

Barnaby Smith – BBC Countryfile

Lots of great stories, a renewed enthusiasm for your research, and the experience of working with some fantastic people. Yes, you can get all this and more from a BA Media Fellowship. Write your application NOW!

You may think I'm exaggerating but the above words summarise my experiences of a five week placement with the BBC Countryfile team during the summer of 2004. I've spent the last five years working as a water quality scientist for the NERC Centre for Ecology and Hydrology Oxfordshire. I enjoy what I do but was looking for some new inspiration. In 2002 I'd met a British Antarctic Survey employee who'd recently undertaken a BA Media Fellowship at the Guardian. She was very enthusiastic about the scheme and I was convinced that this was something I had to try and do. In early 2004 I downloaded the form from the BA website, filled it in and sent it off.

I had no idea if I would be successful and was very pleased to get an email saying I was through to the final 25. At this point my management at CEH were showing a small amount of interest, having initially been lukewarm to the possibility of me disappearing for a summer of long lunches with 'media types'! Then one day in early June I was sitting in the office staring out of the window when the phone rang. Nick Hillier from the BA was on the line and from the tone of his voice I thought he was about to tell me that sadly my application hadn't been successful. Then he uttered the magic words "BBC Countryfile would like to talk to you about a placement". I put the phone down in shock and then rang the number Nick had given me. Teresa Bogan, the Producer of Countryfile answered and as they say the rest is history.

Before the media fellowships got underway the 9, later to be 10, fellows were invited to BA Headquarters in London for a briefing day. London underground conveniently chose that day to go on strike but most of us managed to gather for a stimulating day of talks and discussions which got us fired up for our placements. On this day I realised that the media fellows came from a wide variety of backgrounds and future fellows should note that the interaction with the other media fellows is an important part of the placement.

July 26th 2004. I arrived at the new BBC Birmingham HQ within the Mailbox shopping centre. Sadly, I wasn't feeling on top form. A nasty incident with two dogs on the previous Friday night had necessitated a trip to Casualty and my subsequent level of (legal!) drug consumption had left me fairly spaced out. Fortunately, the Countryfile team proved incredibly welcoming and failed to give me a chance to feel sorry for myself by sending me off to research a story within 90 minutes of arrival. This involved phoning someone, then phoning someone else,

then waiting for a phone call, and then being directed to someone else... It was a long way from reading ten papers before finally feeling confident enough to approach a scientist at a conference in order to discuss their work.

After the initial first day of excitement, and an unscheduled accommodation change, which again saw the immaculate BBC organisation dealing rapidly and efficiently with a crisis of my own making, I moved on to the ten hour BBC Health and Safety Course. This is compulsory for beginners and all I can say is there are some entertaining moments in there somewhere! Actually it wasn't that bad and I now know a lot more about several subjects I had no previous knowledge of.

The rest of week one was spent experiencing several aspects of TV life. I shuttled between the phones, the PC, the edit suite, the dubbing suite, the archive room, the viewing room, the library, the café and on one occasion a full on media lunch with wine. Except for me, of course, still heavily dosed up on antibiotics following the dog incident. It was during this first week that I met the legendary 'JC'. Whilst almost asleep in the corner of a dark edit suite at the end of a long and tiring day, the door opened, and somebody sat down next to me. I didn't take much notice until the director turned round and said "Hi, JC" and turned back to carry on working. I then took another look and realised John Craven was sitting in the next seat and introducing himself to me. A few words later I realised that he knew who I was having read my short CV on the BBC intranet.

By week two I was starting to get into the various stories being worked up for forthcoming programmes. I spent some time talking to people within my own organisation trying to find a CEH story for the programme. Unfortunately, as it was the summer many of the scientists were away and in addition at this stage I still hadn't quite worked out what would make a good Countryfile item. I was also working out what a great team the Countryfile staff formed. A sudden staff absence left the arrangements for a piece on Agatha Christies book locations unfinished. During a hectic day of phone conversations and internet research three of us managed to put the item back on track. Sadly the item was later postponed for several weeks due to the main interviewee suddenly becoming unavailable but that's life in the media world. No time for regrets and straight on with research for the next item.

I was also given the opportunity to accompany a team on a shoot in Brixham. 'Dolphin bycatch' was the story and we were being sent to interview two wildlife campaigners in response to the news that the UK government were planning to stop fishermen pair trawling in territorial waters. Pair trawling has been linked to the many dead dolphins washed up on the beaches of SW England. John Craven had previously been to France to film the main part of the story and we were filling in the gaps as well as shooting the links for that week's program. Cue JC standing in picturesque location saying "and now for this weeks weather forecast"... The whole shoot was a great experience, teaching me a lot about interviewing technique and all the tiny details that go into making up just a few seconds of TV. Back in Birmingham I was fortunate to be allowed to sit in, and advise, on the

editing of the several hours of footage from the UK and France and the archives into one ten minute piece.

