

Roger Horrocks

with Peter Rowlands

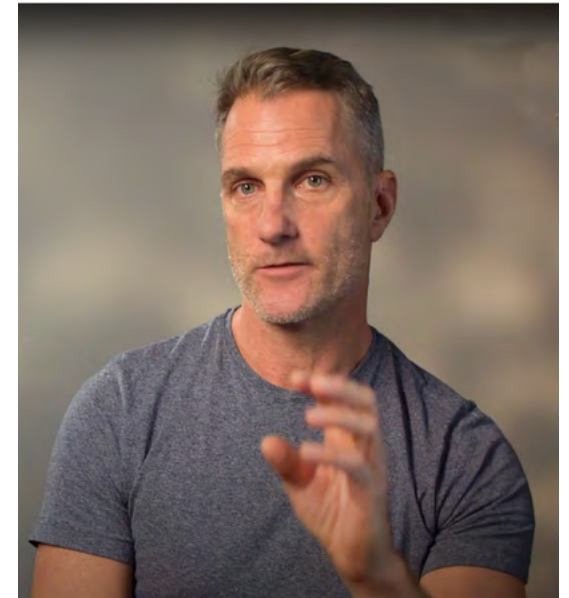
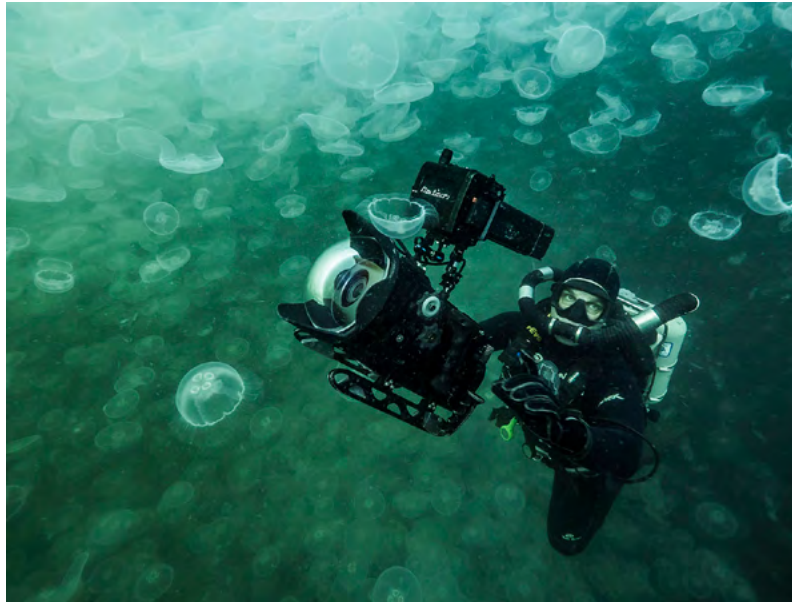
For the last fifteen years, Roger Horrocks has worked as a wildlife cinematographer on some of the most ambitious and acclaimed documentaries ever created, including *My Octopus Teacher*, *Our Planet*, and *Blue Planet 2*, and, most recently, as sequence cameraman for the latest Netflix production, *Our Oceans*, narrated by Barack Obama.

Roger, thank you for taking the time to consider my questions.

Q) To most amateur underwater video shooters, to be able to do what they love, full-time and for payment, is the dream. Does being a full-time professional pierce that dream with serious responsibilities, an ever-present fear of failure and long periods of inactivity both in between jobs or waiting for the marine life, or are you living the dream?

I believe being a wildlife and underwater cinematographer is possibly one of the best jobs in the world.

At our work level, you collaborate with incredible teams and contribute to some of the most ambitious and well-funded series ever created. Your work reaches a global audience and can have impact by raising awareness about wildlife and the state of our planet. That level of influence and recognition is deeply rewarding. Being so immersed in nature is a rich and rewarding experience.



There is significant pressure in this profession. Shoots often cost hundreds of thousands of pounds, and as the cinematographer, you're on the sharp end of the wedge. If you miss a critical moment, there's nothing the rest of the team can do to recover it. But I thrive under that kind of pressure—it's a big part of what I love about this job. The need to deliver in high-stakes situations pushes you to be at your best.

There are also downsides to the profession. One of the biggest is the time spent away from home. I try not to be away for more than 150 days a year, which means I am home more than I am away. Beyond that, it can get very tough on personal and family relationships.

