

FILM

The film *Arid Lands* examines the direct and indirect environmental impact of the Hanford nuclear site.



SIDELONG FILMS

A New Breed of Environmental Film

Fest features complex narratives about intricate ecologies

By RANDY MALAMUD

ECOLOGICAL CHALLENGES beset us from every direction, which can become paralyzing. But if a complacent cultural inertia is one of the biggest obstacles to ecological reform, a program like last month's Environmental Film Festival in the Nation's Capital wonderfully upheaves our received ideas about how life works.

The event, in its 16th year, is one of the best known, but similar festivals are growing all over: EarthVision has run in Santa Cruz for 10 years; the Colorado Environmental Film Festival, in Golden, is in its third year; and the Jackson Hole Wildlife Film Festival began in 1991. Many are affiliated with colleges, like the new Tales From Planet Earth, run by the University of Wisconsin's Center for Culture, History, and Environment; Eckerd College's Visions of Nature, Voices of Nature; and Ithaca College's Finger Lakes Environmental Film Festival.

The mission for Nevada City's Wild and Scenic Environmental Film Festival—"leaving you feeling INSPIRED and MOTIVATED to go out and make a difference in your community and the world"—expresses what all these festivals aim to achieve; it recalls Bertolt Brecht's conviction that a successful play is one that makes the audience riot in the streets.

I learned a great deal at the Washington festival, at which I screened a third of the 115 films shown. The immersion was exhilarating, although also sometimes depressing and angering as I watched a parade of unbridled and unsustainable development, habitat destructions, toxic industrial activities, and quagmires that

subject the most disempowered populations, especially children and women, to the brunt of ecological trauma. But the good news is that ecological transgressions are being exposed, and now, one hopes, remediation can begin. Throughout the festival, I kept thinking everybody should be watching these films: Have your libraries order them! Put them on your syllabi! Start more campus festivals! What is the value of a visual environmental text? When I teach ecocriticism, my students sometimes complain that the canonical texts (by Annie Dillard, Aldo Leopold, Edward Abbey, and John Muir)

rare extant images of its hunting, mating, and territorial behavior. And the rich marine ecosystem around Tierra del Fuego (in *Eden at the End of the World*), a haven for animals because of its remoteness but lately threatened with the encroaching human footprint. And endangered Indian tiger habitats featured in *Battle to Save the Tiger*, about once-effective but lately bungled government efforts to nurture the animal that is the country's national symbol.

But an environmental focus also applied to topics that may seem less "naturalistic" and more sociological, cultural, and political than

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are boring, and I suspect they skim a lot. The students care about the environment, but they are not used to writing that eschews the status quo anthropocentrism. However, they keenly tune in to films like *Who Killed the Electric Car?*, *Grizzly Man*, and *Erin Brockovich*—those get to them, viscerally.

The trope of "environment" at this festival denoted such traditional nature-film tableaux as the remote Himalayan mountain habitat depicted in *Silent Roar: Searching for the Snow Leopard*, a fascinating record of four years spent tracking that elusive animal and ultimately recording

what you'd expect. Liz Miller's *The Water Front*, for example, depicts Highland Park, Mich., residents who live next to the largest body of fresh water in the world but can no longer afford indoor plumbing because of mismanaged utilities and the downward spiral of urban poverty. *Garbage Warrior*, directed by Oliver Hodge, profiles a New Mexico architect, Michael Reynolds, who builds houses (and pretty nice ones at that) with "no carbon going in or out," using cans, plastic bottles, and tires. Zoning officials, regarding him as an eccentric gadfly who threatened their

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JONAS JORDAN, U.S. ARMY CORPS OF ENGINEERS

Oil fires burn in Kuwait in Scarred Lands and Wounded Lives: The Environmental Impact of War.

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conventional presumptions about development and construction, rescinded his architect's license, but when we see him in India's Andaman Islands after the 2004 tsunami showing grateful residents how to turn garbage into housing, we cannot help but cheer his thinking outside the box.

Water was a central theme of the festival; films and speakers often reminded us that bad water causes more deaths than AIDS or war do. Irena Salina's *FLOW: For Love of Water* systematically spotlights the failure to deliver what should be a universal human right, clean water. Large multinational corporations are gobbling up control of water resources in poor countries. Their business is, of course, motivated by profit, rather than the more ecologically equitable ideal of using all available technology and utility infrastructure to get clean water to more people.

