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Pacific Solutions for the Environment: A Personal Journey

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Abstract: This paper addresses David Fulton's career as a documentary filmmaker. In his own words, Fulton explains how his sense of responsibility for the natural environment and its interplay with human presence was established. His is a story of personal involvement and an emotional journey into a pacific solution for the meeting of man and nature.

Key words: documentary-filming; environmental protection; personal engagement.

Recently, I was given a small book on documentary film by Patricia Aufderheide entitled "Documentary Film - A very short introduction" and I would like to quote: "A shared convention of most documentaries is the narrative structure. They're stories, they have beginnings, middles and ends…they take viewers on emotional journeys."

I was once contracted by the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation to make a film about alcoholism among elderly people. I soon recognized that I had a difficult story on my hands. My subjects were totally cut off from family and friends. They were completely and utterly alone. And that's what I called my film: *Alone*. Nobody wanted to have anything to do with them because they were "impossible" people who had brought nothing but disappointment after disappointment.

Filming these troubled people posed a lot of problems because I insisted on filming them exactly as they were. Often this meant we had to film among the squalor in which many of them dragged out their lives. I wanted to show how the society dealt with these lost elderly people. I was taking viewers on an emotional journey.

It was in documentary film that I first became interested in the natural world and how essential it was for us all to play our part in preserving it.

A number of our films have dealt with fresh water resources.

In one film involving the Great Lakes that divide Canada and the United States we looked at the accumulation of PCB's and the effect of this on herring gulls nesting on

some of the islands. Scientists studying the gulls had found alarmingly high levels of PCB (Polychlorinated Biphenyls) resulting in thin egg-shells. They also found that females were laying their eggs but often the chicks inside were dead. Even more alarming was the discovery that parent gulls were not taking normal care of their nests.

Now, during my years as a filmmaker I have seen only a few examples of ordinary people becoming actively involved in the broad process of "taking care of the environment". We have seen a lot of activity by a few large organizations in taking bold initiatives, often on an impressive scale, to draw public attention to specific situations – like saving the whales. All of this work has its positive side but it also has a negative aspect. It relieves the ordinary citizen of feeling any need to become personally involved.

Today, the electrical companies, the banks and even the oil and gas companies seem to have become the guardians of "our" environment. They are doing the job so we do not have to think about things at all. Personally, I am in favour of more "people involvement". The big question is how to develop this in today's world where the polluters are so big and so powerful.

One of my most memorable experiences of "people involvement" showed up in the city of Caceres in Extremadura when I was working with a British television group on a film about the white stork. According to legend, it is the white stork that brings the babies from France. These big birds are part of the urban scene in Caceres and scarcely a tall building is without its stork nest.

The storks return from northern climes every February without fail and it is not uncommon for people to help things along by providing what we might call a "starter nest" to attract a new pair of storks to settle on top of a building.

While we were filming there we heard that a class of schoolchildren was preparing to place a new "starter nest" on yet another building. We asked if we might film the event. The great day arrived and the class had everything arranged. They had ropes and pulleys to raise the starter nest and leave it ready for its new tenants.

The children pulled mightily on the ropes and they soon had the new nest in place. This brought shouts of delight from one and all. We filmed the entire operation.

On the other hand, my involvement with a film on Lake Baikal was by no means casual. I had met a Finnish producer, Erkki Kivi, and a filmmaker from St. Petersburg, Yuri Klimov, who had already created a fine series on Russian wildlife and this set me thinking. I had the idea of involving Klimov and Kivi in making a series of nature films on wildlife all the way from the Urals to Kamchatka. I would write the scripts and Klimov would do the filming right across Siberia.

Our project got off to a good start and our first film looked at Lake Baikal, one of the world's biggest reserves of fresh water. We anticipated Jacques Cousteau, who turned up while Kilmov was filming the lake in winter when it looks like the other side of the moon.

Klimov filmed the fresh-water seals that live in the lake and he went underwater to show whole regions of fresh-water sponges. Klimov brought back film of a wide range of wildlife and recorded many aspects of Lake Baikal totally unknown in the West.

I had a large part in final editing of all this material. Our film editor was Mexican so the work took on a truly international feeling.

Here I must note that, while our original plan was to make a seven-part series on Siberia and its wildlife, our Russian cinematographer had a fatal heart attack and left us and our project forever bereft. We decided to stop things right there and so what we ended up with was a fine one-hour film: *Lake Baikal: the World's Deepest Lake.* The film was shown on television in various countries including Finland, Russia and Spain.

I should like to mention a film made for the Ontario Ministry of the Environment by our production company, Montero-Fulton Productions, started up by my wife Gloria and myself. We were small but we had a lot of energy and ideas. That film was called *Crisis in the Rain.*[i]

This was an informational film about the problem of acid rain. This problem had its origins in coal-fired power stations in the USA from which air-borne pollution moved across the border into Canada. The acidic pollution was finally deposited on many of the small lakes of great importance to Canada's tourist industry. These lakes attracted boaters and fishing enthusiasts (many from the United States), and it was found that a lot of the lakes were becoming denuded of sports fish. This set off the alarms.

In the United States we filmed big power plants belching forth loads of dark pollution. In Canada, we showed scientists studying some of the affected lakes. The film was widely shown and won us a first prize and a Gold Camera Award at the US Film Festivals in Chicago—in what we might dub "enemy territory"!

Of course, policies change depending on the level of government. Canada's federal government has just announced it is withdrawing from the Kyoto Agreement.