Financially, the field is not as rewarding as people might think. Coming from a corporate business background, I've often reflected on this. As the industry evolved in the BBC Natural History Unit, which has a public service ethic, it was almost seen

as a virtue to work for very little. Sure, it's a great job and a privilege in many ways, but when you factor in the long hours, working weekends, and lack of overtime or dangerous pay, the payback per hour is hardly eye-watering.

However, I see this state of affairs as a given and something I have almost no control over. Entrenching yourself in the Victim Triangle and complaining about it is pointless. As a freelancer, the opportunity for more significant wealth creation lies outside the shoots in the field, it lies in what you do with the time you have at home. How do you create additional revenue streams which leverage your cinematography skills or have nothing to do with the industry at all? This has always been a focus for me and something I have done to good effect.

Q: As you developed were you inspired by any cinematographers in particular? I understand you assisted Didier Noirod in the early days. How were you fortunate to work and learn from such a legend?

The wildlife cinematography industry, particularly in Bristol, operates on an apprenticeship model. Through this process, you learn by assisting skilled cinematographers and, by osmosis and observation, develop the knowledge required to one day transition from assistant to camera operator.

In the early years of my career, I was very fortunate to work with some incredible mentors. One was Didier Noireau, Jacques Cousteau's cameraman, and another was Justin Maguire, a South African based overseas.

Both Didier and Justin were instrumental in shaping my development—refining my visual style and teaching me the spirit and approach needed to undertake these shoots and craft at the highest level.

I assisted Didier for a few years and made a film with Craig and Damon Foster that documented Didier's quest to film Nile crocodiles underwater in the Okavango Delta. During this period, I also had the privilege of assisting Doug Anderson and Hugh Miller, two of the very best in the world.

What's unique about these mentorships is that they're not so much about formal training or instruction. Instead, you learn through observation and immersion. Having such mentors in your life is transformative because they set a high benchmark. It's then up to you to close the gap and rise to the level at which they operate.

Q) Your earlier career in the 'corporate' world seems unrelated to underwater filming but were there lessons and procedures which have helped set you apart from other underwater camera operators?

Working in corporate was a stimulating time of learning, working alongside talented individuals dedicated to solving complex problems and managing intricate situations. These experiences not only enriched my management and financial skill set but also laid a strong foundation that I've been able to carry forward into my work in wildlife cinematography.

The biggest difference between working in the corporate world and working in the wildlife industry on a shoot lies in the levels of complexity. In a large corporation, you're dealing with massive systemic complexity. There are emergent properties at play, and it can often feel like you're pulling



levers without fully understanding what's driving the results. This is due to the scale of the organization, the inherent redundancies, and the intricate systems that come with managing something so large.

In contrast, the natural history space operates with small, agile teams, which I find incredibly compelling. The goals are very specific, the timeframes are clearly defined, and the indicators of success are unmistakable. You know immediately when you've succeeded and just as clearly when you've failed. That kind of direct feedback makes

the work incredibly rewarding and satisfying.

Q: As our readers are very interested in equipment and gear reviews, I must ask what equipment you currently own/use, and if there is something on your wish list.

I currently run two RED DSMC2 systems, a Gemini and a Helium, and two Nauticam Cine systems, one an LT and the other an XL. As a general rule, I have both with me underwater at all times (one being carried by my assistant), and this allows me to work

with different lens setups, such as 10-24mm, 24-70mm, or 70-200mm, ensuring maximum productivity underwater and enabling a wide range of shots sizes.

Beyond cameras, my setup includes rebreathers, grip equipment like tripods (standard, underslung, and quad pods), hand-crank sliders, and other supporting gear for benthic shoots.

Another area where I've made significant investments is in drones. As a qualified drone pilot, I consider this skill set essential in today's industry. One of my favourite aspects of drone work is dual operating on an Inspire—it demands intense teamwork. The Inspire 3 is a phenomenal, next-level machine, and along with the Mavic Cine Pro 3, you have two insanely powerful camera systems that deliver in almost any condition.

Additionally, I've invested in a local RIB (Rigid Inflatable Boat). It's an 8-meter semi-rigid inflatable with twin 175-horsepower Suzuki engines, fully equipped for gimbal work, drone operations, and dive ops.

