

FILM: ENVIRONMENT

Energy, People, and the Natural World

The 19th annual Environmental Film Festival in the Nation's Capital offered a broad sample of movies on the natural world and people's relations with it. This year, many of the films highlighted aspects of the crucial links between energy and the environment. Audiences were often encouraged to stay afterward to discuss the films and issues with the filmmakers, activists, and experts. Brief descriptions of the 148 films can be found at www.dcenvironmentalfilmfest.org/films. Here our reviewers comment on ten.



Oil Rocks: City Above the Sea (La Cité du Pétrole). Marc Wolfensberger, director. Intermezzo Films and Thin Line Productions, Switzerland/Azerbaijan. 2009. 52 minutes. www.thin-line.net/thinline/Documentaries.html

In grainy black-and-white footage, lumbering waves smash into pylons that support fragile-looking trestle bridges. Two men crawl precariously along a horizontal pipe, past wrecked planking, to a joint pulsing an arterial spray of oil into the tearing wind. They creep into the spray and grapple the joint shut. In another scene from the same devastating 1957 storm, workers, so completely soaked in oil that they appear shiny and metallic, manhandle more burst and gushing pipes.

Many of the platforms, roads, and bridges of Neft Daslari ("Oil Rocks" in Azeri) collapsed that day, killing an unknown number of workers. In Marc Wolfensberger's documentary *Oil Rocks*, the storm is a harbinger of the future, a metaphorical warning that Stalin's "ludicrous" scheme to build a fully functioning metropolis directly over what would become one of the most productive oil fields in the then-Soviet Union must end in ruin.

The film portrays the history of this unique construction and the community that still lives and works on it through interviews with present-day workers (some of whom are older than the city itself) intercut with Soviet-era propaganda footage (complete with triumphal music parping in the background): We see Khrushchev visiting the island, jocular and rotund in his pork-pie hat, grinning like a buck-toothed mafia boss; members of the Bolshoi Theatre, bravely performing for the workers on a wind-swept dock; and the workers themselves, swimming and diving, quaffing beer, eating on neat tablecloths, or beaming at the camera.

Oil Rocks is a strange spider's web of hundreds of oil derricks linked by trestles radiating

from the central hub of a tiny artificial island. Built on the scuttled hulks of seven ships, the island is a monument, in microcosm, to both the socialist idealism and brutal concrete architecture of the Soviet era. In its day, the complex was a technological triumph, becoming one of the most productive oil fields in the Caspian Sea region and pumping over 170 million tons of oil. But the Soviet Union collapsed, and—in the face of the elements and neglect from its new owners, the Azerbaijan government—so has much of Oil Rocks.

The propaganda-fueled euphoria of the Soviet era ("Wherever the Party sends me, I will go!") is long gone, and the memories of the workers belie that artfully constructed and mostly fictional past: "What did we have in the Soviet era? Bread, and that was it ... now, there are plenty of sausages." The remaining workers, cramped three or more in squalid crumbling dorm rooms, working with rusting, junkyard equipment, on tottering piers, remain only because of the salaries oil brings.

The film's depiction of the flayed and decaying city—and the words of those who work there—give veracity and a strangely uplifting pathos to the story of a once truly audacious engineering project that is sinking slowly back into the sea.

—Guy Riddihough

The Pipe. Risteard Ó Domhnaill, director. Underground Films, Ireland, 2010. 83 minutes. www.thepipethefilm.com

Following the members of a small, remote fishing village in western Ireland, *The Pipe* offers a microcosm of the choices that increasingly confront communities around the world when meeting the rising global demands for energy interferes with local livelihood—and of what happens when the ability to make a choice is taken away. When residents of Rosspoint and neighboring villages were faced with the prospect of a large oil company constructing a 9-km-long pipeline through their coastal fishing waters and farmland, many thought they had the option of keeping the energy development away. Despite numerous protests, litigation, and even a hunger strike, the objecting residents lost. Although the pipeline, a new refinery, and offshore drilling activities will likely bring economic benefits to some, many locals—and the environment—may soon bear untold costs.

