



A young humpback whale rests at the surface of the Bay of Fundy.

PHOTO: Nick Hawkins

Ocean Spotlight: CONSERVATION MEDIA AS A TOOL FOR CHANGE

by **PAIGE CROWELL** /// EAC Volunteer

New Brunswick-based wildlife cinematographer Nick Hawkins advocates for conservation by capturing evocative visuals above and below water to spotlight species and ecosystems that viewers might not otherwise experience or appreciate.

Most recently he served as associate producer and director of photography for *Jawsome: Canada's Great White Sharks*, which premiered on CBC TV in January. However, his passion for marine life goes back to his student days. A series of what he characterizes as "unexpected twists and turns" in his career started while studying biology at the University of New Brunswick with his sights set on becoming a research scientist.

Ocean introduction

A field course in the Bay of Fundy afforded Hawkins the chance to get out of the classroom and on the water. It allowed him to experience the Atlantic Ocean in a more personal way, broadening his view of marine careers.

"For me, it changed my life," he explains. "In all of that time studying in university, it was those six months, and really those few weeks out on the ocean, that left an impression on me and gave me the clarity to know what I wanted to do with my life."

Through his experiences in academia, Hawkins recognized a disconnect between important scientific work being published and the audiences it was reaching. He became interested in what he describes as "the idea of communicating science to the public and filling that gap."

Media landscape

After graduating, Hawkins spent time working in Central America, making connections with local researchers and immersing himself in the flourishing field of conservation photography. He continued to adapt to the ever-evolving media landscape and progressed from shooting for small magazines to large international outlets. Hawkins' work has since been featured in *National Geographic*, *Canadian Geographic*, *BBC Wildlife Magazine* and *Canadian Wildlife Magazine*.

In the intervening years Hawkins' focus has shifted from photography to cinematography. As his career began, print media's pre-eminence was drawing to an end and the traditional magazine photo spread was no longer the holy grail. Hawkins saw an opportunity in film. He explains, "I saw that not only was there a vibrant industry, there were bigger budgets and I could do bigger

projects, but also that the media had changed for connecting with people... [film] is a really powerful storytelling medium.”

Connecting through the lens

Understanding and valuing the world around us is paramount to prioritizing its conservation, and Hawkins’ work focuses on facilitating this connection. This led him to complete the work he is most proud of to date, chronicling a rarely documented species disappearing before our eyes: the critically endangered North Atlantic right whale.

The poignant visuals Hawkins produced helped viewers relate to the unique and important lives of the individual whales featured, and to empathize with the sorrow of their loss. His work fostered an emotional connection to the whales and those working to save them, which supported shifting attitudes towards the urgency of the whales’ plight and our collective responsibility to the species. This work was captured in the film *Last of the Right Whales*, which has been widely viewed locally and around the globe.

Strategic impact

Beyond his natural curiosity, Hawkins seeks projects where he can make a strategic impact. He explains: “I try to look for things where there is great momentum by environmental organizations or conservation groups on a goal or objective, whether that’s establishing a marine protected area or a shift in regulation. There are often areas that environmental organizations are doing such great work on and it gets to the level where if we just have a boost, it can be a tipping point where you can push the needle.”



Aerial view of the complex and beautiful coastal ecosystem along Nova Scotia’s south shore.
PHOTO: Nick Hawkins



A lion’s mane jellyfish drifts in the current off Nova Scotia.
PHOTO: Nick Hawkins



Wildlife cinematographer
Nick Hawkins.
PHOTO: Tom Cheney

Effective content must also captivate. Hawkins explains: “I look for a charismatic animal that I know I can tell an interesting story about, or an ecosystem under threat, or things that haven’t been filmed before.” While conserving keystone species such as whales and sharks often bring additional benefits to the ecosystems that support them, Hawkins also seeks to highlight more humble subjects. “A challenge as a filmmaker and photographer is to try [...] to reveal the lives of lesser-known species, or species that are less charismatic, or are different from us.”

While there is a target audience and impact for every project, recent feedback on his *Jawsome* production was particularly touching for Hawkins. He received a hand-written letter from a young shark conservation enthusiast from Alberta. “You don’t need any greater review than that to know you’re reaching the right audience,” says Hawkins.

In reflecting on his international portfolio, Hawkins still prefers to work on the Atlantic Coast where he first connected with the aquatic world. His next adventure therefore suits him just fine, as he embarks on a multi-year television project to focus on Canada’s oceans with shooting throughout Atlantic Canada. More of Hawkins’ work can be seen at nickjhawks.com.

Paige (she/her) is a conservation biologist living and working in Halifax. In her free time, she enjoys being in and on the water.