


September 2022  The International Publication of the American Society of Cinematographers

# American Cinematographer



**Wildlife Cinematography**



# Tracking Poachers in *Tigre Gente*

An award-winning documentary  
targets the illicit jaguar trade.

By Jean Oppenheimer

Poachers have endangered the jaguar population with the illegal trade of the animals' fangs, skulls and pelts.



PHOTOS BY THE FILMMAKERS. COURTESY OF ELIZABETH UNGER/TIGRE GENTE.

**D**irector of photography Edward Roqueta says shooting the wildlife documentary *Tigre Gente* amounted to much more than making a movie: "It felt like a huge adventure chapter in the story of my life."

He spent more than four years working with first-time director Elizabeth Unger on the project, which chronicles the illegal international trade of jaguar fangs, skulls and pelts that threatens the big cat's population, chiefly located in the Amazon basin. China and Myanmar are believed to be the biggest buyers of jaguar teeth, which are regarded as magical totems, medicinal cures, and symbols of wealth and status.

#### A Thriller and an Exposé

*Tigre Gente* comes across as a thriller and an exposé, covering both China's demand for the product and Bolivia's role as a supplier. The production was an undercover operation, and the film follows two protagonists: Marcos Uzquiano, the head ranger at Bolivia's Madidi National Park, and Laurel Chor, a Hong Kongese journalist and environmental activist.



The documentary follows the efforts of two protagonists: Marcos Uzquiano, head ranger at Bolivia's Madidi National Park (top) and Laurel Chor, a journalist and environmental activist.



Unger, Roqueta and Chor are all National Geographic Young Explorers, but they had never met before their collaboration on *Tigre Gente*. Unger approached Roqueta about the project in 2015 after seeing some of his work, including the documentary short *Silencing the Thunder*, which he'd directed — and for which he'd won the Television Academy's College Television Award. The pair spoke regularly by phone about *Tigre Gente* but didn't meet in person until the following year, when they arrived at La Paz Airport to begin production. Visitor visas enabled them to spend three months per year in Bolivia; they often divided this time into two- and three-week intervals.

Chor met Unger and Roqueta in 2016, when the filmmakers presented some of their footage at a Nat Geo Young Explorers symposium, but she didn't become an integral part of the film until 2018. At that time, Unger had not decided what direction the story would take, and she recalls a lot of the process as "just Eddie and I spending years in Bolivia, being ready with our cameras and backpacks, trying to just be present when something happened. At the time, the press was focused on rhino horns and elephant tusks, and I realized that nobody was aware of the

Cinematographer Blaine Dunkley uses a stabilization rig.



illegal jaguar trade."

She adds, "When you're making a documentary, it can sometimes take a long time, and a process of elimination, to decide what material to include and what to drop. I wanted to make a cinematically raw and devastatingly beautiful film."

As a documentary filmmaker and environmentalist, Unger has always been drawn to wildlife conservation, and she cites *Virunga*, a documentary about mountain gorillas living in the Congo as an oil company starts to move in, as an influential film "that blew my mind. My producer on *Tigre Gente* is Joanna Natasegara, who also produced *Virunga*, and I could not have made my film without her."

This article focuses on the portion of the film shot in Bolivia. Most of it was captured in Madidi National Park, where Uzquiano and the two dozen men under his command were tasked with catching poachers.

#### Approaching the Rainforest

Roqueta says his approach to *Tigre Gente* was inspired by the work of three-time Academy Award-winning cinematographer Emmanuel Lubezki, ASC, AMC. "He has these incredible sweeping camera moves, and his use of wide angles really immerses you in the surroundings," Roqueta says. "In our film, that approach helps you feel the vastness of the rainforest."

He shot with two Sony cameras, an a7R II and an a7S II; three Zeiss Loxia primes (21mm, 35mm and 50mm); a Canon 24-70mm zoom; and



## Tech Specs:

1.78:1  
Cameras: Sony a7R II, a7S II; Canon EOS 5D Mark III; Red DSMC2 Helium;  
DJI Mavic 2 Pro w/ Hasselblad camera  
Lenses: Zeiss Loxia, Rokinon prime, Canon zoom, Sigma zoom, Arri/Fujinon Alura Lightweight, Tokina Cinema

This page, from left: Director of photography Edward Roqueta with cinematographers Dunkley and Alex Pollini. Opposite page: Director Elizabeth Unger says her goal was "to make a cinematically raw and devastatingly beautiful film."



a Sigma 70-200mm zoom. "I used the 21mm and 35mm the most, and that allowed me to get really close to the rangers shooting wide and handheld," he says. "I'd rather move my body closer to a subject to get a tighter shot than depend on the ease of a zoom."

