

Sacred Land Film Project

Around the world, indigenous people stand up for their traditional sacred lands in defense of cultural survival, human rights and the environment.

Some ceremonies are not to be filmed. As the sun came up over the rainforest village of Bosmun, Papua New Guinea, in the spring of 2010, Sacred Land Film Project director Christopher (Toby) McLeod was grateful just to have been able to hear, all night long, the very rare and beautiful harmonies of transcendental flutes.

Toby and the crew brought home magnificent footage of other ceremonies for *Profit and Loss*, one of the four films of *Standing on Sacred Ground*, and lasting memories. They didn't realize that the transcendental flute ceremony was dying out in Bosmun, or that their interest in the endangered tradition inspired an elder of the village to revive it. Now, after two years of instruction, master artist Anthony Tibong has graduated 13 young men "in the art of making mystical music." After attending the emotional ceremony in July, Papua New Guinea activist Rosa Koian wrote, "Bosmun people once again convey their thanks to you and the film crew for realizing the richness in Papua New Guinea."

Rosa wrote on, "Can't wait to share the experience of screening *Profit and Loss* this afternoon. People were emotional, screaming and shouting—and a lot of tears. I am so over the moon this evening."

Gratitude, reciprocity and inspiration: these are gifts to be exchanged between us, as filmmakers and allies, and the distant, imperiled indigenous communities in our films. The people who let us in—despite taboos, misgivings and histories of cultural appropriation—are our

We All Stand on Sacred Ground

BY JESSICA ABBE

most essential audience. It has been a privilege and a thrill to hear their responses as they see their communities, ceremonies and sacred places in the films, and find common ground with guardians in the other seven stories from across the globe.

In November, Toby traveled back to Papua New Guinea and Australia to personally present the films and our common hopes for positive outcomes for these sacred sites, battlegrounds between traditional

sustainable practices and modern pressures, threatened by development, greed, corruption and thoughtless consumption. Please check for updates from the field on Toby's website blog.



When the first boxed sets of *Standing on Sacred Ground* DVDs arrived, the mailing party began. Sets were sent to shamans, farmers and native activists from the Altai Republic of Russia to the Peruvian Andes. Only one set came back, marked undeliverable, but a friend of Darout Guma who stopped by our office was able to hand deliver the DVDs to Darout in Ethiopia. Now that's a network.

The DVDs include 21 bonus special features: great scenes edited just for the DVDs, with "Indigenous Reflections on Christianity," Onondaga Chief Oren Lyons on the education he got after he returned home from university and Winona LaDuke on the importance of government apology. Hear Satish Kumar on how we got into our predicament, and Barry Lopez on how we get out of it. In one four-minute film, see how 1970s actions emboldened Native Hawaiians decades later at a Ritz-Carlton hotel site on Maui, where ancestral remains were discovered—and eventually protected.

In a director's commentary over previously unseen footage, Toby says, "People often ask me how difficult it is as an outsider, a white man, to gain the trust of indigenous communities that have been colonized and abused for centuries..." He describes his first



Winnemem Wintu Chief **Caleen Sisk** opens the Fire and Water Ceremony at Mt. Shasta, August 2014.

CHRISTOPHER (TOBY) MCLEOD

arrival at Dorbo Meadow in Ethiopia. As in many other places around the world, Toby hung back, waiting to go through traditional greetings and complicated translations, a process requiring time and patience.

This was different. Right away, his local consultant, Metasebia Bekele, demanded, "Why aren't you filming?"

"Well, I haven't met the elders yet," said Toby.

"They know why you're here," exclaimed Metasebia, "Please, begin filming!"

Eager to tell their stories, the elders of the Gamo Highlands were delighted that someone was there to listen. Some ceremonies are meant to be filmed.



In August, the Winnemem Wintu tribe of northern California made their annual pilgrimage to the spring that is their spiritual

source on Mt. Shasta. This year, they were joined by other Native Americans, Native Hawaiians and indigenous women from Mexico and Ecuador, all bearing water from their own sacred mountains, to encourage the struggling spring and foster solidarity and common purpose with the tribe.

In the firelight at the Winnemem dance ground at the base of Mt. Shasta, dancers appeared in the regalia of spirits of fire and water, pounding the earth with their feet as voices echoed in song around the circle. The forces of fire and water battled in spiritual conflict. As in ages past, this new dance had emerged from dreams and visions.

A month later, fire destroyed dozens of homes and devastated the town of Weed, west of Mt. Shasta; the same week, on the eastern slope, a river of mud and boulders was released by glaciers melted by drought and a warming climate. Both events were

reminders of the tremendous power of fire and of water, appearing unbidden and unwanted in their destructive forms, as humanity, like a watcher at the dance, struggles to understand and respect these forces of nature.



Films come from good ideas, and some good should also come from films. The John DeGraaf Environmental Filmmaking Award is a high honor for those whose films produce significant outcomes, maintain high standards of artistic and journalistic quality and reinforce the power of the independent voice in film. Last January, at the Wild and Scenic Film Festival in Nevada City, California, Toby McLeod was given this respected award as recognition for his entire body of work, produced in a 35-year career as a filmmaker.