There's a strain of conspiracy theory in some of the films (but the theories are ones that many viewers will find highly credible). The gonzo-documentarian spirit of Michael Moore is often not far below the surface. *FLOW* suggests that capitalist market forces are engaged in what amounts to a global plot to deny billions of people a vital resource. In a similar vein, James Jandak Wood's *Crude Impact* takes aim at the industrial appetite for petroleum, an "oil addiction" that has caused extensive human suffering and environmental desecration. Western societies are largely unaware of the harm caused by oil extraction, Wood argues, because it goes unreported. (Not anymore!)

Crude Impact asserts that the ecological consequences of human behavior overwhelm all other life forms because of the extent to which our lifestyle depends on fossil fuels. We have been brainwashed to believe that more consumption (which obviously requires more oil) equals more happiness. Wood rebuts that by positing that Americans are just about as happy today as they were in the 1950s, although consumption lev-

els have tripled in that time. A talking head, the Worldwatch Institute's President Christopher Flavin, concludes, "The American way of life, to put it bluntly, is not sustainable."

THE ENVIRONMENTAL FILMS I grew up with sedately depicted the quiet sublimity of the wilderness. For earlier filmmakers, nature was above politics. Today's films aim far beyond a placid nature niche. More global and far-reaching, they insist upon making connections between our indulgent living habits and the environment. They don't assume that simply showing audiences an animal or a mountain will automatically induce a comforting faith in the awesomeness of nature.

The threat of global warming is omnipresent in the new films. Many have a similar trajectory, leading to a common moral: Time is running out, and we need to change course. We know what we have to do, we know how to do it, so we just need to steel ourselves and get on with it.

In the wake of such recent hits as *March of the Penguins*, *Winged Migration*, *An Inconvenient Truth*, *Into the Wild*, and *Supersize Me*, environmental filmmakers are staking out a coherent canon that's starting to break through and cross over into a wider popular consciousness. Accompanying that prominence is a growing scholarly attention to the genre. A good starting place is Gregg Mitman's *Reel Nature: America's Romance With Wildlife on Film* (Harvard University Press, 1999), which deftly surveys a range of American wildlife films from the days of Teddy Roosevelt to Walt Disney and *Wild Kingdom*, looking at tensions between scientific authenticity and the commercial audience's demands for lurid thrills.

David Ingram's *Green Screen: Environmentalism and Hollywood Cinema* (University of Exeter Press, 2000) explains how contemporary nature films may foster "greenwashing," the environmentalist Tom Athanasiou's word to describe "a mainstream strategy in which 'images of change substitute for and exaggerate change itself.'"

Cynthia Chris's *Watching Wildlife* (University of Minnesota Press, 2006) shows how traditional, commercial nature films have reiterated prevailing ideologies. She argues that the nature we see in such films is heavily mediated by conventions of representation, preferences for certain kinds of narratives about certain kinds of animals, and the "highbrow sheen" of nature films that invite Foucauldian interrogations about class, taste, and power.

All three of those scholars present valid critiques as they look back at environmental films from the past, but I think today's films have cleaned up their act, so to speak. The caveats about lurid thrills and greenwashing still apply to the standard fare on, say, the Animal Planet channel, where nature is much too readily squeezed into human cultural frames: *Animal Cops*, *Puppy Bowl*, *The Planet's Funniest Animals*. But what I saw in Washington achieved a more intellectually honest and ecologically authentic discourse.

The films were about habitats, people (heroes of the environmental tradition like Rachel Carson, E.O. Wilson, Lady Bird Johnson, and Ansel Adams), and other animals. The heart of an environmental film festival is certainly its documentaries, although there were also animated films, children's films, and other genres represented.

The program also included many retrospectives. For instance, two classic William Wyler dramas, *Come and Get It* (1936) and *The Big Country* (1958), showed how the glorified pioneer-success stories were predicated upon unsustainable resource exploitation (Wisconsin timber and Western water, respectively). These films offered a kind of doubled retrospective: They're old films for us today, and their stories of American settlement are set a few generations before they were made.

Roman Polanski's *Chinatown* (1974), about early-20th-century corruption and scandal in Southern California water-utility development, embodied the same look back at looking back.

Modern audiences watching such films in the context of an environmental film festival can't help but think about the patterns of greed and exploitation unleashed in the formative years of the American empire. The films provoke us to consider how future generations will look back at our own record of preserving or exhausting natural resources.