Regarding gear, I believe we've reached a point where high-end digital systems are sufficiently mature, and if you can't create compelling footage now, you never will. While there are always items on a wishlist—like a pan-and-tilt pole cam system—it's a big investment and not practical

unless tied to a major project with a clear return on investment.

Overall, I'm very happy with my current gear. Interestingly, I've never sold any of my equipment. For example, I still use my Nikon D800, which I bought in 2013, as a dedicated time-lapse kit. Selling older gear doesn't make much sense to me, as resale value is often too low. Instead, I find ways to repurpose it—for use as a tow cam, pole cam, or drop cam. Every piece of gear has its place, and keeping it allows me to be versatile on shoots.

Q: What advantage do the RED cameras bring over conventional ENG cameras?

I've never used an ENG camera myself, but I have some pretty clear ideas about why RED has come to dominate the natural history space. When the industry transitioned to digital, RED was the first to innovate with modularity and significant price disruption. That strategy worked exceptionally well for them.

While they haven't fully delivered on their "obsolescence obsolete" promise, I think RED often gets unfair criticism. What they achieved in disrupting the industry was remarkable. As camera operators, we've benefited tremendously—owning a high-end cinema camera system has never been easier.



Another key factor was their digital resolution. At the time, RED's 6K and 8K systems were groundbreaking. In the wildlife industry, where you're often filming at long distances, being able to crop into an image in post-production or do a push-in without losing quality was a game-changer.

The variable frame rates are another standout feature. Since we're not dealing with syncing dialogue, we can tailor frame rates for each scene or animal behaviour. That flexibility is incredible for wildlife filmmaking.

Then there's REDCODE RAW. The compression is astonishing—it

keeps file sizes manageable while maintaining phenomenal image quality. It's a big plus, especially when working in remote locations with limited storage.

Pre-record functionality is also a massive deal. The ability to run 30 seconds of pre-record means you can capture critical moments that might otherwise be missed.

Q) I have read that you rarely use additional lighting. Is this to keep it simple or do you prefer to capture behaviour naturally?

When it comes to lighting, I'm a big advocate for natural light and try to use it as much as possible. It's my preference, and I lean heavily toward relying on it in almost all situations.

That said, there are times underwater when using lights is unavoidable—like when shooting at significant depths or in caves where natural light simply doesn't reach. In those cases, the use of lights becomes a stylistic choice. I embrace the fact that lights are being used, letting the shadows and contrasts become part of the visual story rather than trying to hide it.

I've occasionally used lights in shallower waters, but my rule is that the lighting should look natural. If it's obvious that artificial lighting has been used, it detracts from the authenticity of the shot.

Another principle I stick to is only using off-board lighting. This means having an assistant manage the lights, which creates a more dynamic and cinematic result. On-camera lights, in contrast, tend to produce flat, unappealing footage that lacks depth. Of course, I recognize that solo shooters don't always have the luxury of an assistant, but for me, off-board

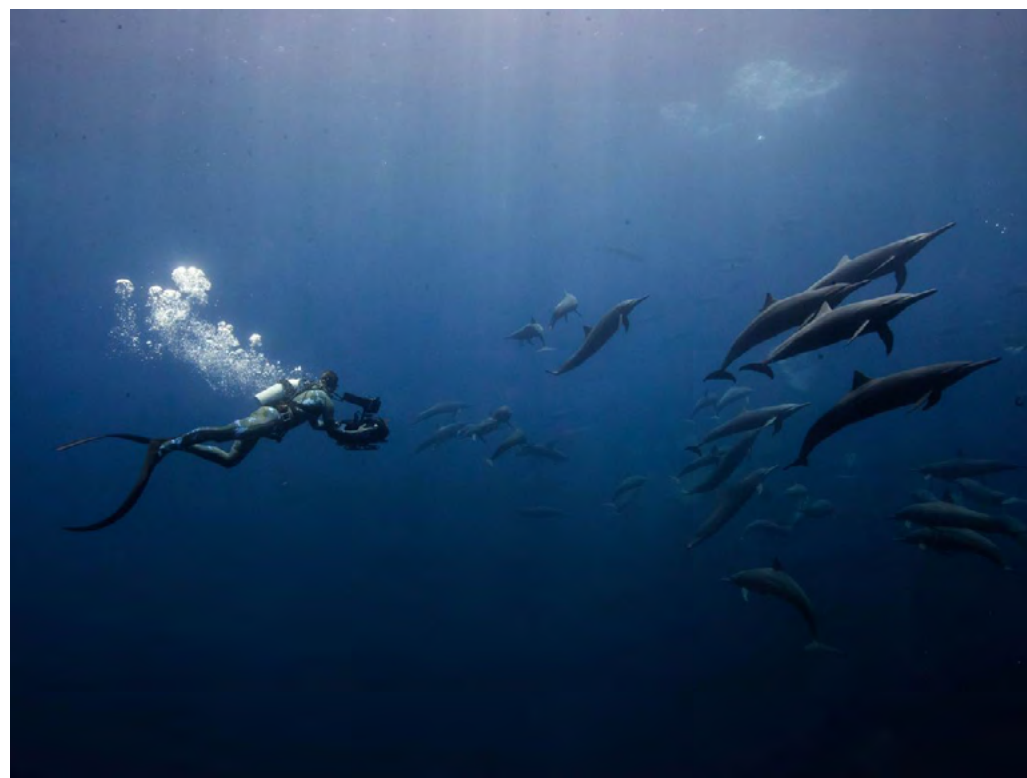
lighting is a non negotiable.

