



A film by

**Mark Kitchell**

101 min, English, Digital (DCP/Blu-ray), U.S.A, 2012, Documentary



FIRST RUN FEATURES

The Film Center Building | 630 Ninth Ave. #1213 | New York, NY 10036

(212) 243-0600 | Fax (212) 989-7649 | [info@firstrunfeatures.com](mailto:info@firstrunfeatures.com)

[www.firstrunfeatures.com](http://www.firstrunfeatures.com)

[www.firstrunfeatures.com/fiercegreenfire](http://www.firstrunfeatures.com/fiercegreenfire)

## About the Film

***A FIERCE GREEN FIRE: The Battle for a Living Planet*** is the first big-picture exploration of the environmental movement – grassroots and global activism spanning fifty years from conservation to climate change. Directed and written by **Mark Kitchell**, Academy Award-nominated director of *Berkeley in the Sixties*, and narrated by **Robert Redford, Ashley Judd, Van Jones, Isabel Allende** and **Meryl Streep**, the film premiered at Sundance Film Festival 2012, won acclaim at festivals around the world, and in 2013 begins theatrical release as well as educational distribution and use by environmental groups.

Inspired by the book of the same name by Philip Shabecoff and informed by advisors like E.O. Wilson and Tom Lovejoy, *A FIERCE GREEN FIRE* chronicles the largest movement of the 20th century and one of the keys to the 21st. It brings together all the major parts of environmentalism and connects them. It focuses on activism, people fighting to save their homes, their lives, the future – and succeeding against all odds.

The film unfolds in five acts, each with a central story and character:

- David Brower and the Sierra Club's battle to halt dams in the Grand Canyon
- Lois Gibbs and Love Canal residents' struggle against 20,000 tons of toxic chemicals
- Paul Watson and Greenpeace's campaigns to save whales and baby harp seals
- Chico Mendes and Brazilian rubber tappers' fight to save the Amazon rainforest
- Bill McKibben and the 25-year effort to address the impossible issue – climate change

Surrounding these main stories are strands like environmental justice, going back to the land, and movements of the global south such as Wangari Maathai in Kenya. Vivid archival film brings it all back and insightful interviews with activists shed light on what it all means. The film offers a deeper view of environmentalism as civilizational change, bringing our industrial society into sustainable balance with nature. It's the battle for a living planet.

Featured in the film are:

- the incomparable Lois Gibbs, still fighting for all the Loises
- Paul "I work for whales" Watson
- Bill McKibben, author, activist and founder of 350.org
- Late activists like David Brower, Chico Mendes and Wangari Matthai captured on archival film
- Paul Hawken, Stewart Brand and other alternative ecology visionaries
- Carl Pope and John Adams, longtime heads of the Sierra Club and NRDC
- Martin Litton, at 92 still thundering about how you've got to have "hatred in your heart";
- Bob Bullard, environmental justice advocate, who closes the film on a universal note, saying, "*There's no Hispanic air. There's no African-American air. There's air! And if you breathe air—and most people I know do breathe air—then I would consider you an environmentalist.*"

## **Praise for *A Fierce Green Fire***

“Oscar-nominated filmmaker Mark Kitchell (*Berkeley in the Sixties*) **winningly spans the broad scope of environmental history in this comprehensive doc**, connecting its origins with the variety of issues still challenging society today.” – Justin Lowe, *The Hollywood Reporter*

“Rarely do environmental-themed films come with the ambitious scope of ‘A Fierce Green Fire: The Battle for a Living Planet’...which **aims at nothing less than the history of environmentalism itself.**” – Mark Olsen, *Los Angeles Times*

“The most ambitious environmental documentary since ‘An Inconvenient Truth’ tries to **make the case that we just might win.**” – Michael Roberts, *Outside Magazine*

"The material is vast and it's an incredibly dynamic film. It's shaping up to be the **documentary of record on the environmental movement. I think it'll be hugely successful.**" – Cara Mertes, Director, Sundance Institute Documentary Film Program

“The film left me emotionally drained and profoundly hopeful.” – Bruce Barcott, *On Earth Magazine*

“While it sounds like a tall order to encompass more than half a century of environmental activism history in one film, Kitchell somehow manages to do so in a way that feels comprehensive and vibrant enough to inspire new converts.” – Basil Tsiokos, *what (not) to doc*

“Brilliant. Should be assigned viewing for all of us, especially those political leaders currently manning the helm of spaceship earth.” – Jay Meehan, *Park Record*

“Sweeping and timely.” – Judy Fahys, *The Salt Lake Tribune*

"Ardently passionate and naturally provocative, the eco-chronicle *A Fierce Green Fire* has the informality of an Occupy encampment, the militancy of anti-whaler Paul Watson and a genuine sense of history." – Paul Anderson, *Variety*

