

Sacred Land Film Project

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Detained in Papua New Guinea

by Christopher McLeod

The fervent hope of international documentary filmmakers is that the research and advance work pans out and everything goes roughly as planned: the satellite phone works in the rainforest, the government minister shows up for the interview, the generator we rent to charge batteries fires up, no one comes down with giardia and we get the tapes we shoot safely out of the country. Encounters with police are not part of the plan.

In Papua New Guinea, where we documented everything from forced relocation of villagers at the site of a new nickel mine to a dozen warriors launching a ceremonial canoe, we ran afoul of local authorities and ended up spending a hot afternoon in a shipping container that served as the police station near a controversial mining project.

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Sama Mellambo is a landowner and village leader on the Rai Coast in PNG. Last year he sued Ramu NiCo, a division of China Metallurgical Corporation (MCC), a Chinese government-owned mining company. MCC is building a \$1.4 billion nickel and cobalt mine that has relocated villagers and threatens to pollute the Ramu River with heavy metals. MCC is also building a huge refinery at Basamuk on the Rai Coast near the town of Madang.

Mellambo won a court injunction



SAMA MELLAMBO LOOKS AT HIS FAMILY CEMETERY SITE AFTER IT WAS DESTROYED BY CHINA METALLURGICAL CORP. AT BASAMUK BAY, PAPUA NEW GUINEA

Photo by Christopher McLeod

that stopped MCC from blasting a coral reef, laying a pipeline and dumping mining waste into the sea. In the process of building the refinery, MCC bulldozed Mellambo's family cemetery.

We crossed Astrolabe Bay to the Basamuk refinery site as dolphins and flying fish jumped alongside our boat. After landing beneath a steep shore littered with pipes, refuse and a jumble of shipping containers, we climbed up and started filming as Mellambo entered the refinery site.

He walked to the edge of a deep pit sprouting concrete piers and rebar and pointed out burial remains exposed in the dirt embankment. We interviewed Mellambo for ten minutes, until a security vehicle pulled up and two armed guards jumped out: one from PNG, one Chinese.

Andy Black kept the camera rolling as Mellambo berated the security men for digging up his clan cemetery.

"You dumped the bones of my ancestors into the ocean!" exclaimed Mellambo.

"You show no respect!" The Chinese guard, named Jason Lee, argued back, as the two men yelled at each other about who owns the land.

Lee told us to leave, and we scrambled down the muddy bluff to our waiting boat. We were about to depart when the police arrived and told us we were being detained.

We stashed the videotapes with our gear on the boat, which took

off for Mellambo's village. The cops wanted us to meet with the MCC security men at the police station. Sound recordist Dave Wendlinger put a wireless microphone on Mellambo to record whatever was about to transpire. Andy, Dave, managing producer Jennifer Huang and I followed Mellambo up from the beach. The police station was a shipping container with one door, one window, a tiny air conditioner and three chairs. Once Jason Lee entered the container and sat down, four cops moved to block the door, one with an M-16 semi-automatic weapon, another with a shotgun. The mood was tense. Lee opened a notebook and said, "There are two requirements: we want your names and passport numbers. We also want to take a photograph of each of you. Give us that and you can go. We don't want to make any more trouble."

I replied that we had been sending

letters to MCC for weeks describing our work, requesting interviews and explaining our plans to film Mellambo's story. "We've been totally open about what we are doing. It's reasonable that you take our names and photos," I said, "but our passports are in our luggage on the boat."

I suggested that a policeman come with us to Mellambo's village to get the passport numbers and the police chief nodded. Lee rattled on about trespassing, commercial secrets at an industrial site and not carrying identification. Then he looked down at his notebook and said, "Oh, there is one thing I forgot. You also have to give us your video footage and photographs, because you were trespassing on MCC land and may not photograph our property."

I shook my head, took a deep breath and said, "No, we won't give you our tapes or photos."

At that point Mellambo went on the offensive. "These people are my guests and this is my land," asserted Mellambo. "You have no right to treat them this way." Within seconds the two antagonists were yelling at each other again. Mellambo picked up one of our backpacks saying, "It's getting late and our boat has to make it back to Madang. We are leaving." We all rose and started moving toward the door, but none of the four cops in front of the door moved. One of them said, "You'd better sit back down."

At this point my calm optimism began to waver.

Mellambo and Lee continued to argue, and Lee said, "You have to give up your footage." Pointing to his shirt pocket, Lee said, "I am recording all this."

Mellambo touched his belly (pointing to the wireless transmitter concealed under his shirt) and said, "So am I," at which point Lee laughed at him.

