



SOC's Center for Environmental Filmmaking

2008 Annual Report

By Chris Palmer, Director
January 1, 2009

This report gives an overview of what the Center for Environmental Filmmaking accomplished in 2008.

Dean Larry Kirkman and I founded the Center four years ago on the belief that films and new media are essential educational tools in the struggle to protect the environment. Our mission is to train filmmakers to produce films and new media that effectively focus attention on conservation issues. Graduate students may now concentrate their studies in environmental and wildlife filmmaking through the Center.

The world faces immense environmental challenges. We are fouling our own nest to an unprecedented degree. Powerful images and films (as we saw with *An Inconvenient Truth*) can play a key role in raising the importance of conservation and bringing about change.

The Center's work falls into four areas:

1. Partnerships with well-established organizations that give students the opportunity to produce professional films
2. World-class filmmakers coming to the AU campus to teach and mentor students
3. Innovative and enriching programs and classes
4. Advocacy for the ethical treatment of wildlife and the environment through films, new media, and presentations

More details on our activities in these four areas follow:

First, we give students the opportunity to do professional work for partners such as Maryland Public Television, National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, the National Park Service, and other organizations. Larry Engel and Sandy Cannon-Brown have been pivotal in these efforts. Grad student Danny Ledonne is now a paid video

production contractor for NOAA's Ocean Media Center producing new media, and NOAA is about to hire a second SOC student. The Center is also partnering with NOAA on a major new initiative called Oceans for Life, and five of our grad students (Brad Allgood, Lauren Demko, Danny Ledonne, Katie Kassof and Jeremy Polk) will be paid film mentors in that program this summer. Three of our grad students (Heather Danskin, Lauren Demko and Katie Kassof) won scholarships to attend an NSF-sponsored conference on lifelong learning and IMAX films. Grad student Mike Shubbuck recently worked on a shoot for Friends of the Earth in Honduras.

Second, we bring outstanding filmmakers to campus. On most Tuesday nights, we hold an event with Filmmakers for Conservation in the Wechsler Theater at which a renowned filmmaker shows clips from his or her films and talks about how and why the films were made. In the fall, Kevin Mohs from Animal Planet, Bob Nixon from Earth Conservation Corps, Charles Dunkerly from the National Park Service, Brent Blackwelder from Friends of the Earth, Janet Canterbury from EPA, Steven Schupak from MPT, Bridget Whalen from National Geographic, Justine Schmidt and Michael Hanrahan from the Ocean Film Festival, and others visited campus to packed audiences.

This coming spring semester, the Center is organizing over a dozen different events, including Gillian Caldwell from 1Sky, Michael Cascio from National Geographic, and Jason Carey from Animal Planet. We are also showing many films, some as part of the Environmental Film Festival, including the premieres of Larry Engel's *Potato Heads and Corn Dogs: Keepers of the Crop*, Ginny Durrin's *Bombs in our Backyard*, and Marty Ostrow's *Renewal*.

Third, we provide innovative programs like *Classroom in the Wild* and *Environmental and Wildlife Film Production* taught by Sandy Cannon-Brown. In Sandy's class, students produce a half-hour film for Maryland Public Television called *EcoViews*. Brigid Maher and Lisa Bream's classes produce the motion graphics for the program. The class challenges students to work at a professional level to produce a broadcast-quality program worthy of PBS and, thanks to Sandy, Brigid and Lisa, they always succeed. Last May, *EcoViews* won a regional Student Emmy.

Classroom in the Wild in Florida is in its fourth highly successful year, and Larry Engel launched *Classroom in the Wild in Alaska* this past summer to enthusiastic acclaim from all the students who attended. *Classroom in the Wild*, an intensive outdoor workshop held in wilderness areas, allows students to camp out and learn how to meet the challenges—sometimes extreme challenges—of natural history field production.

Sandy Cannon-Brown and I continue to create and manage the annual Student Short Film Festival with the DC Environmental Film Festival. Now in its fourth year, it has been a significant success. We showcase the talents of emerging “green communicators” to promote environmental causes and empower individuals to make a difference. A panel discussion on how to succeed as a filmmaker always accompanies the event. This year on March 18, the panel will consist of representatives from National Geographic, National Park Service and the Center for Environmental Filmmaking.

Prof. Maggie Burnette Stogner mentors graduate students in her Advanced Media Portfolio course and as a thesis advisor, sharing her years of experience at National Geographic TV with students committed to conservation advocacy. *Spinning Toward Green*, *A Place to Land*, *Cornography*, and *Sacred Forests* are just a few such films.

Fourth and finally, we advocate the ethical treatment of wildlife and the environment, through films, articles, conferences and festivals—and we give awards, grants and sponsorships to pursue those goals. We participate in a significant way in half a dozen major festivals every year, including the International Wildlife Film Festival in Montana and the Environmental Film Festival in DC.

A film that got its start at CEF, *Scarred Lands and Wounded Lives: The Environmental Footprint of War*, by Alice and Link Day (with major input from AU grad Dan Gallagher) was a finalist at Wildscreen and also won a CINE Golden Eagle award. The Center is also coproducing a film about wolves with Wild Sentry and Lobitos Creek Ranch. We are launching with Friends of the Earth a new video competition with a cash prize to encourage the use of humor in environmental video advocacy. And the Center and Sony also award a cash prize annually to the best environmental film in the Visions Festival at AU.

Professor Sarah Menke-Fish and graduate students conducted workshops on video and audio production, writing, editing, and voiceovers with Montgomery County Public School (MCPS) high school students and their teachers who were participating in the 2008 Environmental Film Festival. This joint collaboration with MCPS and the American Film Institute is now in its fourth year. The students who produced, *The Oysters Decline* won the best of the festival award and received full tuition scholarships to the American University, School of Communication Discover the World of Communication Program, audiscover.com and can be found on the CEF website, <http://vimeo.com/cef/videos>.

In a joint project with the Center for Social Media and Filmmakers for Conservation, Larry Engel led a team dedicated to developing the “best practices” for green filmmaking and to making SOC’s film program the first in the nation to go green. We are defining standards for sustainable production for students in university film programs and among professional documentary producers. Larry and his co-author Andrew Buchanan from the UK will be publishing “The Code for Best Practices in Sustainable Filmmaking” in February 2009 through the Center for Social Media and the Center for Environmental Filmmaking, and launching its release in print and on the Web at this years Realscreen Summit in Washington, DC.

Grad student and filmmaker Danny Ledonne has created a video hosting site on Vimeo where environmentally-themed films produced by AU students can be screened: <http://vimeo.com/cef>. Also thanks to Danny, the Center now has an official Facebook Group: <http://www.new.facebook.com/group.php?gid=28212693862>.

By the way, Danny Ledonne says, “The Center for Environmental Filmmaking has been the single most rewarding aspect of my AU experience.”

I thank Dean Larry Kirkman and Prof. John Douglass for all their support. And I thank Larry Engel, Sandy Cannon-Brown, Sarah Menke-Fish, and Maggie Burnette Stogner—the four Associate Directors of the Center—for their invaluable contributions.

The Center’s activities and programs are made possible by the Wallace Genetic Foundation, Gil Ordway, Roger and Vicki Sant, and other generous donors.