“A visually stunning survey of the environmental movement, from early battles to save American wilderness to international campaigns to save the health of human societies and the biosphere. Broad in scope and fast moving, *A Fierce Green Fire* introduces many of the leaders (both famous and little-known) who have shaped the struggle. This film is worthy of admiration, and has obviously been a major effort by the filmmakers. It will inspire the next generation of activists." -- Dr. Richard Tucker, Professor of Natural Resources and Environment, University of Michigan and author of *Insatiable Appetite: The United States and Ecological Degradation of the Tropical World*

## Filmmaker Statement

**By Mark Kitchell, Producer, Director, Writer of *A Fierce Green Fire***

Like *Berkeley in the Sixties*, my previous work which has become one of the defining films about the protest movements of the 1960s, *A Fierce Green Fire* started with the idea that a big-picture synthesis of environmentalism was needed. It's the biggest movement the world has ever seen, yet so broad and diffuse that we lack a larger sense of what it was about. This film is meant to take stock, explore the historical meaning of the environmental movement, where we've come from and where we're heading. A hugely ambitious undertaking, it has proved to be the greatest challenge of my career.

In making the film we had two big concerns. One was what to include and what to leave out. The second was shaping the film -- how to connect the diverse parts, structure it all into a cohesive and coherent story, find the arc of the environmental movement. The first iteration of this film was a six-part series. After a few years of trying to launch it, Edward O. Wilson, eminent conservation biologist and advisor to the film, told me we were never going to get something so big funded; and, if we did, no one would watch it. He suggested a smaller film that focuses on five of the most important and dramatic events and people. That proved to be the key.

Those five main stories – David Brower and the Sierra Club halting dams in the Grand Canyon; Lois Gibbs and the people of Love Canal battling 20,000 tons of toxic waste; Paul Watson and Greenpeace saving the whales; Chico Mendes and the rubbertappers saving the Amazon forest; and (what else could we end on?) the twenty year struggle to deal with climate change – are emblematic of strands and eras of environmentalism. So we built the acts into an hourglass shape. Each begins wide, with origins and context. Next we narrow in on the main story. Then they open up again, to explore ramifications and evolution.

The film went through two rounds of shooting interviews, gathering archival material, scripting and editing a rough-cut. Some stories, like biodiversity, fell out. The last act on climate change had to be put off until there was more funding. We worked on the acts in pieces and I wasn't sure it would all connect. By May of 2010 we had a first cut of the full film. It showed a lot of promise. The middle acts were working well but the first and last acts needed to be taken further.

The fine-cut phase in 2011 was tortured. We got a Sundance Documentary Fund grant, but it ran out and we had to stop. Then a deal for completion funds fell through and we had to stop again. It was only upon acceptance to the Sundance Film Festival that finishing the film came together. We had a 135-minute cut that I thought was final. But the consensus was that it was too much. In an amazing three weeks, two great editors working with me cut the film down to 110 minutes. For the first time we shaped the film as a whole. We took another stab at an ending, and finally came to something right. It was deeply gratifying all the favors and contributions everybody brought to my baby. And in the end I think, I hope we succeeded in

capturing that big-picture synthesis of the environmental movement. How well we explored the meanings of environmentalism and how useful it is going forward remain to be seen. But it's exciting to see the world taking interest. It's time for that next step of the environmental journey.