And they were off yelling again.

The cop with the M-16 asked both men to step outside.

Once they had left, the officer in charge told us, "We'll tell him MCC can take you to court if they want but that we can't detain you any longer."

Suddenly, it was all over. Lee came back in and the police told him we were going to be released. A policeman would accompany us to Mellambo's village to get our passport numbers and take our photos. Lee looked deflated. I imagine he wondered why providing guns and



Photo by Christopher McLeod

Winnemem Ceremony at Puberty Rock

IN JULY 2010, for the first time in 80 years, Winnemem Wintu tribe members revived a long-banned ritual. In 100-degree heat, Jessica Perez and Winona Steele first cleaned this boulder with river water, then ground dried plants in indentations in the rock where medicine was made for centuries. This important tribal landmark, Puberty Rock, only emerges from the receding waters of California's largest reservoir in years when sufficient water is released from Shasta Dam. When winter rains come, the rock is submerged again, and if the U.S. government succeeds in enlarging the dam the rock will disappear permanently. The Winnemem are determined not to let their traditions and their dream of restoration of a healthy river be inundated by a huge government project which many see as outmoded and destructive.

Jennifer Huang, Toby McLeod, Will Parrinello, Dave Wendlinger and I were honored to witness and film this ritual, part of a four-day coming-of-age ceremony, and taste the sweet, rejuvenating tea the girls made and served to their aunts and to us.

An hour later, Jessica and Winona swam across the river and joined their tribe as women.

—Jessica Abbe

vehicles hadn't ensured the loyalty of the local police.

As we walked in the hot, humid sunshine, a crowd moved with us, as many locals had gathered outside the police station to help their clan leader, Mellambo, if needed. Mellambo made a cell phone call to a reporter in Madang. An hour later, as we were still walking to his village, Mellambo's phone rang. Friends were calling to see if he was OK, as they had already heard the radio news report about his detention. At sundown, a policeman arrived in Mellambo's village to take photos of each of us as we held up our passports—my first mug shot. It turned out all of the cops were either neighbors or clan brothers of Mellambo. As the policeman left, he smiled and said, "We're with you."

On the following afternoon, via a cell phone call from his attorney, Mellambo

learned that a judge in Madang had upheld the court injunction halting MCC's plan to dump mining waste into the sea. We filmed as Mellambo and his village celebrated the news.

Postscript: After returning home, we learned from an online news report that Sama Mellambo was personally offered \$14 million by PNG Prime Minister Michael Somare to drop the lawsuit that is holding up the giant mining project. It wasn't a straight cash bribe offer, but a promise to build schools, clinics and roads. Mellambo refused the offer, called a reporter and exposed the bribe attempt in the local newspapers. But a month later, apparently under pressure from his community, and perhaps out of concern for his own safety, Mellambo accepted the offer and dropped out of the lawsuit.

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LATE SUMMER is beautiful in Canada's boreal forest, giving cool, rainy hints of the severe winter weather

to follow. For three weeks, Andy Black (camera), Jennifer Huang (managing producer), Dave Wendlinger (sound) and I went hunting in the forest to capture images of the devastating industrial process of separating oil from earth. Dozens of international corporations are investing billions to mine the thick, goopy sands of northern Alberta. It's expensive, it's dirty, and it's flowing south: 1.4 million barrels of tar sands oil are imported to fuel cars in the United States every day.

The third largest oil deposit on earth lies beneath the homeland of the Dene, Cree and Métis nations, and their cultures are losing ground to a global industrial nightmare. Hunting people of the Athabasca River basin have already had to give up traditional foods, and can no longer drink from the polluted river or eat fish deformed by contact with heavy metals. The people endure high cancer rates and government-sponsored pollution of their air and water. Even as they pray for the land being destroyed, many native people take jobs in the booming oil sands operations.

Jim Boucher, Chief of the Fort McKay Cree First Nation, decided 15 years ago

The Price is Wrong

that if he couldn't beat the industry he might as well join it. The Ft. McKay community now has \$500 mil-

lion in contracts and business every year, but Chief Boucher still has second thoughts. "Money, it's useless," he told us. "Land, it's priceless."

First by boat, then on 4x4s, we journeyed to a remote sand dune at the heart of traditional Dene territory. Early in the morning, we emerged from our tents to find that our camp had been visited in the night. The nightmare receded, and we were in a fantastic dream, awestruck by the bittersweet beauty of a bear's paw prints in the sand. The photographer is the witness. The artist is the bear.