"I shot 90 percent of the film handheld," he adds. "I used a DIY handheld shoulder rig that had miscellaneous rails and bars attached together with a variety of 1/4-20 threaded attachment points) spread out to hold a portable audio recorder, a shotgun microphone and wireless microphone receivers, all along with the Sony a7s rig. To achieve smooth handheld walking shots, I would carry the rig using both hands in front of me instead of actually putting it on my shoulder. This was my main strategy while shooting the film, but to keep certain shots as steady as possible — like tracking shots in the forest — I used a Pilotfly H2 handheld gimbal stabilizer."

Roqueta also gave Unger a general tutorial on how to shoot video, and the director contributed camerawork for several sequences, including a riverboat chase in pursuit of poachers.

**NANLUX**  
PROFOTO • ALLIANCE

## Dyno 650C/1200C

Powerful Performance, Beautifully Soft

- High power LED soft panel lights with ultra wide illumination, fully tunable between 2700K-20000K
- Fully dimmable from 0-100% in ultra-precise intervals of just 0.1% (between 1-100%)
- Support both wired and wireless control via NANLINK APP, DMX, RDM, Bluetooth, Lumenradio TimoTwo and CRMX
- Built-in 15 customisable practical effects
- Choice of color modes HSI, RGBW, Gel and XY
- Intuitive user interface, providing effortless control

DMX Bluetooth NANLINK APP 2.4G WS-TB-1 Lumenradio

www.nanlux.com info@nanlux.com nanlux\_global Nanlux Global

## Specialized Eyes

Unger brought in three additional cinematographers to do some specialized work: Blaine Dunkley (*The Blue Rose*) handled most of the drone footage and Movi Pro gimbal footage; Alex Pollini (*Not Going Quietly*) contributed time-lapse sequences; and Cristian Dimitrius, a prominent Brazilian wildlife filmmaker, filmed jaguars at a refuge run by the Jaguar Conservation Fund, an NGO founded in 2002. Jaguars are solitary creatures and one of the most elusive of the big cats, and it can take months — even years — to glimpse one. Dimitrius was the only member of the production team who actually saw one in the wild.

Dunkley and Pollini collaborated on *Tigre Gente*'s beautiful opening shot: a mountaintop at sunrise, with golden light kissing the peaks and clouds hovering below. The men started hiking up the mountain at 4 a.m. to make sure they arrived in time. Dunkley brought his own DJI Mavic 2 Pro, rigged with a Hasselblad camera specifically designed for the drone. "It allows shooting in 10-bit D-log, so I could capture more in the highlights," Dunkley says.

When not piloting a drone, Dunkley used a Red DSMC2 Helium — paired with an Arri/Fujinon Alura Lightweight 15.5-45mm T2.8 zoom — mounted to a Movi Pro. This proved especially useful for a moonless night sequence in which a shaman conjures up the spirit world. According to Dunkley, there wasn't enough light to get exposure, so he quickly hung a white sheet under the nearby canopy and clipped two small LED units (Aputure Amaran AL-MX Bi-Color LED Mini Lights) to it.

For a riverboat sequence (see photos on page 44), he paired the Movi-mounted Helium rig with a Tokina Cinema ATX 100mm Macro T2.9. "Not a typical choice for this fast-paced scenario," Dunkley says, "but we only had room to bring a single 100mm prime, and having a macro lens turned out to be critical for the insect shots we got later on."

Pollini feels that time-lapse is one of the most challenging cinematic tools. "You're capturing not just one photo," he says, "but hundreds of photos, all of which have to be perfect." He brought all of his own gear, including a Dynamic Perception motion-control system. "The kit has a motion-control slider, a motion-control pan-and-tilt head, and tools to ramp exposure over time," he explains. He mainly used a Canon EOS 5D Mark III camera, Canon 17-40mm and 16-35mm L series zooms, and a Rokinon 14mm prime. He also occasionally used a Sony a7S II.

Roqueta has tremendous respect for Unger. "Liz isn't afraid to approach anybody," he says. "She is constantly asking questions, and she is open to learning from anybody." Dunkley adds, "I really credit Liz and Eddie for being so open to bringing in so many different eyes. This film was a wonderful collaboration between a lot of different camerapeople."

*Tigre Gente* premiered at the 2021 Tribeca Film Festival and has played more than 30 festivals around the world. Among the honors it has received are the *American Cinematographer* Award at the Salem Film Fest; a \$10,000 cash prize and the Shared Earth Foundation Award for Advocacy from the Environmental Film Festival in Washington, D.C.; and a Pare Lorentz Award honorable mention from the International Documentary Association. 0



**AOTO**

## AOTO Virtual Production LED solutions

- Mini LED Applied, Movie Production
- Nano-Coating, Isolate Chemical Damage
- Grooved-Antioptical-Crosslink, Lower Reflective
- 1/6 Scan and 7680Hz Refresh Rate, Eliminate Scan Lines

www.aoto.com (949)423-3104 (949)755-3612 led@aoto.com