The story begins after a large natural gas field was discovered off the Irish coast in 1996. The new supply could provide temporary relief from diminishing supply along with a potential reduction in gas prices beyond Ireland, but the oil company's construction plans encountered substan-



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tial local protest. Ó Domhnaill's strategy of entraining himself among the outraged citizens is highly effective at demonstrating the emotional side of the all-too-common "not in my backyard" dilemma. Viewers can easily empathize with the community as they see protests that result in violence, arrests, and the division of towns.

The film's approach of not explicitly stating an opinion on the subject matter contrasts with the style and tone of the final product. It is clear that Ó Domhnaill bonded with and felt deeply for the fishermen and farmers. Indeed, it would be difficult not to when he himself was beaten by police as he was filming one particular protest. The film exhibits some lack of perspective in that it fails to contextualize the conflict in Rossport with the larger problem of a world growing thirstier for oil and gas. Similar stories will assuredly continue to arise in Ireland and beyond as oil and gas companies choose to invest in reservoirs previously considered too difficult or too expensive to tap. For now, *The Pipe* illustrates the lack of choices many communities with resources have as the rest of the world continues to consume.

—Nicholas S. Wigginton



Windfall. Laura Israel, director. Cat Hollow Films, USA, 2010. 83 minutes. <http://windfallthemovie.com>

Wind energy is clean and therefore good, right? Filmmaker Laura Israel thought so and decided that she might want a wind turbine installed on

her property. So began a journey from rosy general impression to harsh reality that Israel herself experienced and that she leads us through in *Windfall*.

As Israel began to investigate the details of erecting a power-generating windmill on her property, she encountered the citizens of Meredith, New York, who were struggling with the same question. They were caught up in an increasingly divisive debate over whether wind turbines should be allowed within the town boundaries. Through interviews with the residents on both sides of the argument, she adeptly demonstrates how knowledge is a powerfully important thing. Gradually the residents of this Catskills community, and we the viewers, come to realize that wind turbines are not purely an environmentally clean, domestic solution to our energy woes. The technology is also imposing, loud, extremely hazardous to birds and bats, and a potential risk to human health. People from Meredith compellingly describe their transition from believers in wind as a green energy solution to skeptics fighting for the health of their town, neighbors, and environment.

Even more striking are the testimonies from residents of Tug Hill, in western New York. There wind turbines were initially welcomed, but people now live surrounded by hundreds of them and feel their physical and psychological effects daily. In the end, the film leaves us with feelings of disappointment that wind energy is not the benign solution it is often made out to be—and a bit of dread for what the future may hold if others don't learn what these New Yorkers have discovered. *Windfall* serves as a reminder that there is no perfect solution to our energy problems and should inspire us to conserve and innovate.

—Sacha Vignieri

Arabia 3D. Greg MacGillivray, director. MacGillivray Freeman Films, USA, 2010. 45 minutes. www.arabia-film.com

With scenes ranging from windswept desert sand dunes to the dusk-colored corals of the Red Sea, *Arabia* melds striking images from an exotic and fascinating land. Greg MacGillivray films his three-dimensional IMAX movie from the perspective of Hamzah Jamjoom, a young Saudi filmmaker studying in Chicago who sets out to learn more about the geography, history, and cul-



ture of his homeland. The magnificent cinematography, recorded at 20 different sites around Saudi Arabia, includes footage of Bedouin tribesmen riding their camels across the desert, the celestial minarets of Mecca, and the kingdom's surprisingly modern capital city, Riyadh. The filmmakers clearly wanted to inform viewers not only about the beauty of the often harsh landscape but also about the peoples of the Arabian peninsula. They used animations and historical reenactments to depict aspects of two golden ages of Arabia. The first, two millennia ago, was built on wealth derived from trading the rare costly spice frankincense. Guided by archaeologists, Jamjoom explores a great Nabataean city of that era, Madain Saleh, now a World Heritage site. A second golden age, spanning 800 years, began in the 7th century with the prophet Muhammad, whose followers reshaped the peninsula and spread their religion east to Persia and India and west to Spain. Reading and learning flourished in the Islamic world, which made great strides in mathematics, physics, and chemistry. The narrator suggests somewhat wistfully that Saudi Arabia, with its fabulous oil wealth, may be about to embark on a third golden age, as evidenced by the government's efforts to build several new state-of-the-art universities and to boost student enrollment.

