Better Together
Andy Fry checks in with factual producers and distributors to understand the secret sauce behind successful co-production partnerships.

Between the creative ambitions of producers and the pressures on channel budgets, international co-production has become critical to the effective functioning of the factual TV business.

"Co-pros are the bigger projects—the ones that have higher production values, where more money is involved, the ones that play bigger editorial and financial roles for all partners," says Ralf Rückauer, the VP for factual at ZDF Enterprises (ZDFE).

"We are an emerging channel that has to stretch its resources, but we always set a high bar for our production values," says David Royle, the executive VP of programming and production at Smithsonian Networks. "To achieve this, we need strong partners."

Yuni Sudo, senior producer for international co-productions at NHK in Japan, affirms the growing importance of collaboration in documentary filmmaking.

"With new platforms and services arising, we think it is important to find the right partners to combine our abilities to create something that has a large impact and a big buzz. Co-pros can also be a way to exchange thoughts and ideas and enable us to find a better solution" to today's social issues.

But just what does it take to make sure that the result entails audiences in multiple markets?

**SUBJECT MATTERS**

For Rückauer, the starting point has to be choosing the right subject matter. "Co-pros tend to work best when they focus on topics such as the mysteries and beauties of nature, incidents and dark chapters of history or questions about our existence and the universe that we live in. In short: volcanoes, sharks, Hitler, dinosaurs, the oceans, pyramids, battlefields, planets and God."

Mark Reynolds, the director of factual at BBC Worldwide, takes a position similar to Rückauer's on the appropriate subject matter for cross-border alliances.

"Natural history and science work especially well for us. We do some domestic shows in these genres, but if you choose the right subjects and approach them from a global perspective, they prove popular with buyers. Co-pro can also be right for some pure documentary subjects where one partner has amazing access. Let's say, for example, that a prestigious institution has granted behind-the-scenes access to just one partner."

History is an area that can be challenging from a co-pro perspective. Reynolds notes. "You can build co-pros around anniversaries, iconic events and global conflicts. But it is a little harder because you often have different editorial perspectives coming to the table. Sometimes you find historical topics merging a bit into current-affairs perspectives."

For Sabine Holzer, a former ORF executive who is now head of TV at Terra Mater Factual Studios, "topics that best suit our documentary co-productions are those that appeal to audiences all around the world—from major blue-chip documentary series (such as the forthcoming three-part Okavango: Thread of Life) to very specific one-offs, for instance, the upcoming Ant Mountain presented by David Attenborough."

Echoing his peers, Smithsonian's Royle says wildlife programming and big technology lend themselves to co-production. "Blue-chip natural history crosses all international borders—not least because animals don't speak—so the programs are easy to dub and version. And as filming wildlife is unpredictable and expensive, broadcasters are keen to share the risk."

But he is also "struck by the ongoing appeal of ancient history. I think it's partly because new technology like ground-penetrating radar and lidar is allowing archaeologists to see below surfaces. This has enabled the Smithsonian Channel to be at the forefront of some great discoveries, from the first dig inside Stonehenge in 50 years to the discovery of the gladiator school at Carnunum to the remains of the royal city of Angkor in the Cambodian forest. I also think advances in TV technology have played a huge part. Now you can use CGI to recreate a cinematic epic, as our partners at Korea's EBS have done with Qin Shi Huang: The King of Eternal Empire, or you can use drones to capture the landscape and structures of the ancient world, as Ireland's Tile Films has done for our series Sacred Sites."

Science, natural history and ancient civilizations comprise the top three genres for NHK's co-pros, Sudo says. Projects that illustrate this range include The Body, focusing on the human body and the revolutionary new findings in medical science. A co-production with S4C, France Télévisions and other yet to be named broadcasters, the series "uses our newly developed 8K-UHD imaging technology, and also cutting-edge CGI, to explore the human body as a huge inner network," Sudo says.