### **Synopsis: Acts 1-5**

- Act 1 focuses on the conservation movement of the '60s, the Sierra Club, David Brower and the battle to halt dams in the Grand Canyon. It grows out of three earlier battles to halt dams: Hetch Hetchy, which was lost; Dinosaur Monument, which was won; and Glen Canyon, which was sacrificed. Saving the Grand Canyon looks like a lost cause until David Brower places ads denouncing the dams. The IRS retaliates and the uproar becomes front-page news. Opposition grows until Congress bows to pressure – canceling and finally prohibiting dams. It is the biggest victory yet, a pivotal battle that brings the flowering of conservation. However, Brower is soon forced out of the Sierra Club. He is coming to a larger vision, just as Earth Day heralds a new environmental consciousness.
- Act 2 looks at '70s environmentalism around pollution, focusing on the battle led by Lois Gibbs over Love Canal. We connect Rachel Carson and *Silent Spring* to the golden era of legislation and groups like NRDC that arose to enforce regulations. But it takes Love Canal to put toxic waste on the map. Lois Gibbs leads angry housewives in a two-year battle to save their children from 20,000 tons of toxic chemicals. They are relentless, protesting and conducting health studies and demanding relocation, even taking EPA officials hostage until President Carter agrees to buy them out. However it's just the beginning. President Reagan counterattacks. Grassroots activists fighting toxics in their own backyard arise all over the country; and environmental racism gives birth to an environmental justice movement.
- Act 3 is about alternative ecology strands, with the main story being Greenpeace's campaign to save the whales. We begin with going back to the land, building ecological alternatives and exploring renewable energy. Greenpeace starts by protesting nuclear bombs. But it is putting themselves in front of harpoons to stop whaling that launches Greenpeace on the wildest ride of any environmental group. Soon they are fighting on every front all over the world. Paul Watson, thrown out of Greenpeace for tossing a sealer's club in the water, is reborn as Sea Shepherd and takes on whalers. Radicals and mainstream come together for a moratorium on whaling, one of environmentalism's greatest victories, yet a battle that must be fought again and again.
- Act 4 tells of the rise of global issues in the '80s. It focuses on the struggle to save the Amazon, led by Chico Mendes and the rubbertappers. They campaign for extractive reserves. The pivotal battle comes in 1988 over a plantation called Cachoeira. Chico wins – but is assassinated. His death proves to be the turning point, to an era of reserves that now total a third of the Amazon. Yet deforestation still threatens to turn the Amazon into a semi-desert.

We expand to look at movements of the global south like Chipko in India and Wangari Maathai's Greenbelt Movement in Kenya -- then close with questions of equity and sustainability.

- Act 5 concerns climate change. First we look at its scientific origins. Then comes more than 20 years of frustration from Rio to Kyoto to Copenhagen. We explore opposition; how the movement failed to deal with the issue; and the role of disasters like Hurricane Katrina in bringing it back. COP15 ends in breakdown and our focus shifts from top-down politics to bottom-up movements. Paul Hawken relates his *Blessed Unrest* revelation: two million groups working on environmental and social justice issues. We explore environmentalism as civilizational transformation, then close with movements all over the world up to the present.

### **About the Title**

"A Fierce Green Fire" comes from an essay called "Thinking Like a Mountain" by the pioneering ecologist Aldo Leopold. He describes his experience as a young ranger shooting a wolf.

*"We reached the old wolf in time to watch a fierce green fire dying in her eyes. I realized then and have known ever since that there was something new to me in those eyes, something known only to her and to the mountain. I was young then and full of trigger-itch; I thought that because fewer wolves meant more deer, that no wolves would mean hunters' paradise. But after seeing the green fire die, I sensed that neither the wolf nor the mountain agreed with such a view."*

## **Interviewees in Order of Appearance**

### **Stewart Brand**

Publisher of the Whole Earth Catalog and the Co-Evolution Quarterly, recently wrote “Whole Earth Discipline,” exploring paths to the future.

### **Paul Hawken**

Author of *The Ecology of Commerce*, *Natural Capitalism* and *Blessed Unrest*; eco-entrepreneur and visionary, now pursuing new solar technologies.

### **Tom Turner**

Author and editor at Friends of the Earth and Earthjustice, a protégé of David Brower who is now writing his biography.

### **Doug Scott**

Conservation activist and organizer of Earth Day, who was legislative director for the Sierra Club and formed the Campaign for American Wilderness.

### **Martin Litton**

Brower’s main ally in conservation battles from Dinosaur Monument in the ‘50s to the Grand Canyon and Redwood National Park in the ‘60s.

### **Jerry Mander**

Ad man for the Sierra Club during the Grand Canyon campaign, he turned social critic (“Four Arguments for the Elimination of Television” and other books) and founded the International Forum on Globalization, which led WTO protests in Seattle in 1999.

### **Philip Shabecoff**

NY Times environmental journalist, founded Greenwire, wrote *A Fierce Green Fire* on which this film is loosely based, as well as *Earth Rising* and *Poisoned Profits*.

### **Lois Gibbs**

The angry housewife with sick children who led Love Canal, then started the Center for Health, Environment & Justice and spent thirty+ years organizing grassroots activism.

### **John Adams**

Founder of the Natural Resources Defense Council, led it from a law firm for the environment to one of the most influential environmental groups.

### **Carl Pope**

Former Executive Director of the Sierra Club, who began campaigning for the Clean Air Act and led efforts up to the recent Beyond Coal campaign.

**Robert Bullard**

Pioneering environmental justice advocate and author of “Dumping in Dixie” as well as other books and the study, “Toxic Waste and Race.”

**Stephanie Mills**

Campaigner on population issues, bioregionalist, author of many books including *Whatever Happened to Ecology?* and *The Post-Carbon Reader*.