MacGillivray and his collaborators have worked hard to bridge the cultural divide between Saudi Arabia and the United States. They show us Jamjoom at home with his family, discussing the making of the movie with his father, talking to a celebrated female Saudi poet, and sharing a meal with a Bedouin tribesman. Combining travelogue, history lesson, and cultural outreach, the film certainly should entice any tourist to spend time in this desert kingdom. Perhaps the movie's most enduring image is that of the *Hajj*, the annual pilgrimage to Mecca during which two to three million Muslims from around the world converge on the Grand Mosque in the largest gathering of people on Earth. The breathtaking aerial footage of hundreds of thousands of pilgrims walking in unison seven times around the Kaaba (the holy center of their faith) serves as a powerful reminder that a peaceful, prosperous, and more open Arab world will benefit us all.

—Orla Smith

Contact. Bentley Dean and Martin Butler, directors. Contact Films, Australia, 2009. 80 minutes. www.contactfilms.com.au

Although there have been many stories of first meetings between isolated indigenous groups and members of the modern world, *Contact* is unusual in that the filmmakers not only had photographs and movies of the first encounter but were able, more than 40 years later, to find the people involved. In 1964, 20 women and children of the Martu people were living in a remote section of desert in Western Australia that was about to be used as the impact zone for a series of rocket tests. There they were stumbled upon by a patrol from the Weapons Research Establishment sent to check that the zone was clear. The aborigines had never seen a truck, and Yuwali (who was 17 at the time and 62 when the movie was made) thought at first that a boulder had come to life and was chasing them. Bentley Dean and Martin Butler based their award-winning documentary on a book by Sue Davenport,



Peter Johnson, and Yuwali, *Cleared Out: First Contact in the Western Desert* (Aboriginal Studies Press, Canberra, 2005). The filmmakers relate a poignant tale, showing the “evacuation” of the aborigines to a mission village and the irreversible changes in their lives that followed. The officials involved, however, are presented as real people, not villains. For example, Terry Long of the Native Welfare Patrol wishes that he had done better, but he noted that the aborigines were starving and there were no men in the region to teach the young boys or to marry the young women. The film ends with the Martu visiting their old watering holes and watching films of themselves as children. They are very well aware of how much they have changed: laughing at themselves when they bend down to lap water from a puddle as they used to and commenting on how they would no longer care to walk around naked. Nonetheless, Yuwali remarks, “We were carried away by something we never knew before. We left out hearts in our country.” She explains that they had brought their own children and grandchildren back to the desert so they would know where their stories had come from.

—Barbara Jasny

Henry A. Wallace: An Uncommon Man. Joan D. Murray, director. Video Takes, USA, 2011. 57 minutes. www.henryawallace.com

Although many retired politicians write books, Henry A. Wallace must be unique for also devoting time to improving brown-egg chickens, strawberries, and miniature gladiolus. Even so, that is probably the most trivial distinction Joan Murray includes in this “film tribute” to her grandfather.

Wallace’s father and grandfather were prominent Iowa farmers. His early achievements included the recognition that the appearance of corn ears did not predict crop yields, an econometric analysis of farm prices, and the founding of the first (and incredibly successful) hybrid-seed company, Pioneer. While Secretary of Agriculture during Franklin D. Roosevelt’s first two terms, he helped plan and implement the New Deal. He proved a very effective administrator despite not fitting into the culture of Washington.

(He abhorred political patronage; did not smoke, drink alcohol, or eat meat; and declined his official car, preferring to walk the 10-km round trip to and from his office.) His innovative department developed emergency measures to stabilize crop prices, the Soil Conservation Service, rural electrification, food stamps, and school lunches. Convinced that increasing crop yields would provide great benefits to the people of Latin America, Wallace encouraged the Rockefeller Foundation



to sponsor what became the International Maize and Wheat Improvement Center. (Norman Borlaug’s research there helped fuel the Green Revolution in agricultural productivity.)

