

Mark Steer – BBC Countryfile

In hindsight I probably could have picked a better time to become a media fellow. Having just returned from a conference in Finland I found myself homeless, in throws of writing up a Ph.D. whilst simultaneously starting up a new business (visit www.null-hypothesis.co.uk for further information and a rip-snorter of a good read!) and packing to go to Birmingham for a jolly time with Auntie. That's not to mention the impending job interview.

So as you might be able to imagine, there was quite a lot on my mind as I reached New Street Station, jumped in a taxi and made for my new digs out in south Brum, home of Countryfile researcher Adrian.

"What I could really do with", I thought as I walked up the drive, "what I could really do with is some good physical exercise to clear the head. A game of football or maybe," knocking on the door, "demolishing something."

"You must be Mark?" said a soft Black Country brogue, "I'm Adrian – sorry about the mess, I'm just knocking down a porch out the back."

Hallelujah!

A couple of hours and a beer or two later the porch was gone and life felt much more straightforward. How difficult could this television business be anyway? I was going to meet media heroes, have the chance to let my creative side surge past the constraints of academia, breathe deep and say contentedly "I made this". Next morning, the alarm sounded at 6.30. I pined for the student life.

The first few days were relatively untaxing. I went about my work looking through the daily papers for stories of interest, getting a feel for the kinds of stories that Countryfile run and trying to stay warm. The production had just moved from Pebble Mill to BBC Birmingham's new home at the Mailbox, which is all very high-tech and swish, but it is still Birmingham – not Guam, as the air-conditioning engineers seem to have thought.

Towards the end of the first week, having begun to find my feet a bit, that I felt that I started to show my true colours. Whilst sitting in on a dubbing session, years of geek-hood came to fruition: I spotted that a leatherback turtle, looking for a bit of the limelight, had snuck its way into a piece about loggerhead turtles. After a minute or two of wondering whether to say anything I piped up and consigned assistant producer Teresa, to a long evening rectifying the situation – and, boy, was I popular!

Actually, it was during that fateful dubbing session I had my first brush with fame and fortune, playing the coveted role of Greek government official. It was a voice only rôle, but it's a start. Forever after I can now say (and I do say quite regularly) I've been on national television and not just as a gurning moron in the background on a news item.

I suppose what I first noticed as being a big difference between the job I was doing for the BBC and my academic life was the freedom to switch between thinking about different things. If I'd momentarily had enough of researching red squirrels on the Isle of Wight, I could make a foray into efforts to preserve ancient woodland in Lincolnshire; academic research tends to be a bit more linear. Of course, once I found a project really worth pursuing then my research did become much more focussed; but it did still keep a greater element of diversity than my Ph.D.

The project I researched for most of my time at the BBC comprised a series of stories based around Romney Marshes, on the Kent-Sussex border. These stories ranged from efforts to survey and control mink using nifty little raft-contraptions to a vigorous debate about a proposed wind farm on the marshes. All of a sudden I was phoning up Downing Street and Conservative Central Office, hobnobbing with Peoples' people, organising interviews; quite a change for a theoretical biologist who usually exchanges only the occasional pun with his officemates and regards the electric telephone with a great deal of suspicion.

Further variety was brought to my days when I was allowed to go off and help/hinder on location. I toured the Southwest looking for urban seagulls; I harassed damp holidaymakers in Torquay; was soundman in Wilmslow and cameraman in Alnwick: unforgettable experiences each one, and experiences which brought home the range of skills you have to have to be successful in the TV business.

Countryfile staff, especially the directors, are scriptwriters, cameramen, interviewers, sound technicians, researchers, chauffeurs, editors and even on occasion crowd control experts – all rolled into one. Blimey. And with Countryfile being broadcast 48 weeks a year, it's never ending. There's a constant search for new stories, new angles, new locations, all of which have to be interesting, feasible and within the Countryfile remit: it's exhausting.

It was interesting to realise what a different mindset I had to occupy for researching stories for the Countryfile audience as opposed to for a scientific audience. Scientific research is obsessed by minutiae: the precise methods by which an experiment was carried out, or the exact parameters used in a model. A successful Countryfile project is big, bold and immediate – no matter how interesting something may be, if it needs a huge deal of explanation, it probably won't work, there just isn't time.

One of the questions we're asked to consider when writing these reports is what we feel we have taken from our time in media. Firstly I suppose I've taken a new realisation of quite how difficult it is to produce a television programme, the effort and organisation that goes into each piece: making sure that presenters, cameras,

booms and bodies are all in the right places at the right time; seeing to it that each piece is well written, edited, dubbed and tweaked; getting it all out on time week in, week out.

And what else did I take away from my time with Auntie? Well I took a few ear-bashings from Rachel Curran and a thoroughly enormous breakfast from Torquay, also a slight crush on one of the members of staff and that little warm feeling every time I say, "Michaela Strachan bought me a pint."

My thanks go to all the Countryfile team, I had a great, and in the end much too brief, time with you. Especial thanks to Adrian for not just putting me up, but putting up with me as well! Cheers.