Several of the most moving new films were about war. Alice and Lincoln Day's *Scarred Lands and Wounded Lives: The Environmental Impact of War*, is a powerful and haunting account of war's silent casualty, the environment. Of course wars are supposed to kill people, but the ancillary damage to the land (and consequently to society) often lasts long beyond the actual war and receives little attention. Military aggression often involves toxic environmental bombardment, as when American forces defoliated Vietnamese forests to destroy the people hiding in them.

Scarred Lands catalogs the array of damage from bombs, chemicals, guns, and unexploded ordnance—land mines or cluster bomblets that didn't detonate when dropped. Those "make a mockery of the word cease-fire" as they continue maiming civilians (often children) for generations after the war is over. Three hundred oil tankers sunk in the Pacific from World War II are about to disintegrate, which will devastate coral reefs and other marine life as hundreds of millions of barrels pollute the ocean. "A war we had in the last century is still destroying our future," the film announces. Cleaning up afterward simply isn't very high on the military's priority list.

Children suffer disproportionately because they are more susceptible to deprivations of clean water and sanitation that ensue when power plants are destroyed. Other common targets—nuclear and petrochemical complexes—produce extreme environmental damage when their debris enters the air and seeps into water tables.

Think, too, about the "diversionary" aspect of war: All the resources and attention expended upon waging war could go somewhere else, to tackle major health, welfare, and environmental problems. The film cites Lester R. Brown, who puts forth a "global budget" in his book *Plan B: Rescuing a Planet Under Stress and a Civilization in Trouble* (Norton, 2003). For \$160-billion a year, according to Brown, a mere one-third of American military expenditures, we could eradicate poverty worldwide and resuscitate the earth's aggrieved environment.

Somber stuff—and yet, when I asked Alice Day if the experience of making *Scarred Lands* had been depressing, she replied, "Just the opposite: I think it's made us more optimistic, in the same way that hospice workers report being inspired by discovering the strength people have." I wondered whether the Days were worried that films like theirs were just preaching to the choir. Lincoln responded, "To some extent, there isn't any choir out there—or, it's a pretty small choir." Alice said, "It goes out from the choir"; the self-selecting environmentally conscious audiences diffuse these ideas and debates throughout their larger communities. (The films I saw actually had pretty respectable choirs: Shown in theaters that held hundreds of people, many were sold out. Well, "sold out" in a figurative sense, as almost all the films were free.)

The Days' broad overview of war was counterpoised by the much sharper focus of *White Light/Black Rain*, which presents the individual stories of 14 people who lived in Hiroshima or

Nagasaki in 1945 and the legacy of pain they have lived with. Director Steven Okazaki movingly captures both the horrifying trauma of the immediate moments when the bombs dropped and the drawn-out suffering that has lasted another 60-plus years. The film resonated fascinatingly with a retrospective showing of *Gojira* (1954, the Japanese original that inspired *Godzilla*), a film racked with monstrous fears in the wake of the nuclear attack.

Arid Lands, by Grant Aaker and Josh Wallaert, examines the Hanford nuclear site. Starting in 1941, tens of thousands of people migrated to an isolated and undeveloped central Washington area half the size of Rhode Island, to work in intense secrecy supplying plutonium for the Manhattan Project. Today Hanford is best known as the world's largest environmental cleanup site, with an agenda that may last for decades more (or may, if the government decides to cut the \$2-billion annual budget, end at any time). The film lambastes the monumental shortsightedness about the millions of tons of highly toxic nuclear waste. It was dumped into the Columbia River; piled into troughs in the earth; and eventually stored in immense tanks, many of which are now leaking radioactivity into the land and groundwater.

What's so creatively ecological about the film is that it doesn't stop there. It meanders discursively, examining numerous issues—some directly consequent upon the Hanford fiasco, others not—that affect the region's ecology. A geographer explains that to understand a place ecologically, we must examine the sequence of habitation patterns, and that's just what *Arid Lands* does.

