak the language. I knew that this would be a challenge, and had done my best to be prepared. Although I would undoubtedly have been able to get by in San Felipe as a tourist (the town is only a 5 hour drive from San Diego and gets a fair amount of tourism from the US), as a filmmaker I would be interviewing people who speak very limited English, or in some cases speak no English at all. I needed a translator!

But would a translator really solve all our problems in this instance? One of our goals with “*Souls of the Vermilion Sea*” is to produce a film for audiences in both Mexico and the US. To accomplish this, we knew that we would need more than just a translator, but a filmmaking partner who could help us make both creative and logistical decisions related to the project. We needed someone familiar with the culture who could help us craft a story that will resonate with Mexican audiences.

How might we go about finding someone like this? Sean Bogle – our EOC producer who got the ball rolling on this vaquita documentary – and I discussed this at length early on in pre-production, but ultimately the solution to the problem would actually find us! As we were preparing to launch our kickstarter campaign for *Souls of the Vermilion Sea*,

Mexico City-based filmmaker and artist Brenda Razo was just learning about the vaquita, and began seeking out a way to get involved in this issue. Brenda reached out to Tom Jefferson from the group Viva Vaquita! – who connected her with Sean and myself.

Brenda and I had maybe three or four conversations via skype before I left for Mexico a month ago. She had agreed – enthusiastically I might add! – to meet me in San Felipe after my first week of shooting. I still wasn't completely sure what to expect from Brenda – she had exhibited strong enthusiasm for the project and clearly had the filmmaking experience to play an important role, but it's always hard to gage a person's true interest and passion until you meet in person.

So my initial plan for this shoot was to spend the entire first week on board the Ocean Star – the vaquita survey vessel that would be in the Gulf of California for more than two full months searching for vaquita. Brenda wasn't able to fit this first week of the shoot into her schedule, so it would be just myself and my volunteer production assistant from the Aquarium of Boise – Joe Shull. This was all intentionally planned – I knew that the majority of the crew on the Ocean Star were from the US and all English-speaking, so this was a part of the shoot that I felt very comfortable handling on my own.

Another logistical calculation that I made, was my decision to drive from Boise to San Felipe, Mexico. It would take 16 hours, according to google maps, and would allow us to have transportation once we arrived without needing to rent a vehicle. So Joe and I began our drive on Sept. 24th, knowing that we would need to be in San Felipe to board the Ocean Star on the 26th. These two days were plenty of time to get down to Mexico – we arrived mid afternoon on the 25th at the house where we'd be staying while on the mainland.

The use of house where we were staying was actually donated to us by one of our supporters – another important logistical detail that we had taken care of ahead of time! So Joe and I had some time to settle in, and pack up everything that we would need for the next week on the boat in our new water-tight bags.

The next day we were ready to go early, but we realized that we weren't entirely sure where we were supposed to meet the crew to board the Ocean Star! After numerous somewhat frantic phone calls, I finally got ahold of one of our contacts on the crew, who told us where the meeting spot was, and we made it there just in time!

As we threw our bags into the small boat that would take us out to the Ocean Star however, we got word from Mexican Immigration that there was a problem. It was explained to us that we were supposed to have gotten a specific immigration form when crossing the border. Without this form, we would not be allowed to board the Ocean Star. And the only way to get this form, was to return to the immigration office at the Mexico/US border – a three hour drive from San Felipe!

This threw my well-calculated production schedule into complete disarray! After speaking at length with the very friendly Mexican immigration officials, and making

certain that we understood exactly what form was needed to board the boat, we returned to our house and began a reassessment of our situation.

Unfortunately, boarding the Ocean Star would be a whole lot more difficult now that we had missed this first window. This is because the boat rarely comes in close to San Felipe, and boarding the boat is impossible while it's conducting a survey because it's traveling at a pretty good speed. So to find the opportunity to board, we would have to coordinate with the captain to get the coordinates of the boat, then hire a small boat (called a panga) to drive us out to those coordinates before daybreak, being sure to arrive before the day's survey effort began (at around 6:30am).

Before we could even consider this however, we needed to drive to Mexicali – the closest border town, and secure our immigration paperwork. So the next day this is exactly what we did – we arrived in Mexicali in late morning, parked the car as close to the border as possible, got out and tried to find a way to access the Mexican side of the border crossing office. We did this without much difficulty, and were given a very basic immigration form to fill out. As silly as it seemed that this very simple form, which took 2 minutes to fill out, was what had thrown such a wrench on my careful planning, it was a relief to have this form in hand!

