

Nature on TV: deep interests on flat screens

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The amount of time people spend watching TV has grown very fast in recent decades. Watching nature has a marked and prominent place here. In this paper we will address two issues concerning Nature on TV: the experience of nature on TV compared to the experience during real visits and the geographical and ecological characteristics of popular nature on TV. The link between management of nature areas and the potential of these areas on TV seems to be largely unexplored .

The experience of nature during real visits of an area is compared with the experience of the same nature area on TV. We will show that there are marked differences. On TV people turn out to be more of a 'nature investigator'. They like to expand their interest to areas normally out of reach, they like being surprised by rare or particular plants or animals and they like to learn something. This 'zoomed-in' way of experiencing nature is made possible by enhanced filming technologies, enabling us to watch an ongoing flood of spectacular shots, and the voice-over or presenter explaining everything (Scott, 2003). With real visits we can use all our senses, including scent and touch, but nature experience is more 'superficial' in a way. Nature provides an attractive scenery for walking or biking, for relaxation, and the enjoyment of nature concerns the whole landscape far more than particular plants or animals. Arcade landscapes seem to be appreciated most while curiosity for wilderness seems fairly absent. Interestingly the ultra modern medium has some potential of bringing people closer to wilderness. The association of wilderness is only mentioned by a small group of TV watchers, but by no visitors. This also holds for nature conservation, suggesting that watching nature on television makes people more aware of the intrinsic value of nature rather than actually visiting the same nature area. The active (visiting) and passive (TV watching) attitudes toward nature are not static, but influence each other. During our research, participants who had both visited a nature area and watched a TV program on the same area stated that TV had changed their perception of the area, and thereby influenced future visits.

The research on the geography of nature on TV (compare Hinchliffe, 2007) focused on two very popular nature programmes, one with a national nature scope and one with a global scope. The research identified the locations filmed and it showed interesting differences. At the national level the topics treated in the nature documentaries hardly required ecological quality of the area filmed. The technical camera and editing possibilities facilitate the making of attractive nature documentaries even in highly urbanized or degraded areas. Showing nature in the neighborhood of people and showing that there's (still) a lot of nature to admire in the area people live, even if it is in the city, seems to be a major focus. Furthermore, close to all documentaries include animals, and mostly birds, the tone is sweet and cuddly.

Analysis of the global level documentaries gives quite a different view. Here a clear correlation can be shown with high nature quality of the area's filmed. Here we can also observe a classical focus on large animals, and filming (huge) areas without any human presence (Bagust, 2008). There is also a clear correlation between the sort of nature filmed. Viewers like to see exotic nature, so no nature they already can see in their own living area. The largest concentrations of people live in areas with mixed forest or with broadleaf forest and in these areas there are less documentaries filmed.

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The apparent paradox in the second part is easily understood from the first part of the research. Learning about animals, plants, and areas, out of (daily) reach, or in a way normally out of reach, seems to be the dominant underlying motive for watching TV; this motive is addressed somehow by film makers. The real paradox is how a superficial and increasingly flat screen can trigger such a deep nature interest.

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