Also on the slate are Deep Ocean, a co-production with ZDF and Nat Geo WILD, and Looking Through the Pyramids, a co-production with Bonne Pioche, HIP.institute and France Télévisions. The latter, says Sudo, is "an ambitious project that will aim to reveal, for the first time, the inner structure of the Great Pyramids of Giza."

**THE BIG IDEA**

It is also important, co-pro veterans agree, to make sure the collaboration is led by creative considerations. ZDFE factual's Rückauer stresses that a co-production should never just be about chasing the money.

"Our philosophy is to encourage producers first to be creative and then think about partners. An example is Size Matters from Screen Glue and Jasper James. His idea to create a science program on the size of things and his experimental approach was so unique that we closed a development deal with him. ZDF's Terra X strand then became part of it, as well as ARTE and BBC Four. None would have asked us up front to create a science program on the size of things."

Partners should also have some creative input, but the level of input is highly dependent on the deal.

"Some co-production partners don't get deeply editorially involved, while others prefer to give detailed editorial input," says Terra Mater's Holzer. "But the common vision of what the completed film should look like is certainly key to a successful co-production."
Examples of successful doc co-pros for Terra Mater include Soul of the Elephant and David Attenborough's Light on Earth. “The first, a co-production with wildlife filmmakers Dereck and Beverly Joubert, Thirteen/WNET Nature and France 5, provides exclusive access to the lives and behavior of elephants. All partners were striving for the same grandeur in cinematography, emotions and storytelling. Light on Earth by Martin Dohrn and Joe Loncraine, on the other hand, was a co-pro with CuriosityStream, BBC, ABC Australia and UKTV. It was fruitful due to the mixture of technical innovation throughout the production, producing stunning one-of-a-kind footage, topped with the enthusiastic participation of Sir David Attenborough.”

CREATIVE INPUT
Royle notes that with Smithsonian’s “substantial financial contributions to co-productions, we always expect to have creative input. Luckily, most of our partners want us to have editorial involvement—I think because we try to be culturally sensitive and we have a reputation for dramatic storytelling, creative quality and editorial integrity. Of course, there are some challenges in working with us. I think we are one of the few channels left that has an independent fact-checking team—experts from the Smithsonian Institution review all our films to ensure they are fair and accurate.”

While creative input from partners can be valuable, it also helps not to have too many voices. “You don’t want to have too many partners on a project; otherwise it places a tremendous burden on the producer who has to answer to so many people and has so many different sensibilities to satisfy,” Royle says.

But of course, Royle acknowledges that there are exceptions. “We’ve just finished the 4K series Warrior Women with Urban Canyons. Sebastian Peiter combined the Smithsonian Channel with at least ten European co-pro partners to make the series—and I believe his other co-production partners are as pleased as we are. He deserves a medal for diplomacy!”

Sudo says that for projects initiated by other producers or broadcasters, NHK might be less involved editorially, or may take on a role as a simple co-financer. But the organization’s preference is to be involved in all aspects of the creative process, from script development to actual filming, as well as in contributing to the promotion and distribution of the program. “Our focus is always on combining an international team of creative talent and expertise so that the end product becomes stronger in its universal appeal. Balancing creative input from different partners is always a challenge, but if done carefully and sensibly, we believe partnership can bring out an amazing result for everyone.”

Sudo cites Tokyo Phoenix, a co-production with CC&C (Clarke Costeloe & Co) and ARTE. “In this history project, NHK provided its extensive archive footage and the historical research from our experienced director, where our co-producer, CC&C, contributed to the project with the colorization techniques and their eloquent storytelling,” he says.

CALLING THE EXPERTS
BBC Worldwide’s Reynolds says it is standard practice to hand the central production responsibility to one outfit, “but there are times when you can draw on the creativity and expertise of all the partners involved. In Wild Japan, co-producer NHK provided [equipment], teams and access to areas we wouldn’t have reached without them.”