In the weeks since we returned from Alberta, we've been counting small blessings. Working at the David Brower Center in Berkeley, we're all able to commute by public transportation or hybrid car. Solar panels on the roof capture energy for our editing room equipment.

Instead of cement, the concrete walls were constructed of recycled blast furnace slag.

After immersion in Canada's nightmare, even small efforts toward sustainability take on greater significance and healing power. We hope our film's audience will be equally inspired and encouraged to protect the people, lands, cultures and unseen bears of our fragile world.

—Christopher McLeod

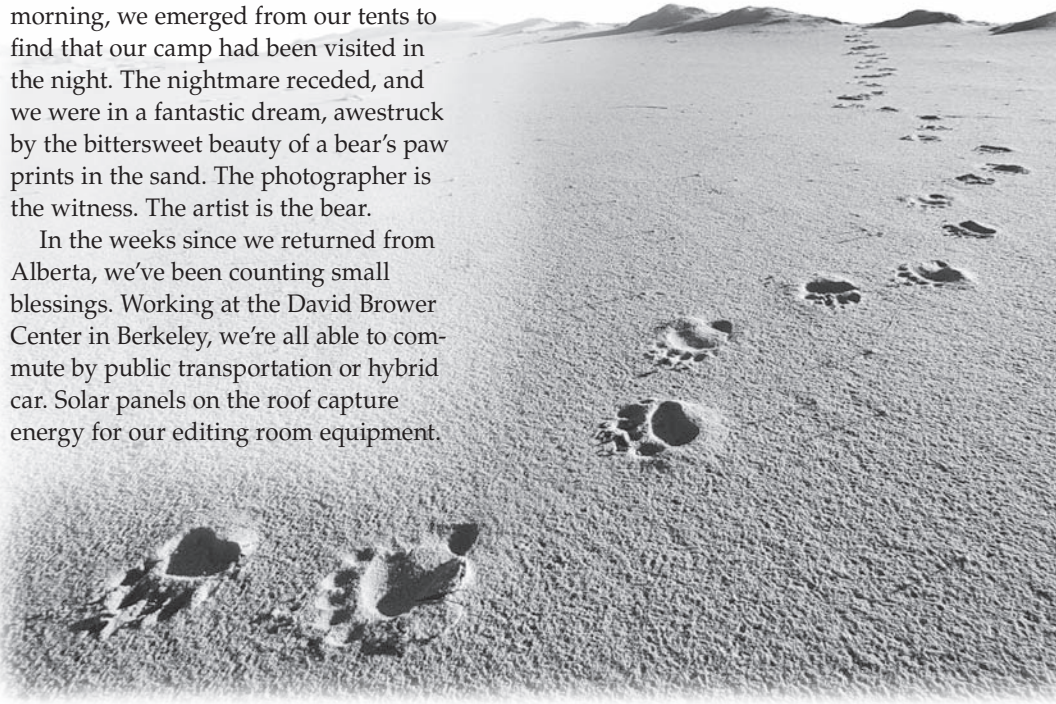


Photo by Christopher McLeod

Signs from Nature

THE EIGHTH and final story in our film series depicts the ecological and spiritual restoration of Kaho'olawe. A walk on this Hawaiian island is a perilous adventure, and access is restricted to Native Hawaiians and their guests. Visible to tourists from the beaches and resorts of Maui, the red dirt of

Kaho'olawe hides unexploded ordnance left by 50 years of bombing by the U.S. Navy, which began after Japan's 1941 attack on Pearl Harbor and continued until 1990.

Named after the Polynesian ocean god Kanaloa, Kaho'olawe is of historic significance to Native Hawaiians as the launching place for journeys to Tahiti. It was used as a place to teach navigation, to observe the sun, moon, tides and wind in solitude, and to watch for *ho'ailona*, signs from nature.

When we filmed at Kealaikahiki, the point of departure for Tahiti, a double rainbow arched across the sky. A light rain

fell on the thirsty island, where erosion is a constant threat. The next day, as we filmed a group of young men and women arriving by canoe from Maui, a school of spinner dolphins surfaced and swam alongside the canoe.

The battered island was the victim of wartime fear that could not distinguish between a military target and *wahi pana*, a storied, revered place. The slow, painstaking efforts at restoration—replanting native species, reviving ancient ceremonies and continuing to clean up the military debris—are the centerpiece of a revival of traditional Hawaiian culture, by elders and youth together.

We'll return to Kaho'olawe to complete filming in early 2011.

—Christopher McLeod



Photo by Dornie Dawson

◀ CHRISTOPHER MCLEOD PHOTOGRAPHING UNEXPLODED ORDNANCE ON KAHO'OLAWE