We returned to San Felipe, and I immediately began trying to figure out when and how we might be able to get on board the Ocean Star. Here I must provide another logistical detail that was a bit unexpected. Although this was my first time in San Felipe working on this new film project, producer Sean Bogle spent several weeks there in early June – so I had Sean's experience to learn from. Sean had informed me that there would be wifi service at the café just around the corner from the house where we were staying. Unfortunately, when we arrived we found out that the café was under construction, and there was no wifi.

Although this may seem like a minor inconvenience – it turned out to be a source of serious frustration because of our situation with the Ocean Star. No one on the Ocean Star had phone service, but they did have wifi on board, so they could send emails. So I was completely reliant on email to coordinate the boarding of the ship – and the only way I could get good enough cell service to check my email was by standing on the roof of our house! So after sending an email, I would walk up to the roof every hour or so to check my email and see if I'd gotten a response... not the most efficient way to plan a shoot, but I found a way to make it work!

As it turned out, we wouldn't be able to board the Ocean Star for another two days – the boat was too far out for an early morning panga ride to be realistic. So now I had another challenge – how to spend these two days in a productive way! Several late-night phone conversations with Sean helped point me in the right direction, and I reached out to the folks who run the remote acoustic monitoring program for the vaquita population.

We met up with Gustavo, the lead biologist with this acoustic monitoring program, which has played a crucial role in our ability to monitor the vaquita's decline over the past

decade or so. Gustavo introduced us to his crew – all fisherman who are now using their skills to help retrieve and re-deploy the special hydrophones, or “sea-pods” that record the high-frequency sonar “clicks” made by the species, are dispersed throughout the vaquita’s range. We arranged to go out with a group of these fisherman to document this process.

The next morning we were up before dawn and waiting at the marina for these three fisherman. When they arrived we jumped into the boat, and quickly realized that none of them spoke a word of English. My production assistant Joe spoke barely a word of Spanish, so it was up to me and my rudimentary understanding of the language to facilitate all communication between us! This was no easy feat, and there were numerous conversations that ended with confused looks, and a shrug on both sides. I did however find a way to ask a couple of very basic interview questions in Spanish of the crew leader Carlos.

The first and most obvious lesson to take from this experience is to always be prepared for the unexpected. This should go without saying on any documentary shoot – just about the only thing that you can count on in documentary filmmaking is that unexpected things will happen. The ability to adapt – both logistically, but also in the development of the story – is crucial for documentary filmmaking. This ability to adapt to unforeseen circumstances become more important however on an international shoot – partly because you’re in an unfamiliar place, but also because if you’re out of the country, you’ve probably got a lot invested in the shoot.

I’ll say something else pretty obvious about working on an international shoot that this experience brings up – do whatever you can to learn the language as best you can! This is something I wish I had put more time and energy into before this trip – as I said I had a basic understanding of Spanish from taking it in high school, but I would have benefited greatly from a refresher. Even if it’s a language that you’re totally unfamiliar with – learning the basics is a really good idea.

So we eventually were able to board the Ocean Star – we ended up spending just a day and a half on board, but were lucky enough to be on the ship during the crew’s very first vaquita sighting! You can check out our blog to learn more about this really powerful experience – wildlensinc.org/blog.

Just one day after leaving the Ocean Star, we met up with Brenda Razo – our filmmaking collaborator from Mexico City. This changed everything, not only because now had a much easier way to communicate, but because I now had a creative partner – someone who understood Mexican audiences and could help steer the creative as well as logistical decisions that I was making. We shot our first formal interview in Spanish the next day, with Brenda doing an expert job of interpreting my questions as well as adding her own into the mix.

Over the next two weeks Brenda and I spent countless hours discussing this film project and the issues surrounding vaquita conservation, and it became very clear to me that she

has a strong passion for this issue. It also became clear that she was willing to dedicate herself to this project, and make this film her top priority. We had found another key filmmaking partner and producer for this project!

The lesson here is one in the importance of working with local filmmakers, and being open to sharing ideas and sharing the creative control of a project. A lot of filmmakers are extremely guarded around other filmmakers, adopting a competitive approach and treating others with similar interests as adversaries. I would argue that this is not an ideal approach – if we had just hired a “fixer” for this shoot in San Felipe we would have gotten the translation help and some logistical advice maybe, but we would not have found someone like Brenda, who is genuinely fascinated with the vaquita issue, and is therefore able to bring a her own unique perspective into the story.