**Paul Relis**

Led the Santa Barbara Community Environment Council, pioneered alternative technology, led changes in recycling and sustainable use.

**Lee Swenson**

Anarchist and pacifist who led the Farallones Institute, an incubator of ecological alternatives.

**Amory Lovins**

Physicist-turned-activist who pioneered the “soft path” of conservation and renewable energy, founded Rocky Mountain Institute, wrote “Natural Capitalism,” “Winning the Oil Endgame” and just published his magnum opus, “Reinventing Fire.”

**Rex Weyler**

Draft dodger who helped found Greenpeace, was part of the early whale and seal campaigns, wrote the defining history of Greenpeace and is still active in many causes.

**Paul Watson**

Another founder of Greenpeace, who dreamed up the baby harp seal campaign, was kicked out of Greenpeace for going too far, and founded his own Sea Shepherd Society.

**Wolfgang Sachs**

Member of Greenpeace, the German Greens and Wuppertal Institute; author, critic and expert around development and equity issues, sustainability and justice.

**Thomas Lovejoy**

Conservation biologist. At WWF he conceived Biological Dynamics of Forest Fragments Project, long-running study of biodiversity loss in the Amazon. Now heads Heinz Center for Science, Economics & Environment.

**Adrian Cowell**

Journalist who made the defining films about the Amazon, “The Decade of Destruction.” He was close to Chico Mendes, and helped bring him to the world’s attention. Recently deceased.

**Barbara Bramble**

Head of National Wildlife Federation's international affairs, she campaigned against destructive impacts of development and helped reform World Bank environmental policies. She became a key US ally of Chico Mendes and the rubber tappers

**Vijaya Nagarajan**

Professor at University of San Francisco and co-director of the Institute for the Study of Natural and Cultural Resources. Her forthcoming book is *Feeding a Thousand Souls: Women, Ritual and Ecology in India*.

**Jennifer Morgan**

Climate activist with WWF International, led their efforts from Kyoto to Copenhagen, and now she is head of the Climate and Energy Program at the World Resources Institute.

**Stephen Schneider**

Pioneering climate scientist at National Center for Atmospheric Research and Stanford, author and tireless advocate. Recently deceased, this is one of his last interviews.

**Bill McKibben**

Author of *The End of Nature*, the first book about global warming. He moved to activism after a decade of frustration, founded 350.org with students, built it into a leading organization battling climate change. Stopping Keystone XL is their latest victory.

**Joe Romm**

Author of *Hell and High Water* and leading blogger at Climate Progress. He was Assistant Secretary of Energy working on efficiency and renewables in the Clinton Administration.

**Mark Hertsgaard**

Author of "Hot: Surviving the Next Fifty Years" and "Earth Odyssey." Longtime journalist for *The Nation* on environmental issues.

## About the Team

### Mark Kitchell

#### Director/Producer/Writer

Mark Kitchell is best known for *Berkeley in the Sixties*, which won the Sundance Audience Award in 1990, was nominated for an Academy Award, and won other top honors. It has become a well-loved classic, one of the defining documentaries about the protest movements of the 1960s. Kitchell went to NYU film school, where he made *The Godfather Comes to Sixth St.*, a cinema verité look at his neighbors caught up in filming *The Godfather II* – for which he received another (student) Academy Award nomination.

### Marc N. Weiss

#### Executive Producer

Marc Weiss is the creator and former Executive Producer of P.O.V., the award-winning documentary series now in its 26th season on PBS. Longtime media activist, Weiss was recently asked to help lead the Sierra Club's Obama Climate Legacy Project, a 100 –day action plan to encourage President Obama to lead on climate in his second term.

### Ken Schneider, Veronica Selver, Gary Weimberg & Jon Beckhardt

#### Editors

Three veteran editors who have cut some of the greatest documentaries: *Have You Heard From Johannesburg*; *Regret to Inform*; *Word Is Out*; *On Company Business*; *Earth and the American Dream*; *Dear America: Letters Home From Vietnam*; *Ballets Russe*; *Coming Out Under Fire*; *You Got to Move*; *Berkeley in the Sixties*...

And a newcomer from Oberlin who did excellent work on his first big film.

### Vicente Franco

#### Cinematographer

Credits include: *The Storm That Swept Mexico*; *Waiting to Inhale*; *The Most Dangerous Man in America: Daniel Ellsberg and the Pentagon Papers*; *Speaking in Tongues*; *The Judge and the General*; *Thirst*; and *Freedom On My Mind*. He also produced and directed three films with Gail Dolgin, including *Daughter From Danang*.