FDR chose Wallace for his running mate in 1940, seeing him as the potential successor who would be most likely to continue the New Deal reforms. As vice president, Wallace expanded the scope of the office’s duties and during World War II chaired important economic and production boards. He entered the 1944 Democratic Convention as the delegates’ choice for reelection, but party bosses and Southern conservatives (opposed to his positions on poverty and race) engineered his replacement by Harry Truman. When FDR died in office and Truman assumed the presidency, Wallace remained as Secretary of Commerce. The next year he was forced to resign due to disagreements over policy toward the Soviet Union. As the Progressive Party’s candidate in the 1948 presidential election, he was widely accused of links to communists and finished fourth. However, many of the planks of his then-radical platform have subsequently been enacted (although not universal government health care).

The film weaves together excerpts from Wallace’s speeches and writings; historic news footage and photographs; and interviews with historians, biographers, conservationists, and others. The portrait Murray offers is clearly a friendly one. Nonetheless, she makes a convincing case for the broad, lasting, and beneficial impact of Wallace’s science and public service.

—Sherman J. Suter



Plastic Planet. Werner Boote, director. Neue Sentimental Film Entertainment and Brandstorm Entertainment, Austria/Germany. 2009. 95 minutes. www.plastic-planet.at

Anyone who still doubts that we live in the age of plastics should be dissuaded by the convincing arguments Werner Boote presents in *Plastic Planet*. The filmmaker, whose grandfather worked in a plastics factory, traveled to 14 countries to learn how plastics are manufactured, used, and discarded. In one of the film’s most striking story lines, he asks people around the world to place every plastic item from their households in front of their homes, an eye-opening exercise for both participants and viewers. Even a small dwelling in Kolkata, India, holds a surprisingly large amount of plastic. Another narrative begins when Boote buys an inexpensive plastic globe and tries to discover its origins. Although the Chinese factory that makes the toy grants him a tour, once the guide realizes that Boote is a filmmaker (complete with camera crew) and not a potential customer, she quickly ends the interview.

Few who have been following concerns about the safety of plastics will learn much new here. Some of the scientists who appear in the film emphasize bisphenol A (BPA)—found in polycarbonate plastics and epoxy resins—as the primary enemy, but Boote freely extends the hazards of BPA to any and all forms of plastic. In one scene, he travels the aisles of a grocery store sticking labels with negative slogans (for example, “PLASTIC CAUSES BRAIN DEFECTS”) on various items, including a nonpolycarbonate bottle of shampoo. Industry representatives appear as familiar villains, refusing to address negative effects,

and government officials are their usual foes, wanting further regulations. Boote does suggest a third way in mentioning a company that has developed biodegradable plastics from plant-derived as well as petroleum-based materials. Their manufacturer deems these bioplastics completely safe, much as traditional plastics were seen when they were first introduced. Although the film provides a detailed account of plastic's extended life cycle, Boote does not offer much in the way of constructive suggestions for mitigating the material's many problems. Instead, viewers are simply left wary about what lies ahead in a world awash with plastic.

—Trista Wagoner



Mother Nature's Child. Camilla Rockwell, director. Fuzzy Slippers Productions, USA, 2011. 57 minutes. www.mothernaturesmovie.com

Play Again. Tonje Hessen Schei, director. Ground Productions, USA, 2010. 80 minutes. www.playagainfilm.com

As a child I spent my free time climbing trees, catching insects, and exploring my neighborhood, largely only in the company of other children. Today, most girls and boys experience much different childhoods. Technological advances and increasing concerns over children's safety have led to them spending their spare moments indoors, in front of television or computer screens, or being shuttled by adults to organized and supervised activities. A recent estimate placed the average amount of time a child in the United States spends in front of a screen at 44 hours a week and the average weekly total spent outdoors in unstructured play at less than 40 minutes. *Mother Nature's Child* and *Play Again* explore the physical, psychological, and societal consequences of a generation of children growing up in the absence of free interaction with the natural world around them.

