

# CAREERS

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AUDREY HALL



Biologist Stephani Gordon turned to freelance film-making to capture nature and science research on camera.

## VISUAL MEDIA

# Science on the screen

*Film-making offers scientists the chance to transform research into stunning visuals.*

BY ROBERTA KWOK

Stephani Gordon has filmed squid in the Gulf of California, a nineteenth-century whaling boat in the northwestern Hawaiian Islands and a search for Amelia Earhart's plane in the central Pacific. In 2017, she shot footage off the coast of Mexico of pelagic creatures such as the paper nautilus (*Argonauta nouryi*) and vampire jellyfish (*Vampyrocrosota childressi*).

Gordon, sole proprietor of Open Boat Films in Portland, Oregon, spent more than a decade working as a field biologist, studying seabirds, sharks and other marine animals. But from 2004 to 2005, while working as a marine-ecosystem research specialist at the US National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) in Honolulu, Hawaii, she served as a field guide for

two nature photographers and was impressed by the large audience their images drew.

In December 2005, she learnt from a friend about a graduate programme in science and natural-history film-making at Montana State University in Bozeman, intended for students who have science, engineering or technology backgrounds. "A huge lightbulb went off" after reading the programme description, Gordon remembers. She recalls thinking: "This is what I need to do. This fits me."

Gordon had no experience making videos, but she had taken photographs for her university's student newspaper, and had once considered photojournalism as a career. And she had always thought that science TV programmes

should include more field-research details.

Gordon won a place on the course and learnt how to write scripts, direct a production and edit video. She began freelancing during her studies and continued full-time after graduation, working for clients such as *National Geographic*, the BBC, PBS and NOAA. She has no regrets about leaving research behind, even though freelance film-making presents challenges, among them an unstable income. "It just feels like the right medium for me," she says.

Video offers researchers a dynamic way to communicate scientific concepts, ranging from the way microscopic algae tumble through water to dancers enacting Brownian motion. With the rise of mobile devices and a generation that expects online visual content, the demand for videos is booming. YouTube boasts more than 1 billion users, who collectively ►

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For accompanying videos, see the online story at [go.nature.com/2blrafu](http://go.nature.com/2blrafu)