#### Original Music for the Film comes from:

- **George Michalski**, a high school friend of Kitchell's who has worked with Barbra Streisand and has numerous gold records, and **David Denny**, who played with Steve Miller Band and wrote some of his biggest hits.
- **Garth Stevenson**, a budding composer and bassist who has worked with Kitchell's niece Sonya Kitchell.
- **Randall Wallace**, a supporter who stepped in to help with scoring in the rush to finish.
- **Todd Boekelheide**, a highly-esteemed composer in the San Francisco Bay Area.

**Narrators** -- one per act, in order of appearance: **Robert Redford**; **Ashley Judd**; activist and founder of Rebuilding the Dream, **Van Jones**; author **Isabel Allende**; and **Meryl Streep**.

# Screenings

## Upcoming Festivals and other Screenings

- \* February 14-17: Boulder, CO (Boulder Int'l Film Fest)
- \* February 15-18: Portland, OR (Portland Int'l Film Fest)
- \* February 16-17: Columbus, OH (Wexner Center for the Arts)
- \* March 19: Washington, DC (Environmental Film Fest in the Nation's Capital 2013)
- \* March 20: Erie, PA (Mercyhurst College)
- \* March 22-31: Montpelier, VT (Green Mountain Film Fest)
- \* April 20 & 23: Honolulu, HI (Honolulu Museum of Art)
- \* April 21: Point Reyes Station (Dance Palace)
- \* April 24: San Francisco (SF Public Library)

## Past Screenings

Sundance Film Festival 2012 (world premiere)  
Environmental Film Festival in the Nation's Capital 2012, Washington, DC (closing film)  
Sheffield Doc Fest, Sheffield, England  
Margaret Mead Film Festival, New York , NY  
Wild & Scenic Film Festival, Nevada City, CA  
Philadelphia Science Film Festival      Nashville Film Festival  
Newport Beach Film Festival      Palm Springs International Film Festival  
Berkshire International Film Festival      Vermont International Film Festival  
Mendocino Film Festival      Chesapeake Film Festival      Maine Film Festival  
Festival do Rio, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil      Docville Film Festival, Leuven, Belgium  
Human Rights International Film Festival, Mexico City  
Bergen Film Festival, Bergen, Norway  
Amherst Cinema  
Netroots Nation

<http://www.latimes.com/entertainment/movies/moviesnow/la-et-mn-fierce-green-fire-review-20130315,0,6103678.story>

# Los Angeles Times

## Review: 'A Fierce Green Fire' recounts environmental struggle

The film recounts seminal events in the ecological battle. Robert Redford and Meryl Streep are among the narrators.

By Gary Goldstein

*March 14, 2013 4:45 p.m.*

A kind of crash course in 50-plus years of environmentalism, the documentary "A Fierce Green Fire: The Battle for a Living Planet," adapted from the book by Philip Shabecoff, proves a worthy reminder of how much has been done to help heal our planet's ecological woes as well as how much remains to be achieved.

Writer-director Mark Kitchell ("Berkeley in the Sixties") efficiently divides the film into five acts — "Conservation," "Pollution," "Alternatives," "Going Global" and "Climate Change" — narrated, respectively, by Robert Redford, Ashley Judd, Van Jones, Isabel Allende and Meryl Streep. These occasionally overlapping chapters, arranged largely in chronological order, powerfully recount a host of seminal events in the battle for environmental awareness: the founding of the Sierra Club and Greenpeace, 1970's first Earth Day, the Save the Whales campaign, the Love Canal disaster, Chico Mendes' fight to preserve the Amazon rain forest and more.

Stirring interviews, new and archival, with these movements' participants, plus discussions with authors, advocates and ecological visionaries, reinforce the hyper-commitment that's been needed to effect grand-scale change.

But it's a look back at how, starting in 1969, then-President Nixon heartily passed a bipartisan series of environmental protection reforms (summarily undercut in the 1980s by the Reagan administration) that, for many, may prove this film's most startling takeaway.

<http://www.sfweekly.com/2013-03-13/film/a-fierce-green-fire-film-review/>



## "A Fierce Green Fire": Naturally Sourced Environmentalism

By **Sherilyn Connelly** *Wednesday, Mar 13 2013*

"Narrated by Robert Redford" is always a promising credit to see at the beginning of a documentary, since it implies that whatever else happens, you'll get to listen to the sonorous tones of a handsome man. Ah, but Mark Kitchell's *A Fierce Green Fire* is playing a deeper (and probably more budget-friendly) game than that, as Redford only narrates the film's Act 1, subtitled "Conservation." Ashley Judd, Van Jones, Isabel Allende, and Meryl Streep take over talking chores for the next four Acts, as *A Fierce Green Fire* traces the evolution of environmentalism from the early conservationist movement up through the modern climate change controversy. There's a fair amount of preaching to the choir and recitation of familiar factoids, but the movie justifies its existence when it retells the all-but-forgotten Love Canal pollution debacle of the 1970s, a subject which deserves its own film. Also to its credit, the movie doesn't shy away from the infighting that seems to constantly derail the movements, be it the Sierra Club or Greenpeace. *A Fierce Green Fire* shows environmentalists as flawed and often deeply hubristic people who aren't above spray-painting a seal pup as a means to an end — especially if that end is to save the planet.

