

The Calgary Justice Film Festival and Environmental Justice

By Tako Koning

Just as the Alberta Wilderness Association is a voice for the environment, so the Calgary Justice Film Festival (CJFF) strives to be a voice for social justice using the medium of film. The festival screens documentary films with the aim to create awareness and stimulate post-screening discussion with the audience on issues such as marginalized cultural or racial groups, immigration, healthcare and education, prison systems, as well as environmental topics. The film director or experts on the documentary's topic, share their knowledge during these audience discussions.

AWA's Carolyn Campbell for example, served as 'the expert voice' at the 2019 film festival following the screening of *The Whale and the Raven*, a documentary about the struggle facing the people of the Great Bear Rainforest to protect their territory and its inhabitants against the pressure and promise of the gas industry. She also moderated: *The Sacred Place Where Life Begins*, a film highlighting the coastal plain of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge which has been protected by the Gwich'in Nation for more than 25,000 years. This area is the birthing and nursing ground for the Porcupine Caribou Herd, on which the Gwich'in have depended for millennia and is now facing the threat of oil and gas development.

CJFF was launched in 2006 and is the only justice-themed film festival in Alberta. To generate more community engagement, a two-day Peace Fair is part of the festival. Tables are made available at no cost to non-governmental organizations (NGOs) focused on justice issues. Film festival attendees can mingle and interact with the various NGO representatives whose advocacy ranges from building schools in South Sudan to promoting a museum for peace and reconciliation in Calgary. AWA has had a table at the Peace Fair for the past two in-person film festivals, displaying the work they are doing. Executive Director Deborah Donnelly and Sean Nichols were on hand to liaise with festival attendees.

The 17th annual Calgary Justice Film Festival took place November 18-20, 2022 at



Film directors and/or film experts share their knowledge with guests at the Calgary Justice Film Festival, such as this discussion which took place after the screening of a film at the Calgary Central Public Library in 2019. Photo © T. Koning.

the downtown Calgary Public Library and in the auditorium of River Park Church located in the Marda Loop neighbourhood. A locally produced film, *Fish Creek Beavers: Pathways to Coexistence*, was one of the environmental documentaries shown. In 2020, the Friends of Fish Creek embarked on a journey to coexist with beavers, focusing on alleviating pathway flooding caused by these 'ecosystem engineers' in Fish Creek Provincial Park. The short documentary highlights the positive and negative impacts of beaver activity on the landscape as well as the basics of simple coexistence devices such as pond levellers and culvert exclusion fences. Michael Ratliffe and the Friends of the Fish Creek Provincial Park Society produced this documentary.

The international documentary, *Stolen Fish*, was also screened last year. It focused on environmental and economic injustice in Gambia, the smallest country in Africa. Gambia's fishermen realized that their country was running out of fish due to massive overfishing ever since Chinese-operated fishmeal factories opened in the country. The fish were processed into animal feed and then exported to China and Europe. This documentary looks at the lives of three Gambian fishermen who lose their livelihoods and are forced to leave their families to look for a better life in Europe. The Polish film director Malgorzata Juszczak filmed it in 2020.

CJFF is always on the lookout for documentaries focused on environmental justice, especially close to home. Indeed, the feedback received from a majority of film

festival attendees is that the environment is their top justice concern. If you have an environmental justice film to recommend, please contact us at: administration@calgaryfilmfestival.ca.

CJFF is one of the few film festivals that does not charge an entry fee since it is volunteer-run. As well, its main venue, River Park Church, does not charge for the use of their auditorium or the gymnasium where the Peace Fair is held, nor does the downtown Calgary Public Library charge when their hall is used for screenings. Calgary Arts Development Authority is an important financial supporter of the film festival. It has also had long-term financial sponsorship from a variety of businesses including Canadian Western Bank and Ptarmigan Oil & Gas Accounting.

The 2022 CJFF opening night kicked off at the Calgary Central Public Library with the documentary, *To Kill a Tiger*, about sexual injustice in India. The film festival then moved to River Park Church the next two days and screened films focusing on the environment, ageism, gender identity, racism, and equality. The Peace Fair was held both days hosting 18 organizations including Ploughshares, Fair Trade Calgary, Calgary Youth Justice Committee, Centre for Newcomers, Building Schools in South Sudan and Calgary Outlink Centre for Gender & Sexual Diversity.

This year CJFF will run a program called 'JustReels' where every three months a film will be screened. On April 14, the Alberta premiere of *Unarchived*, a National Film Board production, is set to be shown in the evening at the Central Public Library. November 17, 18 and 19 will see the launch of the 18th Calgary Justice Film Festival. CJFF welcomes everyone at any and all of its events.



Deborah Donnelly and Sean Nichols both represented AWA by attending an informational booth at the 2022 CJFF. Photo © D. Donnelly.