Kyle Murdoch, the managing director of NHNZ, says his company is “focused on true co-pros—we expect our partners to have editorial input. Our co-producers are investing so they can share with their local audience and they know their audience much better than we do. He acknowledges that “it’s not easy managing editorial input from multiple co-producers, but given the amount
of investment required for these shows it is vital to take the time to listen and discuss editorial opinions.”

NHNZ, which recently partnered with ZDF Enterprises and several broadcasters on Big Pacific, is a new addition to the Blue Ant Media family. Blue Ant has been ramping up its co-production efforts, in part to bolster its Love Nature streaming service, a joint venture with Smithsonian Networks.

“We are involved in giving creative input, but every partner is different,” says Ward Platt, the former head of National Geographic International channels who recently joined Blue Ant as its CEO of global networks and kids. “We work together to ensure all needs are being met in every unique partnership that we have. Our goal is to produce internationally successful content, and that will happen with strong partnerships with a common goal.”

An example of a successful partnership, says Platt, is a long-standing relationship with Blink Films that has resulted in 30 hours of content, including Secrets of Wild Australia and Arabian Inferno for Love Nature. A new two-year deal between the companies will create 24 hours of natural-history fare.

**TALKING IT OUT**

As a battle-hardened co-pro executive, ZDFE.factual’s Rückerau has learned a number of key lessons about the collaboration process. “Lesson one is, be patient,” he says. “Co-production doesn’t come quick and easy. You have to convince people to spend a lot of money, and in return, they have to give up control. Lesson two is, it’s worth taking the time and effort to create a bigger, brighter production that will build your reputation. And lesson three is, find the right key personnel on the creative side (producer) as well as on the financing side (broadcasters or platforms). It’s always a matter of trust and understanding and you need to have a very specific ‘can do’ spirit.”

An example of well-executed collaboration, says Rückerau, is The Celts: Blood, Iron & Sacrifice, made with the BBC, among other partners. “It started in a big meeting with around 20 commissioners from Germany and the U.K., all in one room. Trying to find common ground between the British and German audience, we found that good documentaries about the Celts had not been done for quite a while, and that this may be a topic that could attract British, German and international audiences.

With a starting point like that, a fifty-fifty spirit was born, and the BBC and ZDF joined forces, editorially as well as financially.”

For BBC Worldwide’s Reynolds, one tactic that can aid the collaboration process is proper planning. “For example, you can arrange to swap talent in or out to suit the needs of each market. In Expedition New Earth, the BBC version has Stephen Hawking talking about the logistics of colonizing new planets. But our French partner, France Télévisions, used [physicist] Christophe Galfard for their version.”

It’s crucial, he adds, to be clear about what you want from the outset “and that should involve face-to-face meetings where you get around the table and talk about how the project will be executed. You should also build time into the schedule for unexpected developments. Co-pro partners can join halfway through, but that does make it harder.”

**NO HOLDING BACK**

Exploring the ingredients of a successful co-pro, Smithsonian’s Royle says they thrive on “open communication and strong personal relationships. It’s at least a two-way process, and co-pro partners have to be open to give and take. The best producers understand this—and strive to keep the broadcasters well informed and engaged during production. Some will take the time to send photos from shoots, or occasional video highlights. This keeps everyone engaged and excited.”

Terra Mater’s Holzer reiterates the point that the key to collaboration is communication. “It’s of utmost importance to converse on the same level about the editorial and cinematographic goals so that in the end everyone is happy and proud of the final product.”

Echoing his peers, NHK’s Sudo notes, “Whenever there is concern or doubt, each party should honestly address the issue and openly discuss the problem. It is crucial to understand the difference in the styles or narrative and to be ready to create different versions respectively. Although these discussions require time, by sharing the vision and goal of the project, the parties can ensure a good result for everyone.”

Summing up, NHNZ’s Murdoch offers up his co-pro do’s and don’ts: “Do keep an open mind, listen, communicate opinions clearly, have regular face-to-face meetings, over deliver. Don’t assume your ideas and ways of working are right for your partner.”