Filmmakers are everywhere! Pretty much anywhere on Earth that you could travel to to tell your story will have people there working as filmmakers! Don't be afraid to reach out and try to seek the interest of these people! In our situation, it wasn't necessary to make this effort, Brenda found us! So there are two lessons here – first of all consider working with a filmmaker as a creative partner when involved in a film project that is international in scope.

The second lesson is – don't be afraid to embrace the benefits that come along with promoting your project at an early stage and developing connections within the community associated with your subject material. It is because we ran a crowdsourcing campaign and spent an entire month promoting this film project that we had the base of connections that allowed Brenda to find us. Had we not but very public about our early efforts to tell this story, we likely never would have connected with this talented filmmaker.

The next stage of our shoot in San Felipe involved boarding the Maria Cleofas. This former fishing vessel has been converted to a conservation support boat based in the Tres Marias island chain along the Pacific coast of Mexico – south of Baja California. We had been talking with the director of Grupo Cleofas – the non-profit that owns the boat – for a number of months about the idea of having the Maria Cleofas in the Northern Gulf of California to serve as a media support vessel.

The idea was that to have a second boat, in addition to the official vaquita survey vessel, would provide a great benefit to media personnel interested in covering this story about the world's most endangered marine mammal. It would also provide a platform for attempts to actually capture imagery of the vaquita itself – a species that is notoriously difficult to film and photograph.

Of course funding was an issue for this excursion, and many of us had given up on the idea of having this “media boat” out in the gulf during the vaquita survey mission. On the day before I left to drive down to San Felipe I got a call from Sean – he had just found out that this “media boat” idea was now a reality!

As you might imagine, this completely changed all the plans I had for this shoot! Realizing that the presence of the Maria Cleofas would present a truly unique opportunity to try and get footage of the vaquita, I made the decision to shift our plans to take advantage of this situation. Instead of spending most of the second half of our shoot talking with fisherman, community members and government officials about the vaquita issue, we would instead spend as much time as possible on the Maria Cleofas searching for this most elusive of porpoises.

New, unforeseen opportunities came along with the shift in our plans – we would now be spending quite a bit of time with marine mammal scientists and photographers Tom Jefferson and Tom Kieckhefer. As the days passed on the Maria Cleofas, we began to realize how difficult a task getting good footage of a vaquita was going to be. We also learned through talking with Tom Jefferson that virtually all images that exist of the vaquita were taken during one 20 period back in 2008 – at a time when the population was likely 5 times larger than it is currently.

In 2008, there were very few exiting images of a living vaquita, and this was a big problem for conservation efforts, because many people in Mexico didn't believe that this animal existed! Photos and video was needed just to prove to people that this animal was still out there, and so the first of these photographic expeditions was undertaken. After more than two weeks searching without a single sighting, Tom and his small crew of photographers and videographers spotted a small group of vaquitas. They were then shocked to watch two members of this group of animals swim TOWARDS their boat and pop their heads up out of the water – apparently expressing curiosity towards this boat full of humans! This was the first, and only, time that this type of behavior has been observed in this species, and the images that they got are still just about the only high quality photos ever taken of a living vaquita.

I mention this story because had I not been willing and ready to make last minute adjustments to our schedule for this shoot, I never would have learned about this story. I've said this numerous times in past episodes of this series, "from Field Biologist to Filmmaker", but I can't say it enough times – flexibility is extremely important when working on a documentary film! No matter how much planning you do ahead of time, nothing can substitute for being on location, and you will discover new, and sometimes surprising information during a shoot. The ability to react and absorb this new information is one of the central tenants to becoming a successful documentary filmmaker – and this is particularly important when working on an international shoot.

I'll give one more example from this past month's shoot in Mexico to bring home the importance of adapting to new situations and learning absorbing new information on the fly. While our crew was on board the Maria Cleofas, we had a few days with sub-optimal weather conditions for seeing vaquita. Because they're so small and elusive, its really only possible to see a vaquita when there's virtually no wind, and the water surface of the gulf is very calm.

On one of our first days out on the boat, we had very windy conditions, and decided to take the skiff back to the mainland to run some errands – a few folks were having issues with their cell phone coverage and wanted to visit the shop in town. While at the cell phone store, someone happened to come in, witness the difficulties that we were having, and suggested that we talk with his boss at the restaurant next door, who had the exact same type of phone.

We went next door to talk to this man's boss, who turned out to be the owner of the restaurant, and although he couldn't resolve the phone issue, a conversation about vaquita conservation was initiated. We quickly learned that this restaurant owner – whose name is Octavio – had a unique perspective on the issue, and was very well spoken. He agreed to do an interview!