The Sacred Land Film Project at the Mill Valley Film Festival world premiere of *Standing on Sacred Ground*. Standing from left:

Quinn Costello, Michael Preston, Vicente Franco, Tantoo Cardinal, Fiona McLeod, Caleen Sisk, Toby McLeod, Jessica Abbe, Erin Lee, Andy Black, Marta Wohl, Dianne Brennan, Tom Disher,

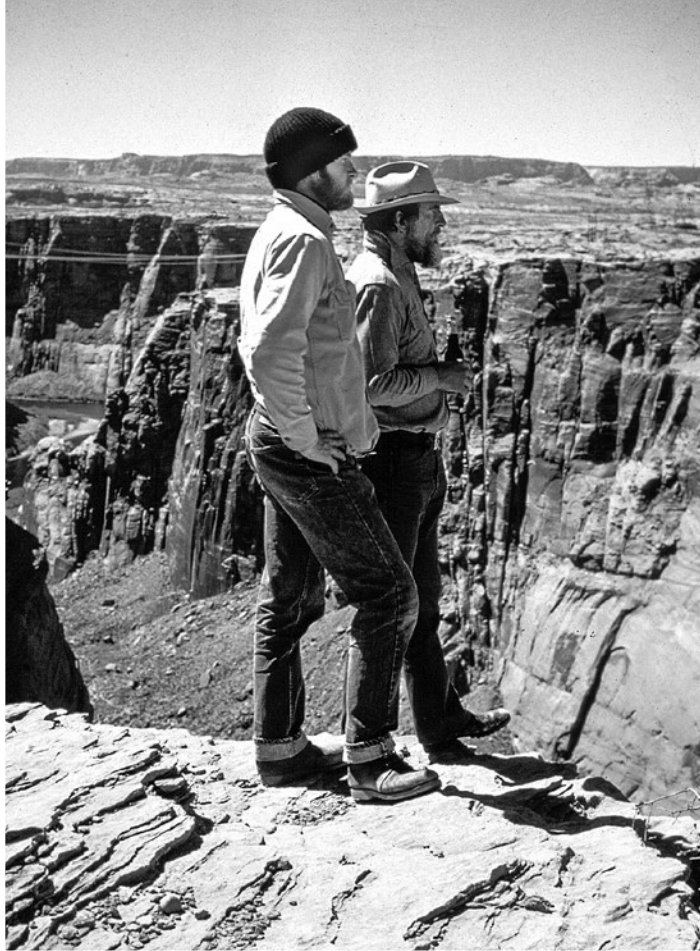
Davianna McGregor Closer to Earth: Danil Mamyev, Sara Moore, Indra Mungal, Jennifer Huang, Marlo McKenzie, Emmett Alufi

A few months ago I was sitting in the David Brower Center's theater watching the great new film *DamNation*. An activist on screen described seeing a film about Earth First!'s 1982 action at Glen Canyon Dam, which inspired him to go out five years later and paint a giant crack on Glines Canyon Dam on the Elwha River in Washington's Olympic National Park. His covert action emboldened a movement to remove dams and restore salmon habitat all over the U.S.

I sat in the dark theater feeling goosebumps, then tears in my eyes, as I realized that a film I had made 30 years ago had a direct connection to another activist, and then to a movement, and then the removal of not one dam, but many.

Back in 1982, the reclusive author Edward Abbey had agreed to an interview for *The Four Corners: A National Sacrifice Area?* On the phone, I tried to set up a location for the interview. Ed said, "Meet me at Lone Rock Campground, nine miles north of Glen Canyon Dam, on the spring equinox. We have something planned."

And so it happened that Randy Hayes, Glenn Switkes and I were on hand for the birth of Earth First! and their guerrilla theater action of unfurling a 300-foot long black plastic "crack" down the face of the hated Glen Canyon Dam—the main target in



Toby McLeod with Edward Abbey inspecting Glen Canyon Dam, 1982.

The Sacred Land Film Project Turns Thirty

Abbey's 1975 novel *The Monkey Wrench Gang*. We filmed the scene, plus a rare interview with Abbey. Earth First! founder Dave Foreman took *The Cracking of Glen Canyon Damn*, the nine-minute film that resulted, on the road and used it to launch a new era of environmental activism.

A few years later, the federal government was considering a nuclear waste dump next to Canyonlands National Park in an area of Utah that I—and many others—had experienced as a sacred place. I knew that if the government went forward with its bad idea that people might die for that place. I was hanging around Friends of the Earth at the time, and I asked David Brower if the organization would sponsor me as a nonprofit

film project to make a documentary about the Canyonlands Nuclear Dump. He said Friends of the Earth was about to throw him out, just as the Sierra Club had a decade before, but he was starting Earth Island Institute and I would be welcome to have a project there. Hence the Sacred Land Film Project was born, one of the original Earth Island projects in 1984.

In many conversations with Dave during those years, a frequent subject was his remorse over making the first ascent of Shiprock, a Navajo sacred site in New Mexico. "If I had

known it was a sacred site," said Dave, "I never would have climbed it."

Three decades have passed since I was fired up by the proposal for a nuclear dump in a canyon full of ancient rock art and Anasazi villages deep in one of the nation's most stunning wilderness parks. The government backed off. And in 2012, dams on the Elwha River were dismantled. The salmon are returning.

Our actions matter, no matter how small or unsung they may feel at the time. After 30 years, the inspiration and commitment of Ed Abbey and Dave Brower live on in the global community of the Sacred Land Film Project.

—Christopher (Toby) McLeod