My interest in water quality shows up in another film I made for the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation about mercury poisoning in a river in Northern Ontario on which the Native Indian communities of White Dog and Grassy Narrows depended for their living.

I had been sent to look in on these communities, where a major paper mill had been dumping mercury into the river where they lived and there were fears of mercury poisoning such as had occurred at Minamata in Japan. What I found were two communities in a severe state of social disintegration.

The government had banned commercial fishing and this had cut off the livelihood of both communities. The government sent out monthly support cheques but a lot of this money went into alcohol and the level of domestic violence was very high.

I went back to the CBC to report on what I had seen and I fully expected to be sent back with a film crew right away. The answer from the producer was simple: "No budget".

I was so moved by what I had seen at White Dog and Grassy Narrows that I blurted out that I would do the documentary even without getting my usual fee. Of course, that did not fit into the corporate scheme. I went home very troubled.

Next day a miracle happened. I had a call from the CBC producer to say I would, in fact, have a film crew to tell the story of those communities and, what is more, I would be paid!

Nor was this was an easy assignment. I called the crew together and we agreed to take up residence for a week in the teacher's house, vacant for the summer holidays. We would take food and prepare our own meals right there. Everyone was in agreement so we loaded up and left for Grassy Narrows.

Of course, the best laid plans…

We were made welcome by the Indian Chief of Grassy Narrows and settled into the absent teacher's house.

First problem: the water pump was not working so there was no running water to wash dishes or to make the toilet work! We had a meal but there was no way of cleaning up afterwards. We had got off to a bad start.

I had to work out a plan so that evening I took a walk along the river-bank to think things over. Finally, I went back toward the teacher's house. When I arrived there I found the crew sitting in their car so I stopped to talk. Imagine my surprise when one of the crew began to explain their view of the situation.

According to this view, we should film what was happening at Grassy Narrows in one solid day's work and get out as fast as we could.

This was a point of view I did not share. I bid the crew "Goodnight" and retired to my room to work out a plan. I decided I would be ruthless. I would send home the lighting man who appeared to be the ring leader of the mutiny on the grounds of "unsafe health conditions". Then we would continue to work according to my plan.

We worked hard all the next day and things were rather strained but gradually I found that another miracle was taking place. Slowly the crew members, even the "mutiny leader", had begun to see the terrible situation I was trying to show on film. The "mutiny" was over. There was no doubt in my mind that our film would take viewers on an emotional journey.

One of the first things I did next day was to take the Chief back to the old village on a nearby island from which the community had been wrested some years earlier to "make access easier for the teacher". The old wooden church building was still there, sitting in a sea of long grass which came up to our ears. We filmed the Chief walking

through the tall grass looking at the old wooden church that was now falling down. This was the beginning of the emotional journey that made this film really work.

Next day, back at the new community site, I sat the Chief down on a big rock close by the edge of the river and asked him to tell us what life was like at the old village.

I was always getting comments about the way I conducted my interviews. The fact is I seldom asked people direct questions. I simply asked them to tell me their story. And everyone has a story to tell.

In the case of the Grassy Narrows chief, I did not need to ask him anything more. His story just poured out. I remember a tribe of small children sitting on top of a nearby rock listening quietly to what their Chief had to say.

This film told the stark truth about these Indian communities and how the effects of dumping mercury or other dangerous chemicals into rivers and lakes can have devastating effects on the lives and well-being of ordinary people. The film was shown on National Television and the children in the Grassy Narrows school were obliged to watch it and they were encouraged to write to me. Their letters were devastating. One was very short and I shall never forget how it ended:

"What will happen to us? Who knows? God knows."

To end up, I should like to say that, in the course my work in documentary filmmaking, I have seen only a few isolated examples of citizens or groups of citizens taking a personal stand on environmental issues. Does this mean that the ordinary citizen really has no voice? Have we allowed ourselves to believe that all is well? Are the new communications channels now opening up going to give ordinary people more of a say in what happens to their environment? I would like to think so.

I will always remember the children in Caceres who prepared a starter nest to attract a new family of storks, and the children of Grassy Narrows who inherited their Chief's concern for maintaining their way of life in spite of the actions of those who would thoughtlessly take away their livelihood and their sense of community. In my own work in documentary I've tried to use the medium to tell a story and to take viewers on emotional journeys.

This has been part of my own personal search for pacific horizons in the environment we all share.

David Fulton was born in Australia and lived many years in Canada before moving to Barcelona. He worked freelance as a documentary filmmaker, writing, directing and producing films on the natural world and environmental concerns, such as the effect of PCBs on herring gulls in the Great Lakes and the health and social effects of mercury pollution from a paper mill on the native community of Grassy Narrows. "To the beat of a different drummer" looked at the life and work of Henry David Thoreau and featured folk-singer Pete Seeger as narrator and performer. With Gloria Montero, he produced "Crisis in the Rain" showing the effects of acid rain from cross-border pollution produced by coal-burning power-plants in the United States.

This film won a Gold Camera Award from the US Film Festivals (Chicago). With Finnish and Russian partners, he coproduced "Baikal: The world's deepest lake" filmed in Siberia and shown widely on television.

[i] I should like to mention that the film editor who worked with us on *Crisis in the Rain*—and many of our other films—was Ronald Sanders, editor of *A Dangerous Method,* a volume on Jung and Freud released only recently. Working on documentary films Sanders always would come up with editing alternatives that demanded creative decisions.