We were back the next day (as weather conditions had remained poor for sighting vaquita) with my full crew to shoot the interview. As we chatted with Octavio he kept mentioning a friend of his who had a big idea about trying to help save the vaquita – when we expressed interest, Octavio called up his friend – whose name is Pat. Pat is an ex-pat – he grew up in the US but has been living in San Felipe for more than 20 years. He owns one of the largest ex-pat tourist communities in the region and is quite well known in San Felipe.

Pat proceeded to lay out his plan to save the vaquita AND the totoaba, by legalizing the trade in totoaba swim bladders. While this initially seemed like a crazy idea, it became clear to us that his idea was well thought-out and had true potential. He basically wants to sell a certain number of sportfishing permits for totoaba to tourists from the US, under the condition that they don't get to keep the swim bladders. The swim bladders would be extracted and sold LEGALLY to China by an independent commission, which would be tasked with putting that money back into the San Felipe community.

Obviously there would be many challenges involved in implementing such a plan, but we all agreed that the fundamental idea is sound, and may even hold the greatest promise for truly resolving the illegal trade in totoaba swim bladders. This issue is central to the survival of the vaquita, and yet it is extremely difficult to enforce this illegal trade. By legalizing the sale of these swim bladders, and providing a way for the sale of the bladders to bring money into the community, you would be providing an incentive for people to participate, while dis-incentivizing the illegal harvesting of these animals with gill nets (gill nets are used for sport fishing of totoaba).

At this early stage of our film project it's uncertain how this idea will fit into the story, but it is clear that we've tapped into a very important idea. Pat agreed to give us an interview on the spot – so thanks to a combination of luck, and our ability to adapt to changing situations, we now have this unique perspective captured on camera.

Looking back at the footage that we captured over the course of this three week shoot, maybe about half of the footage that we shot came from the careful planning that went on ahead of time, while the remaining half arose from opportunistic situations like those I

just described. It is this careful balance between planning ahead of time, and an ability to adapt on the fly that is crucial for filmmakers to harness when working on any shoot, but is especially important when working internationally.

As our time in San Felipe and on board the Maria Cleofas came to an end, it became clear that I would return to Idaho without capturing a single frame with a vaquita. Although we had a few unconfirmed sightings, it had proven too difficult to get footage of this extremely rare and elusive animal thus far. Luckily, our new Mexican producer Brenda had the flexibility in her schedule to be able to stay an extra week in the region and maximize our chances of getting vaquita footage.

This presented yet another logistical challenge however – everyone had to get off the boat for the next four days because of some maintenance work that needed to be done. So how could Brenda's time be best spent for these few days before she would be able to re-board the Maria Cleofas? We reached out to some contacts, and were able to arrange an interview with the director of the Mexican non-profit – the Intercultural Center for the Study of Deserts and Oceans. This group is heavily involved in vaquita conservation, and was on our list of groups to follow and get interviews with – unfortunately they are based in Porto Ponasco – the town on the opposite side of the gulf from San Felipe – and Brenda didn't have a vehicle.

So our final day in Mexico was spent driving 6 hours around the Northern Gulf of California to drop off Brenda in Porto Ponasco, before turning back North and starting the long drive to Boise, Idaho. The benefit of this is huge however – we were able to extend our shoot by an entire week, increase our chances of getting footage of a vaquita, and continue to expand our contact base.

We were able to do all of this for two reasons - and these are the take home lessons for this episode: First – we nurtured a collaborative relationship with a filmmaker living and working in Mexico. We're only just beginning to see the benefits that come along with this important decision. Second – we remained flexible and open to new opportunities that might arise over the course of the shoot. We found just the right balance between planning ahead, and the ability to adapt on the fly.

Well that just about does it for this episode of “From Field Biologist to Filmmaker”. Many of the videographers and producers that we work with on the Eye on Conservation series actually have a whole lot more experience than I do working on both field biology and videography jobs outside the US – if you are one of those people I'd like to hear from you! Do you have anything to add to this conversation about preparing for an international shoot? Do you agree with the advice I shared here? Leave us a message in the comments section of the show notes page, or shoot me an email directly at matthew@wildlensinc.org.

Those show notes can be found at: wildlensinc.org/eoc42 And if you want to learn more about “souls of the Vermilion Sea” – our film project about the endangered vaquita – go to vaquitafilm.com.

This episode was produced by myself, your host, Matt Podolsky. Our theme music is by the Humidors.