Q) Do you set white balance underwater or shoot RAW and leave that to post-production?

When shooting on a RED camera, the standard practice is to set the white balance to daylight or 5600 Kelvin and leave it there. You shoot everything in RAW and don't do any white balancing underwater. I take a grey card and a colour card down with me as references, filming them in situ. This provides the colourist with a baseline for what the colours actually look like.

For projects like those for Netflix or the BBC, they often have strict guidelines for how footage should be acquired. For instance, creating custom looks or profiles directly in-camera is generally not allowed. Early on, I experimented with creating a look in REDCine and applying it to the camera. While it made the on-screen image more attractive by showing a LUT rather than a flat RAW image, I eventually shifted my focus to the framing and movement, trusting the RAW footage would look stunning after grading.

The approach depends on the production when I occasionally shoot with cameras like the FX3. Production companies usually require footage to be shot in LOG for professional work.



However, for personal projects, I might do a basic white balance, especially if I'm staying at a consistent depth. This can simplify post-production and save time. In some cases, I'll use one of the Cine profiles, which gives a "what you see is what you get" (WYSIWYG) experience.

Q) Personally, I think your open-water action sequences give the viewer the closest feeling of actually being there. The camera almost seems locked off leaving the action to come into frame, develop and leave, ideally. Is this why it is so effective or does your physical

performance underwater encourage your subjects to forget you are there?

I established myself in the industry through my open-water baitball and fast-moving pelagic sequences. My big breaks came on dolphin projects. John Downer's *Spy in the Pod* was my first significant opportunity, which required immense effort filming wild dolphins in the open ocean. This transitioned into working on a the Disney Dolphin Reef project with Keith Scholey at Silverback Films.

These shoots allowed me to

refine my diving style, incorporating long fins and scuba to develop a fluid, fast-moving, and dynamic approach that captures the energetic and fleeting moments of ocean life. Much of this was influenced by Didier, who has an incredible eye and a talent for creating long, evocative, and lyrical shots—like the two- or three-minute sequences with whales that feel seamless and poetic. That influence is evident in my style, especially in open-water settings.

For example, the Costa Rica sequence with lanternfish and spinner dolphins, followed by mobula rays, carries a similar dynamic feel. Another memorable project was for Our Planet in the Azores, where we filmed common dolphins feeding on anchovies. I vividly recall capturing a shot of a bird diving into the baitball and popping out again. That particular baitball lasted nine minutes, and almost the entire four-minute sequence came from that single event.

When it comes to how your presence in the water affects animal behaviour, I call this dynamic “the dance.” It’s the delicate balance of getting close enough to film marine life while ensuring you don’t disturb them.

Generally, this isn’t much of an issue during feeding events. The animals are so engrossed in the action

that they treat you as just another participant in the spectacle. In these moments, your focus shifts entirely to your craft—framing the shot, determining the coverage you need, and working with the available light.

When there’s a lot of activity, the animals remain aware of your presence but aren’t bothered by it. That allows you to fully concentrate on capturing the scene and acquiring the necessary footage.

Q) Would it be true to say that the two most significant capabilities are pre-record and rebreathers?