<http://filmmakermagazine.com/65752-five-questions-with-a-fierce-green-fire-director-mark-kitchell/>

# FILMMAKER

## Five Questions with *A Fierce Green Fire* Director Mark Kitchell

by David Licata | Feb 27, 2013

In 1974, Francis Ford Coppola and the cast and crew of *The Godfather Part II* took over a Lower East Side block in Manhattan. An NYU film student and resident of that block, Mark Kitchell, focused his camera on the proceedings. The result, *The Godfather Comes to 6<sup>th</sup> Street*, was not a fluffy “making of” film but a document of the good, the bad and the ugly that happens when a film crew descends on a neighborhood. A portrait of a community, the film also captured the efforts of a group of local activists who objected to the film’s presence; Kitchell had found his themes: community and activism. *The Godfather Comes to 6<sup>th</sup> Street* was a festival hit and garnered Kitchell a Student Academy Award nomination.

With *Berkeley in the Sixties* (1990), Kitchell expanded on his themes. He left the Lower East Side block and embraced a whole city, and went from showing a group of local activists to profiling the birth of the counterculture movement. This historical perspective necessitated a voice-over narrator, a finely researched and written script, sit-down interviews with participants and experts, and extensive use of archival footage. Kitchell efforts earned him another Academy Award nomination, this time for Best Documentary Feature.

Kitchell’s latest film, *A Fierce Green Fire: The Battle for a Living Planet* (opening in New York City on March 1), tackles a still larger subject, the birth and evolution of the environmental movement. His geographical focus was not a city block or a city, but the planet; the film is, in his words, “A hugely ambitious undertaking.” To help him tell this vast story, Kitchell wrangled some star power to narrate the film, including Robert Redford, Ashley Judd and Meryl Streep.

**Filmmaker:** *A Fierce Green Fire* is a history, told in five acts, of the environmental movement from 1960s to the present; that’s a pretty enormous undertaking. Tell me about the process of finding the structure of the film and the challenges of handling such a huge subject.

**Kitchell:** We started out wanting to do justice to the movement, so we developed a six-part series. But when I went to see Edward O. Wilson, biologist and advisor to the film, he told me, "Mark, you're never going to get it funded; and if you do, no one will watch it." He suggested selecting five of the most dramatic and important events and people. We chose them, sitting right there in the bug museum at Harvard. I then built those five main stories out into an hourglass structure for each act. They start wide, with context and origins and then focus in on the main story and character. Then the story opens up again to explore ramifications and evolution of that strand of the movement.

We went through three rounds of production, meaning editing and writing, shaping the film. At each stage we had to face what to leave out. And we kept on adding interviews, so there was more material to deal with. I'm amazed that we got it down to 116 minutes, which was the length for Sundance. Then we went in and took out 15 minutes more. Of course I have regrets about the brilliant and important thoughts that were left out. But we always had the audience in mind and wanted to be sure that the film was as tight and strong, entertaining and informative as possible.

Lastly I'd be remiss if I didn't acknowledge editors and advisors and all the feedback we got from friends and colleagues. I'm really glad we took the time to do it right.

**Filmmaker:** The title of the film comes from an epiphany experienced by ecologist Aldo Leopold, when, as a young ranger, he shot a wolf. Did you experience such a moment and know that you had to make films that involved portraying and inspiring activism? Did you experience a Fierce Green Fire with this film in particular?

**Kitchell:** No I didn't kill a wolf and see a fierce green fire. I did shoot a moose on a wilderness journey and I have regretted it ever since. My environmental awakening (which is what the Leopold story is about) was simpler, less dramatic. To a certain extent the idea that it is all connected is related to the idea that it's all one, the revelation some of us were having in the '60s. Growing up in San Francisco, California and the West, it's hard not to take the environmental message to heart. As soon as I saw photovoltaics, I expected that the world would be powered by the sun – it makes so much sense. The decision to make the film was not a revelation that involved activism. If you've seen my prior film, *Berkeley in the Sixties*, that was that epiphany. But I did have a sense of déjà vu when I started looking around to see if anyone had made the big picture history of the environmental movement. No one had, so I stepped up. It was my wife's idea. We developed it together. There were a lot of great books we read, deep discussions. In terms of a fierce green moment, maybe it was Paul Hawken's *Blessed Unrest* – the realization that there are two million groups worldwide working on issues of environmental and social justice; and his brilliant metaphor of the movement as humanity's immune response system.

