

Lights, camera, action for life sciences

BY CHRIS TACHIBANA

NATURE & SCIENCE

A marine biologist, television host, and film producer reminds us that science is an adventure with universal appeal.

For many biologists, our love of science began with an image seen in childhood: a menacing spider in National Geographic, or an attacking cheetah on the Discovery Channel. Science is knowledge transfer—telling people about your results, whether in a peer-reviewed journal or a science documentary, says Anders Drud Jordan. A dramatic (but accurate) image or video calls attention to scientific results. How does Jordan know? He is a marine biologist and physiologist, now a producer and TV host of science documentary films.

Jordan earned a PhD in Biology from the University of Copenhagen in 2006, but instead of doing a typical post-doctoral fellowship, he got involved in Galathea 3. This Danish research project outfitted a navy vessel for science and sailed around the world in nine months, collecting data on 71 projects from monitoring climate

Anders Drud Jordan.



Eske Willerslev being filmed for the documentary.

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change to discovering new potential natural medicines. The project is named after famous Danish expeditions from the mid-19th and mid-20th centuries. Jordan never set sail, but hosted Danish television broadcasts about Galathea—work that grew into the science film company Nature&Science. The company of six, with three trained scientists and three film and business experts, made short promotional films and a number of Danish television documentaries. Most recently, they co-produced the 2011 “Coast to Coast” series that looked at the nature, history, and culture of coastal areas from West Jutland to Bornholm. A recent leadership change converted Nature&Science into Kompas Film, with Jordan at the helm.

Currently, Kompas Film is making a documentary about Eske Willerslev, the University of Copenhagen professor who is known for sequencing ancient DNA, perhaps most notably the genome of a 4,000-year-old Greenlander using a hair sample that had been preserved in permafrost. Willerslev’s studies include the origin of familiar animals such as horses and whales. But Jordan says the true reason that Willerslev is so fascinating is the

way his research connects to our sense of mystery and wonder. “He is today’s true Indiana Jones,” says Jordan. “He goes to the farthest corners of the world to answer questions that rewrite the way we think of our own history.” Willerslev’s work—and Jordan’s—reminds us that science is an adventure.

ALL SCIENCE IS A STORY

Not everyone can, or wants to be a filmmaker, but Jordan has advice for all scientists, no matter what part you play. “Make science the true adventure that it really is. Make it into a story that is appealing to everybody,” he says. Any research report, from a talk to a poster to a publication, should set up the project as a mystery to be solved or a code to be broken. Even in the standard format of introduction-methods-results-conclusions, try to create an interesting narrative. Have the main characters, even if they are genes and proteins, move into something unknown. Frame the presentation as a quest and have a moment of truth, satisfying the audience with a result that is meaningful. Science images and films, says Jordan, package a scientific message into a universally appealing

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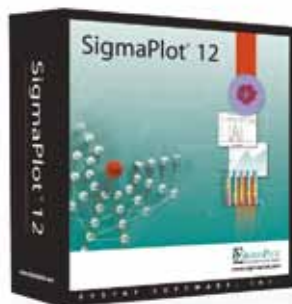


story using mystery, myth and even a little humor. While a research presentation is serious business, keeping these concepts in mind can help your results make sense and be more memorable to your audience.

Deep down, Jordan is still a scientist, and even feels that filmmaking has made him a better scientist. It's shown him the importance of getting results both published and noticed, and taught him the truth of the cliché that a picture is worth a thousand words. Still, he feels he can have a bigger impact and reach more people as a filmmaker. For him, science is a monolith like the Great Wall of China. “For most scientists”, he says, “you contribute a little stone to this wall. With science communication and filmmaking, we talk about the whole wall and the way we see it, and I get a big satisfaction from that.” ●

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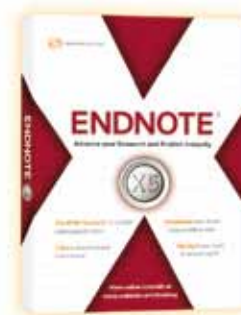


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