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## Virtual experiences seek to inspire users to protect the natural world

2019 Jackson Wild Summit showcased benefits of digital views of the wild.

By Billy Arnold

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NOAA displayed the cameras it used to create its 360-degree underwater virtual reality experience during the 2019 Jackson Summit at Jackson Lake Lodge. Kate Thompson, the head of NOAA's Office of National Marine Sanctuaries' Education and Outreach Division, called the camera the "Boxfish 360."

KATHRYN ZIESIG / NEWS&GUIDE

Nick Zachar, a filmmaker working for the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, thinks a lot of people know about — or at least have heard of — coral bleaching.

Reefs are bleached when higher sea temperatures cause their corals to expel algae that live inside them. That expulsion turns the corals white and kills them, as was the case between 2014 and 2017 when 75% of reefs on Earth experienced bleaching, according to NOAA.

That process has been covered by news outlets ranging from The Wall Street Journal to the Miami Herald, so it's in the public domain. But Zachar said people likely don't know about coral diseases, other processes threatening reefs in places like the Florida Keys.

He and a team of videographers from NOAA are setting out to change that.

They're looking to inform people about the problem and show them what they can do to fight it. But it's not like Zachar and Kate Thompson, the head of NOAA's Office of National Marine Sanctuaries' Education and Outreach Division, are just going out and boring people with lectures. They're trying something new: virtual reality.

"When you put people into a headset and they're seeing people really doing something to put new corals onto these reefs, they're seeing that they can do something about that," Zachar said. "It's stories like those that need to be in a VR experience because you're immersing people. It gives them a different feeling."

Zachar and Thompson were members of one of the many teams of virtual or augmented reality filmmakers and media professionals at the 2019 Jackson Wild Summit. That group of creatives showed the broad diversity in the burgeoning virtual reality industry, which seems to have taken hold at the conservation-oriented summit. Creators of virtual reality-focused filmmaking equipment and the creatives themselves were able to showcase their wares each of the seven days of the event.

There were immersive video games, 360-degree immersive experiences like NOAA's, and augmented reality tablet apps that allowed users to interact with rare marine wildlife, as well as an artistic experience that shrank users down to the size of a plankton — virtually — and allowed them to rise through the ocean, discovering how microplastics affect the seas.

Mac Cordona, the founder and CEO of cWave, which created the video game and augmented reality platform, described the range of experiences as "XR."

"X is a place holder for A" — augmented — and "V" — virtual reality, she said, as well as any other kind of virtual systems creatives dream up.

But for all the filmmakers involved in Jackson Wild's XR world, there seemed to be a common purpose: allowing people to access worlds they hoped to protect.

Thompson perhaps put it best, describing how she hopes virtual experiences can help protect marine sanctuaries across the United States and world.

"How do we get people to appreciate the underwater treasures across the country?" Thompson asked. Her answer: "Taking them there."

## **Overcoming doubts**

Not all of the filmmakers, though, were always gung-ho about XR.

Zachar said he was originally hesitant. A world where people were walking around with augmented reality goggles didn't appeal to him. Adam May, the creator of the shrinking plastic-focused experience, said he originally felt similar, and was turned off by the photo of Mark Zuckerberg walking through a crowd of hundreds of goggle wearing tech executives.

"That sent chills down my spine," May said, "I don't want to be ushering in the end of mankind."

But that photo encouraged May, who has also produced an immersive virtual reality film about Africa, to think about XR differently.

What emerged from that introspection was "Drop in the Ocean," an artistic exhibition that has been installed at venues ranging from the Tribeca Film Festival to policy summits aimed at protecting the ocean. And, rather than providing a solo virtual experience, "Drop in the Ocean" walks people through the experience together.

"The result we've got — I hope — is a good experience where audiences who could be strangers come together, are taken on a totally crazy wild journey and come away with a better sense of the natural world and a sense of responsibility," May said.

Lynn Jeffords, a Jackson Wild volunteer who tried out some of the XR experiences, said she, like May, originally had doubts. She worried that virtual reality could be "as addictive as video games."

But Jeffords said there were positives and negatives to anything new — or old, for that matter. For her the possibilities are endless, especially “for people who are impaired,” whether physically, financially or in any other way.

“Maybe someone has a bad knee or a bad back or maybe they don’t have the funds to fly to Hawaii,” Jeffords said. Through XR, they can “experience very close to what it’s actually like.”

Cordona agreed. She hopes that people of all means and backgrounds will be able to use immersive virtual experiences to engage with science, whether that’s through collecting virtual data on marine life or learning about endangered vaquita whales.

“With film you are watching science happen. With interactives you are doing the science,” Cordona said. “I am the one making the difference. I am the one that has the power to cause change. So you’re empowering people to make a difference.”

Of course, not all virtual experiences are interactive like Cordona’s. The majority of the exhibitions at Jackson Wild were experienced as one would watch a film. There were narratives, or at least visual arcs throughout, and, occasionally, you could move through the experience, as users did in “Drop in the Ocean.”

Still, all the filmmakers the News&Guide spoke with shared Cordona’s focus on empowerment — or at least education.

Like the “Drop in the Ocean” team, the NOAA team was focused on bringing technology to trade shows and getting in front of members of Congress to show them the diversity of the oceans. Their goal? Secure funding to protect them.

## **Making an impact**

But while people like Cordona were taking their technology to schools and other learning institutions, much of the technology remained relegated to the world of trade shows and policy conferences.

One user of “Drop in the Ocean,” Sibylle Hofmann, thought it would be beneficial to get the technology — and the conservation stories that came with it — to the masses.

“If you experience it, you get this emotional impact that you need to do something,” Hofmann said, noting that if people in supermarkets could learn about the pervasiveness of plastic in the ocean firsthand, “it would let them rethink certain things.”

Zachar agreed. He said he was inspired to become a filmmaker after watching the BBC’s series “Blue Planet” and thought getting topical XR experiences in front of kids could create a similar spark with younger generations.

“Who are these things going to inspire?” Zachar asked. “This is like the next new thing that’s going to inspire the next ocean stewards, the next filmmakers.”

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## **Billy Arnold**

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