Week three and I would have been cracking on with a story of my own, except I was on holiday in Tenby. The holiday had been arranged months before and couldn't be moved. This was a shame as continuity during placements is important and I would thoroughly recommend to all media fellows that they don't disappear for a week in the middle of their placement. Furthermore as my placement was only five weeks I probably didn't get full value out of it. Eight weeks would be a more realistic length of time to spend with a TV host.

Week four and I was back in the frenetic atmosphere of the Mailbox. The second BA Media Fellow, Mark Steer from Bristol University had arrived and was already making his presence felt. By this time I thought I knew what I was doing and the Countryfile Producers Sarah and Teresa showed their, possibly misplaced, confidence in me by handing me the lead item for the second hour show. I should explain here that during the summer months Countryfile operates with a reduced team producing 30 minute shows most weeks and at the beginning of September reverts to it's winter schedule of hour shows with obviously twice the content. Anyway, there I was researching 'Food and Fascism' an investigation into the relationship between the 'big four' supermarkets and their fruit and vegetable suppliers. The particular angle was perceived demands for cosmetic perfection in how the fruit and vegetables looks over what they tasted like. Fortunately Sarah and Teresa supplied me with a mentor, Stephen Lockwood, who was to direct the piece and pull me out of any holes I fell into.

However, it wasn't all supermarkets. I also spent a day standing in the pouring rain by the River Trent in Nottinghamshire holding a reflector. This is a vital piece of equipment which makes anyone look good on camera. The point of the day was to get Environment Agency and Fishermen's views on whether there are more or less fish in our rivers. This was a story I knew something about having done lots of work on pollution in UK rivers and I was very happy to see the evidence being thoroughly dissected and a balanced view given in the final piece. I also had the opportunity to meet another of Countryfiles presenters, Adam Henson.

Anyway, back to the phones. After a week of work I had isolated the main players in the supermarkets and suppliers story. As this is a controversial issue it proved difficult to get people to speak on camera and also to get the supermarkets press offices to respond to any questions we had. I did manage to achieve success by getting the Heads of the Office of Fair Trading and the British Retail Consortium to agree to be interviewed. The rest of the piece evolved as we worked through the complex logistics of trying to get all the interviewees into locations we could get to over the course of the two days allotted for filming. Here, I think, my skills spent travelling around the world organising equipment, locations and field sampling campaigns came in handy. The main difference from scientific work was that like all aspects of the media, the deadline was real not an illusion!

Sadly, just before the supermarket piece was due to be filmed, my placement came to an end as I transferred to Exeter and the BA Science Festival. Countryfile didn't really have a role for me at the Festival. It's weekly format means that it doesn't tend to cover 'new' science which has already had saturation coverage in the newspapers and daily TV and radio bulletins. Instead I spent the festival helping various BA staff run the Backchat sessions for teenagers discussing major scientific issues. This was very interesting work and showed me another side of communication of science to the public. I also managed to fit in several other events. These included attending a lecture by a Nobel Prize winning chemist, at the end of which the stage was mobbed by schoolchildren asking for his autograph! I also attended the sad demise of the Genesis space probe into the Nevada desert via live link up to the US. Attending the festival with the other BA media fellows, and staying in the same student accommodation, added to the experience. I was able to see at the first hand how print and radio journalists work in the festival press centre. This was an impressive insight into how journalists have to deal with a vast amount of information in a concise and rapid manner. I also managed to spend a lot of time socialising. The BA Media fellow tag gets you access to a wide range of parties!

To summarise, the whole experience has added greatly to my knowledge of how the media reports science. Since I've been back at CEH many staff have come to talk to me about the fellowship and I'm now giving a series of talks at our sites highlighting the lessons learnt from a summer with the media. Rumour has it that CEH might be recruiting it's first press officer in the near future! I'd recommend the BA Media Fellow scheme to anyone, particularly those who are sceptical of how the media report what scientists do. Go and find out, you may be surprised!

Examples of work

Whilst at Countryfile I worked on a number of stories. The main one 'The quest for cosmetic perfection' was broadcast on Sunday 12th September 2004 with my name in the credits as researcher. For more details visit the Countryfile website <http://www.bbc.co.uk/nature/environment/programmes/countryfile/>