Rebreathers are indispensable for benthic filming of small marine creatures aren’t moving much. In these scenarios, you’re often using underwater tripods or other grip equipment and working with your fins off.

Rebreathers allow you to stay underwater longer on less gas, and the rich Oxygen mix benefits recovery after the dive.

They also allow for more precise camera moves when using a tripod, fluid head and probe lens. For example, when I was filming blennies for Our Oceans in Mexico, even subtle breathing movements on scuba would translate into the image. Using Rebreathers on that shoot was a necessity.



However, for open-water shooting, I typically prefer scuba. It’s faster to get in and out of the water, you’re confident in the air mix, and it’s generally safer and more efficient for those scenarios. That said, for free-swimming scenarios like filming manta rays or mobula rays, I’ve occasionally used rebreathers. During the Our Planet sequence in Raja Ampat, Hugh Pearson and I filmed shoals of mobula rays on rebreathers to avoid disturbing the surrounding bait fish.

Pre-record, on the other hand, is an absolute non-negotiable in many

contexts. It’s invaluable for capturing unpredictable moments without wasting massive amounts of storage. For instance, during the great white shark sequence for Our Oceans, we used an Inspire 2 drone, which doesn’t have pre-record functionality.

We shot nearly 40GB of footage because we had to record continuously every time a shark or seal entered the frame. With pre-record, we could have reduced that data load by 400%, capturing only the critical moments leading up to the action.

Both rebreathers and pre-record

are game-changing capabilities that elevate your ability to capture specific types of shots. While they're not always necessary, in the right circumstances, they make an immense difference in both efficiency and quality.

Q) I think it is fair to say that your My Octopus Teacher footage established you as almost a household name. At the time did you realise how groundbreaking it was and how it would touch those from so many walks of life?

Before My Octopus Teacher, I had made three films with Craig and Damon Foster, all performing well in their own right. But nothing came close to the impact of this documentary. We never anticipated the kind of reaction it received. It completely blew us away.

I'll never forget sitting through various awards ceremonies, seeing it nominated alongside films from some of the biggest natural history production houses like Silverback, and then winning. It was surreal to be part of that process. None of us knew the story would resonate so deeply with people.

I think it was the perfect storm—a simple, heartfelt story told in a beautiful, straightforward way. The timing of the pandemic amplified its appeal, offering something audiences

wanted and needed to hear at that moment.

I feel incredibly grateful to have been part of such a unique project. I also know it's unlikely I'll ever be involved in something like that again.

Q) The advent of subscription TV has broken the traditional mode of natural history documentary productions. Has it brought better funding and opportunities or diluted the genre?

So Peter, that's a great question, and it touches on where natural history programming has been and where it's heading.

If you look at the "Bristol model"—the style of natural history filmmaking pioneered by the BBC's Natural History Unit in Bristol and personified by Sir David Attenborough—it was created under a public service mandate. It wasn't designed to make a profit but to serve the interests of the British public, who largely funded it. This approach fostered a particular culture and style of storytelling, which has become a national treasure in Britain and countries with close ties to Britain, like South Africa, Australia, and parts of Europe.

However, in the U.S., it's a different story. Natural history programming doesn't hold the same cultural significance. If you mention



Sir David Attenborough to most Americans, many won't know who he is.

With the rise of streaming platforms, particularly Netflix, we've seen a digital disruption of the traditional broadcast model. As the editorial power shifted to the U.S., I always suspected there would be an evolution—or even a departure—from the classic "blue-chip" style of natural history filmmaking that we all love: respectful, reverent, and almost spiritual in its awe of nature.

We're seeing that shift now. Take Our Oceans, for example. Instead of being narrated by Sir David Attenborough, it's by Barack Obama. This reflects a move towards more global storytelling tailored for a broader audience. The influence

of American editorial mandates is evident in how these programs are evolving.

Streaming platforms like Disney+, Nat Geo, and more recently Apple TV, have all begun exploring natural history content. Amazon hasn't made as much of a push in this area, but it's clear that the genre is diversifying.

One thing that stands out is the oversupply of natural history content during the peak of the "streaming wars." With so much money being pumped into the industry as platforms competed, we saw a production glut. In many ways, I think this oversaturation diluted the quality of the work. Now, as the industry starts to contract, I see this as a healthy correction.

