Co-production partners present Giant Squid’s big success story

WHEN NHK’s Hiromichi Iwasaki set out to capture on film the elusive giant squid, he wasn’t to know that he would discover something nearly as rare: a co-production where all four partners emerge at the other end happy, satisfied and ready to go again.

At the MIPDoc Co-Production Case Study on the production, delegates heard how Giant Squid: The Monster Is Real brought together NHK, Discovery Studios, ZDF Enterprises (ZDFE) and ARTE France. It required marine research, expensive R&D to design submersibles capable of diving to 1,000 metres, ultra-HD underwater cameras, new red lights invisible to giant squid — and exceptional levels of trust.

“The risk was huge,” said Iwasaki. “It would cost a lot and there was no guarantee of success. So the day before I pitched it to the boss of NHK, I had a conference call with Clark Bunting, Discovery’s boss. I told him that if he said yes, we’d get NHK’s approval. He said yes that day. My boss said yes the next.”

Discovery Studio’s Lee Bartlett said: “That yes was unusual, and a testament to Hiro’s credibility.”

Bartlett had a ‘squid summit’ in DC to cement the relationships, and they were ready to go.

Delegates then heard how the dive, scheduled for March 2011, was delayed, first by the tsunami and then by ‘the Korea Problem’. But when it finally happened, and the cameras captured an enormous three-metre squid, eerily golden under the red lights, the long wait was over.

“Both NHK and Discovery had crew onboard,” said Bartlett. “We both cut our own versions, and we both had access to everything the other crew had shot.”

When ARTE and ZDF saw the footage, they both wanted in.

“We knew we would have to air very quickly after NHK did, or our viewers would have seen it online,” said Catherine Alvaresse of ARTE France. To achieve this, ARTE and ZDF made a joint offer, and ARTE agreed to waive its usual demand for six months exclusivity. But they still needed their own versions of the show. And fast.

“NHK trusted us to make a version, and ARTE agreed to use our cut,” said Kristina Hollstein of ZDF Enterprises. “We knew this would be complex, but it turned out perfectly. NHK was so helpful. No email went unanswered. Every request for material, administrative help, financial information was met.”

Bartlett described this as his best co-production experience ever, and Alvaresse reported that it got ARTE’s best share ever for primetime on a Sunday. “It shows that with good partners, anything is possible,” Alvaresse said. “When there’s a story like this, go for it.”

All four partners are co-producing NHK’s next documentary, Legends Of The Deep: Deep Sea Sharks.

ARGENTINIAN producers have brought 70 new documentary series to market this year under the auspices of INCAA, the country’s National Film Board. Among the eight series previewed at INCAA’s Snack & Screen event on Sunday were: 8W: Extreme Women (8 x 26 mins), about women in boxing, football and motocross; Entrepreneurial Homeland (8 x 26 mins), about how co-operatives are confronting the economic crisis; Photos, Portrait Of A Country (8 x 26 mins), which reveals the powerful stories behind some historic photos; and Joy And Dignity, which follows a young Buenos Aires slum dweller as he uncovers the painters, musicians, rappers and circus performers in his community. Biographies of Latin America’s presidents and Argentine footballer Lionel Messi also featured. Pictured at the MIPDoc event were: INCAA’s Alejandro Righini (left) and Bernardo Bergeret, with Ventana Sur’s Silvina Cornillon, the Ministry of External Relations and Culture’s Tobias Breton and INCAA’s German Cañi.

A TOTAL of 1,325 titles were registered in the MIPDoc DVD library this year, and the projects seeking partners numbered 159 — 17% up on last year. Gordon Main of Barefoot Rascals was among producers who took the opportunity afforded by the new Commissioners’ Meet Up sessions to discuss his projects one-to-one with top international commissioning editors. Main is pictured with France Televisions’ head of international development, documentaries, Ann Julienne.