

There Once Was an Island
The Human Face of Climate Change in the Pacific
By Hana Miller

“As a New Zealand filmmaker I like to pay attention to what is happening to our island neighbors,” says Briar March, director of the recently released film *There Once Was an Island*. The documentary is about a community of people living on a tiny and remote island in the Pacific, as they face the decision to leave the island and escape the threats of natural disaster that threaten their homes. “I was inspired by the way in which the story of an island had the potential to work as an allegory for the entire planet, and its small community, a microcosm for how society at large responds to environmental change.”

March, who is currently pursuing her Masters degree in Documentary Film at Stanford University, spent several months on the island during the 4-year journey it took to make the film. In addition to the initial challenge of actually getting to the island, which is located on the remote atoll of Takuu in Papua New Guinea, March and her crew experienced first-hand what it was like to live – and film – in a place largely without electricity, telecommunication and with very little contact with the rest of the world. On their second visit there, as if nature knew that it was being recorded, the crew experienced the effects of a flood, the size of which the island hadn’t experienced in over 20 years.

Takuu, much like several populated islands, is facing the consequences of changing sea levels. As the island’s shoreline continues to shrink, the community continues to build sea walls to try and keep the water at bay. However, as oceanographer John Hunter points out in the film, these sea walls interfere with the shore’s natural process of rebuilding itself by blocking the sand from being washed back up onto the island.

“The changes in the shape of an atoll island is caused by varying weather patterns, hence different wave regimes and overall higher or lower water levels, and partially by what the islanders do,” says Hunter, “I think that much of the change we observed on Takuu was due to human interference.”

Confronted with the risk of losing the rich cultural traditions so closely linked to their lives on the island if they choose to leave, and with the changes that they must initiate if they are to safely remain, the islanders are forced to assess their relationship to their environment in the most literal way.

“Sea-level rise will ultimately be a big problem for these people,” says Hunter, when asked how the circumstances in Takuu – an island no more than 500m long, only 1m above sea level, and home to a population of 400 people – might represent serious considerations for other islands and seaside towns. “They need to learn ways of coping with these inundation events and to refrain from stopping the process of island building by putting this sand back in the sea.”

In an archipelago like Indonesia, with densely populated areas and the shore never too far away, this message carries an added weight. “For relatively undeveloped islands like Takuu, this is not too difficult, given that their infrastructure is mainly composed of huts,” he continues, “however in places with more modern infrastructure...the problem is greater.”

Asked about the challenges endured and the lessons learned through the process of creating *There Once Was An Island*, a film that has already won several international awards, Briar March gives us the filmmaker's perspective on what it was like to make a documentary with such far-reaching implications.

Why make this film?

Overall I think that the central message of the film is summed up by Satty, one of the film's characters. He eloquently explains, "When you loose something small in the world you lose a lot." Satty's words make us realize how everything is connected - a small island out there in the Pacific ocean might seem insignificant in the larger scheme of things, but if it were to disappear, it will directly impact the ocean's fragile eco-system, and potentially destroy a rich and valuable culture. With this in mind, everything in this world is in some way connected – and its worthwhile making small differences in our own lives, as the little things are just as valuable and count as much as the big things - just as Satty has said of his island and people.

Ultimately I hope the film will encourage developed nations to not only consider the pending reality of environmental refugees but to think about adaptation – so that the less advantaged communities such as Takuu can still maintain a sense of their land and culture.

What is it about Nature and Human Nature?

I think human nature is very predictable and in many ways universal. When there is a problem we don't want to deal with, we like to sweep it under the carpet or we quickly go back to our old ways, the way we have always done things, not always the most sensible solution in the long run.

There are two instances that occurred while making the film that make me think of this. For example, after we witnessed a major flood on Takuu, which destroyed over half the houses on the island, the scientists we brought to the island advised the community to build their homes further inland, in order to prevent being flooded again. However, most people quickly rebuilt their houses in the very place they were before, as they wanted the convenience of being close to the water.

Similarly, the non-biodegradable rubbish on the island is usually chucked into the sea, only to be washed back onto the beach, causing a major safety hazard for swimmers, who are in danger of cutting their feet on broken glass and the edges of old tin cans. Throwing rubbish into the sea dates back hundreds of years, but when once the rubbish only consisted of food scraps, it now includes car batteries and coke bottles, which don't breakdown like banana skins!

Such scenarios reminded me of similar situations in my own country or elsewhere in the world. Adjusting to change doesn't come easy – but if we want to avoid getting our feet cut every time we go for a swim, or losing our house from flooding, this community, just like all of us, will need to start rethinking the way we have been doing things.

How did the islanders react?

It has taken us a long time to get a copy of the film to the community. This is mainly

because of the remoteness of the location, and the very few boat trips that are made to the island each year. We would have loved to go back to Takuu and show the film to the islanders ourselves, but because of a lack of funds and the difficulties of getting there, we gave a DVD to Richard Moyle - the ethnomusicologist who indirectly introduced me to the island of Takuu when I read an article about his studies on the island's customs and music – who traveled there a few weeks ago.

He told us that overall the community spoke with gratitude of the film, mentioning it was of something important in their lives. This news makes me really happy, as I have always hoped that the film might eventually be used by the community as an archival resource and historical document. There are very few photographic records of the island or its people other than what Richard and we have recorded. In this sense, making this film has had a significant cultural impact on the community, in comparison to most other films, where there is more access to media and cameras.

What does it feel like to be a documentary filmmaker?

I love filmmaking for its potential to change people in positive ways. In this instance, through the scientists, filmmakers and participants' active engagement in the process of making the film, a transformation took place. Documentary has a unique way of creating a ritual out of an event. Through the apparatus of the camera, participants being filmed respond in a certain way. When confronted with the camera's lens there is a particular gravity to what is being said and a sense of permanence.

We can't always say how a film is going to change the world. Sometimes it's a little change, like a seed planted inside the mind of the viewer. And sometimes it is a big change - consider the dramatic impact of a film such as *An Inconvenient Truth*. But whether it's big or small, it is a change, and I really feel all these changes count.