Natural history programming

will always have a place. People find these shows incredibly comforting. However, with fewer commissions going forward, I believe the value and appreciation for these programs will only increase. Less can be more, and the contraction will lead to higher-quality work that audiences cherish even more when it's released.

Q) I can't think of any other career that has such a lack of established procedures, qualifications, or formal training, yet it seems to attract a constant supply of new cameramen keen to make their living and themselves known. Is there currently enough work to consider this as a good career move?

This question depends on how you define a "good career move." If your idea of a good career is something that provides stable employment and minimizes risk, then becoming a wildlife cinematographer is not a good move. It's inherently uncertain and doesn't come with the security of a traditional job.

On the other hand, if you define a good career move as something incredibly personally rewarding—offering access to breathtaking locations and opportunities to work on some of the most well-respected natural history projects in the world—then yes, it can be an amazing career

choice.

That said, it's not for the faint-hearted. You have to be comfortable with uncertainty because this is a freelance-driven industry. Developing strong entrepreneurial skills is essential to navigate the ups and downs. And yes, it's highly competitive. The sheer number of people wanting to enter this field drives competition, but that's not a bad thing. It raises the bar and pushes everyone to evolve and improve constantly.

Q) I feel a push from interested readers for me to ask the age-old but, in this world, still very pertinent question - what would your advice be to any aspiring underwater video shooters who want to make a career of it and is that why you have introduced the Ocean Footage Mastery Course?

My advice to anyone aspiring to become a full-time underwater wildlife cinematographer is this: Be maniacally focused on achieving that goal but do not put all your eggs in one basket. This principle is at the core of the mentorship program I have launched, called the Ocean Footage Mastery Program.

This advice is rooted in my own journey. When I started out as an apprentice to Didier and Justin, I only got one or two assisting jobs a year—



not enough to live off. That forced me to develop my entrepreneurial skills early on. These skills allowed me to remain freelance and flexible so I could be available for shoots when opportunities arose to seize career-changing opportunities.

The Ocean Footage Mastery Program focuses on two key areas of development.

Firstly, helping aspiring wildlife cinematographers bridge the gap from shooting mediocre footage to shooting footage that would meet the demands of high-end production companies producing shows for Netflix, Disney and the BBC.

The second is teaching the entrepreneurship and value-creation strategies and skills necessary to thrive and be viable

in the 21st century. We live in a digital economy with a wealth of opportunities opening up. If you're skilled at capturing the natural world underwater or in the ocean, how can you leverage those skillsets to create intellectual property that you own and that you can make and sell? I have done this very successfully with my own stock footage library over the years, and I will be teaching this and personal branding in the program.

Ironically, this program is a great opportunity for individuals who don't want to become full-time underwater wildlife cinematographers.

Through this program, you will access the keys to unlocking your full potential as an underwater wildlife cinematographer. The only other way to do that would be to become an



underwater assistant, and for many, that is simply impossible and/or undesirable.

If you can dive like a fish and you have access to amazing dive locations, I can teach you how to shoot like I do. It's a style and language which can be learnt, and it's not rocket science.

It's then up to you to decide how you want to integrate that skillset into your current life situation and use it to generate an additional revenue stream or just reap the personal reward that comes from improving your skill level in a craft.

Roger, thank you so much for your considered, informative and inspiring answers.

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Ocean Footage Mastery Course with Roger Horrocks



Are you a skilled diver with access to prime diving locations worldwide? Passionate about ocean conservation and have deep affinity with the underwater world and the creatures that live there?

Are you trying hard to solve the money problem and invest in your passion?

If the answer to many of the above is YES, its likely you are an excellent fit for the program.

Through this program, you will gain access to all the knowledge, protocols and systems you need to unlock your full potential. This course will teach you how to capture cinematic-quality footage that not only records your underwater experiences but also meets the industry standards - and, to top it all;

I'll teach you how to package and sell it to the industry giants like Netflix, BBC, and NatGeo.

Ongoing coaching, community feedback and accountability will reinforce and accelerate your learning curve.

A key milestone will arrive when you are able to craft footage would be considered for inclusion in wildlife documentaries for Netflix and AppleTV.

Reaching this level of actualisation will empower you to pursue a full-time career as an underwater cinematographer.

Alternatively, you could work part time in the industry and contribute footage to high-end productions through stock sales.

www.rogerhorrocks.com/mentorship-program