**Filmmaker:** The film is a very powerful call-to-action documentary. How do you hope to bring this film and its message to audiences that might not ordinarily watch such films? Are there plans for making it available outside the traditional distribution channels?

**Kitchell:** We're doing all the traditional channels of distribution. And the film is catching fire! Up to 60 engagements far between theatrical and non-theatrical. Educational sales and rentals are taking off, too. But where we are really pushing, where our grassroots heart beats strongest, is outreach and engagement with environmental groups and activists. We're working with big national orgs and local activists. Lois Gibbs' CHEJ sent out a newsletter to 20,000 followers and now she's launching a year of organizing around the film. 350.org wants to get the film to 234 colleges that are pushing divestment movements. Marc Weiss, exec producer of the film, just joined the Sierra Club Foundation board and is working on the Obama Climate Legacy Campaign. I'm excited about Beyond Oil, the Sierra Club's follow-up to their successful Beyond Coal campaign, which stopped 167 out of 180 new coal-fired power plants. I think taking on the oil interests is the main event, a battle of a lifetime. It may take 20 years but we've got to get off the carbon kick – and I'm hoping our film plays a role in that campaign. The list of groups we're working with is long: Green Action, Clean Water Coalition, Maine Natural resources Council, Earthjustice, New Yorkers Against Fracking, NRDC, Friends of the Earth (I'm afraid of leaving people out now, there are so many – Van Jones' Rebuild the Dream! Amory Lovins' Rocky Mountain Institute! Bob Bullard...). We're partnering with them on screenings for now, getting them to speak about their work. Hope to move on to putting on their own events, whether fundraising or educating and organizing. Using the film as a tool for campaigns. All of that... send money, it's a huge job and we need help...

**Filmmaker:** The film makes brilliant use of archival footage. What's the key to finding the right archival images and then using them well?

**Kitchell:** We had the time to talk to everyone and look at everything. Bullfrog Films opened their library to us. So did The Video Project. I looked at festival lineups and found obscure films. Later on we had people look through the National Archives and UNEP. I found a key film about Love Canal, *The Poisoned Dream*, while interviewing Lois Gibbs and looking through her library.

We pursued fair use for some sources. The indie filmmakers, our friends and colleagues, we had to treat right. And big archives like ABC and AP we had to license. But we developed something of a royal road to fair use, a way to get around the problem of mastering when you don't have access to masters. It's called Dark Energy and deep thanks to Kim Aubry at ZAP for making it available to us – a way to up-rez and correct for motion and frame rate. We did really detailed archival logs and ran them by our attorneys – got everything we wanted. So – hard work and fair use will get you where you want to go.

**Filmmaker:** You interview a number of activists in *A Fierce Green Fire*. Did you gain any insight into what attributes they have – the thing or things that motivate them to act – that other less activist-oriented people might lack?

**Kitchell:** I thought this was a film magazine! No, nothing special. Just the same grit and determination and sense of mission that drives all of us filmmakers...

<http://www.planet-mag.com/2013/greenspace/jordan-sayle/setting-the-world-ablaze/>

# PLANET<sup>o</sup>

## SETTING THE WORLD ABLAZE

mark kitchell's "a fierce green fire"

March 6, 2013 By Jordan Sayle

A warming climate isn't the only source of heat these days. There is, in fact, another source of burning intensity. Organized groups of protesters amped up the temperature in their own fashion by taking to the nation's capitol in a recent display of opposition to the proposed Keystone XL pipeline. As clarion calls to address climate change spread, it's worth remembering that demonstrations and fights of resistance have stoked the environmental movement since its inception. These measures have succeeded in numerous cases throughout the years to protect communities from exposure to hazardous waste and to save endangered species or threatened ecosystems.

The ferocious fire that inspired the name of Mark Kitchell's new documentary isn't the sooty, pollution-fueling combustion of coal or the burning of rainforests. *A Fierce Green Fire*, now in limited release, is named rather for the life-sustaining inner flame that the conservationist Aldo Leopold once observed in the eyes of a dying wolf and for the corresponding zeal that has fueled the efforts of environmentalists for nearly five decades. The very same passion that was on display last month in Washington has fed the movement for generations through often bitter fights and against long odds.

In the time since Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* was published and the Sierra Club was victorious in blocking the construction of dams in the Grand Canyon, activists have been busy responding to an evolving set of practices that threaten our land, wildlife, water, and air.