That broader sequence involves dams and ag-

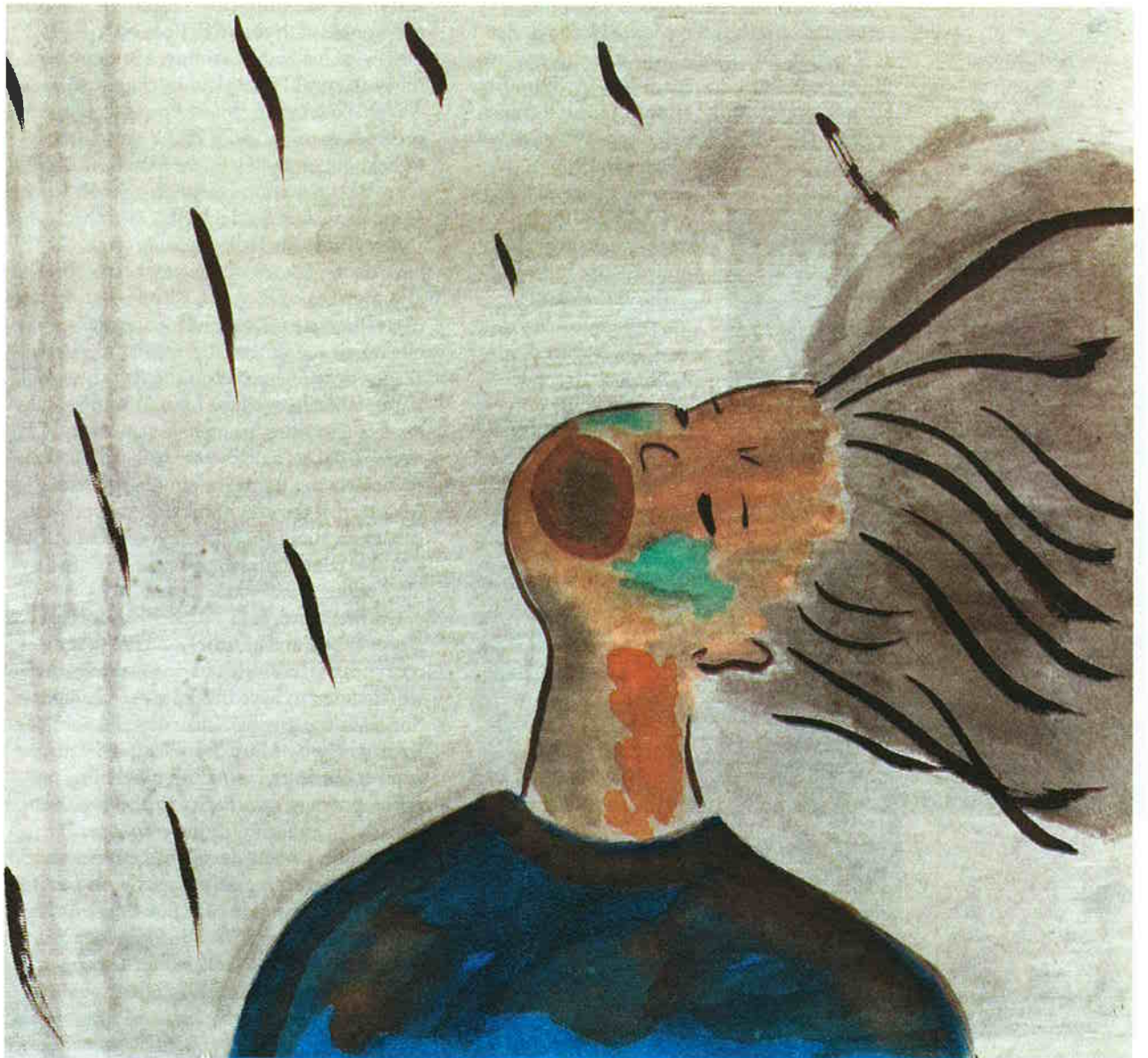
riculture (fruit and wheat versus "new economy" vineyards); excessive, unsustainable development; the legacy of massive federal works and hydroelectric projects; and ethical questions like whether people should build golf courses in the desert and what to do about the fish that used to thrive in the rivers.

Arid Lands presents a broad array of personalities: American Indians whose ancestors once inhabited the region; a crusty old fisherman outraged because the river drops two feet when Portlanders come home from work and turn on their electricity; people who came in the 1940s when their parents worked in the nuclear plant, and people displaced by them; local economists and biologists; and developers who are desecrating the undramatic but highly functional shrub-steppe ecosystem. When a farmer observes that without the dams "there would still be nothing but sagebrush out here," we can't help but think, wow, wouldn't that be wonderful! (An ecologist has already explained the subtle and intricate ecosystemic value of sagebrush, its scruffy importance in the landscape.)

Do not expect a linear narrative in *Arid Lands* and today's other best environmental films. Indeed, be highly suspicious if someone tries to feed you one, because ecological discourse demands detecting and understanding connections, networks, and implications. The films take you far afield. Enjoy the hike. ■

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Survivors of the Hiroshima and Nagasaki atomic bombs were asked to create artwork from their memories of the attacks. This image is one of those featured in White Light/Black Rain.



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