By following organizations designed to foster contact with nature, *Mother Nature's Child* leads viewers through the important impacts that free play in nature has on childhood development. Preschool children develop their senses, understanding of cause and effect, creativity, and early sense of self as they explore and interact with the natural environment. School-age children build forts to establish their independence; acquire the ability to observe, reflect, and make decisions; and develop empathy for other living things. As adolescents, the natural world becomes a place to bond with peers, foster prosocial behavior, and gain self-confidence and self-reliance. At all ages, contact with nature reduces aggression and improves physical health.

In *Play Again*, we see the profound influence direct contact with nature has on a group of adolescents whose earlier years largely lacked such experiences and whose childhoods were instead shaped by screens and media. Young teens who usually spent 6 to 15 hours a day planted in front of televisions and computers were asked to give up their screens and disconnect from their online networks for a 4-day camping trip in the woods. Through the teens' own words and actions, we witness initial withdrawal followed by profound transformations in confidence, interaction, and engagement.

Both films note important points about the influence of the media and advertising on children's development and desires for the future. Both pose a crucial question: Will children raised without contact with the natural world work to protect it? In the end, both demonstrate the essential fact that the risks of raising a generation of children away from nature are much larger—for the young, society, and the planet—than those that await them in the great outdoors.

—Sacha Vignieri

Inside the Firestorm. Jacob Hickey, director. Renegade Films for Australian Broadcasting Company, Australia, 2010. 110 minutes. www.renegade.com.au

With the seasonal drought, a stretch of daily highs above 40°C, record low humidity, and gale-force continental winds, bush fire indices in the countryside around Melbourne, Australia, reached levels of 140 to 190 (where 100 is extreme) on 7 February 2009. Fire officials warned the public to prepare for the worst. But the course of events on "Black Saturday" far exceeded anyone's expectations. By 3 p.m., 10 uncontrolled major fires (several ignited by electrical power lines, others of suspicious origin) were burning across Victoria. They would consume nearly a half million hectares of bushland, leave 7000 people homeless, and claim 173 lives.

Many factors contributed to the catastrophe. Driving the fires to the southeast, winds dropped flaming material up to 20 km ahead. One blaze rushed 50 km in a few hours. Fires roared up slopes, and locations nestled in valleys came under intense attack from falling embers. Prompt initial responses were overwhelmed, access routes were closed, and fire-fighting resources were exhausted. A late-afternoon shift of winds to the southwest turned long northeast flanks into active fronts. Existing policy urged rural



residents to "prepare, stay, and defend or leave early." The rapid spread of the fires and communications breakdowns (some messages warning particular locations of imminent danger were prepared but then neither broadcast nor posted) meant many people, and entire towns, were caught unaware, having insufficient time to flee or to take shelter. And often even the best-prepared structures were destroyed in the intense firestorms.

Inside the Firestorm uses impressive computer graphics to map the progression of the fires. Jacob Hickey incorporates amazing, often frightening, footage captured on cameras (and cell phones) by people caught among the flames, fire fighters, and the news media. But the power of this commemoration of Black Saturday stems from the captivating, moving, and frequently heart-breaking personal stories told by those who fought and escaped the fires—many losing their homes and possessions; others, much more.

Like people who inhabit wildfire landscapes elsewhere around the world, most residents of Australia's bush do not wish to leave. Recognizing that fact, the Royal Commission charged with investigating the February 2009 fires in Victoria (www.royalcommission.vic.gov.au) returned an extensive list of recommendations for policy, procedural, and organizational changes that could help reduce the risks to lives in future fires. But it is impossible to disagree with the conclusion of a 97-year-old veteran of the devastating bushfires of 1939 who came close to losing his life on Black Saturday. Noting the continuing arguments over who's to blame and what should be done, he commented, "on a day like that, nature will take over."

—Sherman J. Suter

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