Though many of the individual battles have been recorded along the way, there has rarely been an effort to assemble the entire history of the environmental movement in a single body of work, as Kitchell's film attempts to accomplish.

"I thought the movement, at about the age of 50, needed its big picture history [in order] to give broader perspective and deeper meaning," the filmmaker tells PLANET.

The initial idea was to create a six-part miniseries that truly would seek to incorporate every last chapter of the story, but that plan was abandoned at the suggestion of the biologist Edward O. Wilson, who served as a consultant for the film. Instead, Kitchell decided upon a feature-length movie centered on five important historical turning points. With the outcome of the final section still yet to be determined, the idea was to provide context around our current struggles as we seek to mitigate climate change. The director also hoped to engage audiences by conveying that environmentalism hasn't always been about learning to live with defeat.

As a documentarian, Kitchell (*Berkeley in the Sixties*) recognizes that he has a bent for focusing his lens on social movements. The latest repetition of this tendency comes in response to the challenges facing today's environmental defenders and the next generation of them, for whom Kitchell wanted to illustrate how bottom-up grassroots movements have managed to overcome firm opposition in the past and ultimately succeed.

"People who have grown up in the last twenty years really haven't had much of a sense of movement," the director contends. "There have been some pretty grim issues that appear intractable and you have a lot of handwringing but not much sense of movement."

In the aim of proving that this stasis hasn't always prevailed, some of the key figures who have led the way during the past half-century are introduced through interviews. Their voices are woven together to create an oral history of environmental crusades past and present, and interspersed with archival footage, they shed light on famous news events with the added perspective afforded by the passage of time.

Lois Gibbs of Love Canal infamy is one such figure. As a young mother in the late 1970's, she was horrified to discover that her neighborhood in Niagara Falls, NY had been built atop thousands of tons of harmful chemicals. She organized her community to take action and eventually persuaded the federal government to declare a health emergency, which facilitated the relocation of the area's residents. Today, she continues to dedicate her life to the service of helping those caught in similar circumstances. While she sees room for improvement, she also acknowledges progress in the nation's response to environmental hazards compared to what she experienced during her showdown with the Carter Administration.

"We've passed a number of laws and regulations," Gibbs tells PLANET. "The Superfund law provides a financial disincentive for industry to create another Love Canal. We have right-to-know laws.

When they came into effect, people became educated really fast. Industry cleaned up its act significantly because of public awareness, so I do think we're in a much better place than we were."

That progress has been accompanied globally by successful campaigns to prevent deforestation and whaling led by the likes of the Brazilian rubber tapper Chico Mendes and marine conservationist Paul Watson. These hopeful stories are included in the film, but even encased as they are in careful language that underscores the tenuousness of past victories, they don't paint the full picture.

The concluding portion of *A Fierce Green Fire* takes a sobering look at our present-day climate crisis. Looking back at the failure of governments meeting to address the issue in Kyoto and Copenhagen, it adopts a decidedly less optimistic tone than other environmental docs from recent years. As talking heads, the Sierra Club's former director Carl Pope describes underestimating the depth of resistance to action and 350.org's Bill McKibben suggests that it might be too big of an issue for the environmental movement to handle. Then there's the fatalistic attitude of climate scientist Steven Schneider, who wonders toward the end of the film whether it might require a monster storm wiping out Miami or Shanghai before the world takes this threat seriously.

Pessimism about climate change also comes strongly from the filmmaker himself. In his interview with PLANET, Kitchell called it "quite literally the impossible issue." Citing the slowness with which it takes place, its invisibility, and the cost of reversing it, he sees the task as being much more complicated than previous campaigns that brought about sea changes in our society.

"It makes the 60's and the anti-war and civil rights movements look easy," he provocatively stated. "There has never been a movement like this in all of history."

Long gone is the era when environmental action meant promoting recycling and working to save the local swamp. The hard-fought local victories by the likes of Lois Gibbs may do little to prepare us for the planet-sized challenge of bringing CO<sub>2</sub> levels under control. And yet, with the future still so uncertain, it helps to know where we've been. If there's reason for hope going forward, it's in the commitment to opposing dams and containing chemicals that activists have shown before. If there's a source for continued resolve, then the same kind of ardor that enabled those earlier triumphs will have to inflame people's spirits now.

"It's a very difficult thing to do — to make an optimistic film about the environment," says Kitchell.

In *A Fierce Green Fire*, he seems to have half-succeeded. The screen goes dark just as the stakes are highest and the drama is heating up. Now it's up to us to determine how optimistic a film about the next 50 years of the environmental movement will end up being.