

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



dir. Kevin McMahon. *Waterlife*. Toronto: Primitive Entertainment/National Film Board of Canada, 2009. DVD. 109 minutes.

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What Goes Around, Comes Around

Vital to the survival of one of North America's most densely populated regions, and threatened by a host of intersecting circumstances, the Great Lakes have been the subject of a series of works in the popular and academic presses over the last decade. With the exception of Margaret Beattie Bogue's excellent history of the Great Lakes fisheries, most of these titles fall into the category of natural histories of the lakes or environmental policy texts outlining the ecological problems associated with the lakes, and the political and economic remedies required to address these problems.[1] While the lakes present rich territory for documentary film, not since the 1960s have they captured the imagination of filmmakers, with the notable exception of a handful of "made for television" productions including *Inland Seas: Understanding and Protecting the Waters of the Great Lakes* (2008; <http://www.glwi.uwm.edu/education/outreach/InlandSeas/>); Lindsey Haskin's two-hour documentary *Freshwater Seas: The Great Lakes* (2008; <http://freshwaterseas.org>); and the IMAX film *Mysteries of the Great Lakes* (<http://sciencenorth.ca/consumer-sites/mysteries-lakes/>). The vastness of the lakes themselves, and the complexity of the circumstances that affect them, seem to discourage cinematic treatments of human relationships with Great Lakes ecologies.

Director Kevin McMahon seeks to correct that balance with *Waterlife*, a feature-length documentary film co-produced by Canada's National Film Board and McMahon's production company, Primitive Entertain-

ment, that sets out to tell "the story of the last great supply of freshwater on Earth." Sumptuously shot by Canadian cinematographer John Minh Tran and accompanied by an evocative and memorable soundtrack, including artists such as Sufjan Stevens, Robbie Robertson, Brian Eno and the Tragically Hip, the film departs from its predecessors by capturing not only the multiple threats facing the lakes, but also the magnificence of these vast bodies of water, and the great variety of ways that people experience and appreciate them. As such, it readily succeeds in its goal of "[taking] viewers to a familiar place and [helping] them see it anew, as if for the first time." [2]

McMahon's work takes its inspiration from Bill Mason's 1966 National Film Board classic, *Paddle to the Sea*, a film adaptation of American author and illustrator Holling C. Holling's 1941 book of the same name, which told the story of a native boy who carves a wooden model of a man in a canoe and sets it free to travel the Great Lakes from Lake Nipigon, north of Superior, to the Atlantic Ocean. McMahon breaks free of the strong guiding narration that characterized *Paddle*, however, choosing instead voices from diverse perspectives to overlay the visual story of the lakes as it unfolds. Aboriginal residents, fishermen, pulp mill managers, environmentalists, and suburban families speak in sequence, no one voice more prominent than the others. Narrator Gord Downie (Canadian musician and former Tragically Hip front man) becomes one of these voices, distinguishable from the others by his role as a narrative bridge between topics. This narrative device reveals not only the diverse

stakeholders with an interest in the lakes, but also the multiple things the lakes are to us: livelihoods; sources of food, water, and energy; emotional sustenance.

Like *Paddle to the Sea*, *Waterlife* uses the cyclical flow of water as it changes form and moves ceaselessly through the Great Lakes system as the structural foundation for his film. The documentary opens with underwater footage of beluga whales in the Gulf of St. Lawrence. Despite the relatively healthy condition of the lands surrounding the Gulf, the belugas are considered the most contaminated marine mammals on the planet. One quarter of the adult population succumbs to cancer. Scientists have linked their contamination with upstream sources of pollution: the five Great Lakes that ultimately flow into the St. Lawrence River. From the St. Lawrence, we move to the waters north of Lake Superior, covering in turn each of the five lakes and their particular challenges and susceptibilities.

Linking all of the lakes is Josephine Mandamin, an Anishnabe woman and grandmother from Thunder Bay who walked around all five Great Lakes (some 17,000 kilometres) “in order to sympathize with them.” One must turn to the director’s comments on the film’s companion Web site (<http://www.ourwaterlife.com/>) to find out her name and her place of residence. In the film, she stands in more generically for an aboriginal women with a deep concern for the health of the lakes, and the related health of her people. Her meditative walk around the lakes, carrying with her—seemingly penitentially—a pail of lake water from one location to another—seems at first viewing the walk of someone not sound of mind. This is an especially disturbing presentation, given the history of cinematic depictions of aboriginal peoples, and particularly aboriginal women, as indecipherable “others.” As the film progresses, however, she and her mission come more clearly into view. As we learn of the historic and ongoing of abuses to the lakes, and their inevitable ramifications for human and ecosystem health, her walk, and her concern, become increasingly comprehensible.

The messages in this film are the lessons of ecology. Changes in one part of the system lead to consequences elsewhere: everything is interconnected. These principles are illustrated with concrete examples of some of the most pressing problems facing the lakes today: nineteenth- and early twentieth-century canal construction, which historically enabled the invasion of trout-predating sea lamprey in the 1930s and 40s, today threatens to release highly invasive Asian carp into the lakes,

with devastating consequences for native fish populations. Other problems, such as oxygen depletion caused by fertilizer run-off and resulting algal blooms, demonstrate the complexity of human effects upon lake ecologies, and the unforeseen consequences of our actions.

Reinforced here, too, is the understanding shared by environmental historians that the notion of a “pristine” environment is at best illusory: human influences are felt even in the remotest corners and deepest reaches of these vast bodies of water. We are encouraged to view the lakes not as an incomprehensible wilderness, but as a fragile commons subject to a complex mosaic of stakeholders, each seeking a claim on the resource but too often avoiding the responsibilities that, as theorists such as Elinor Ostrom and others have elaborated, are essential for effective commons management.[3]

The film, furthermore, does a good job of explaining in comprehensible terms complex processes such as the bioaccumulation of PCBs and other chemicals, their effects on the hormonal systems of fish and other species, and potential implications for human health. It also raises some important questions, such as the widespread perception among residents of the Great Lakes watershed that the lakes are relatively healthy, and that pollution and related problems are things of the past. As one resident of Lake St. Clair comments, “I am a child of the 60s. I’ve seen fires on rivers. I fear the generation of my children have grown to trust that government is ‘watching the environment.’ Sometimes it’s not happening.” One example is the way that government hatchery programs create the impression that the lakes are healthy enough to support mature fish, when in reality the fish generally fail to reproduce. Fish survival has been complicated by a crash in zooplankton populations (an important food source) caused in turn, scientists speculate, by the rapid spread of invasive zebra mussels in the 1990s, and their voracious appetite for microorganisms. As the film makes clear, environmental problems on the lakes can no longer be understood through simple cause and effect; instead, a “perfect storm” of events appears to be affecting the health of the lakes.

Having recently taught a course on the history of the Great Lakes, I found the film to be especially effective in linking the complex range of issues facing the lakes, and in speculating upon their possible futures. The film is, in short, a powerful meditation upon the significance of these great bodies of water in our lives, and their surprising delicacy in the face of human uses both flagrant and seemingly innocuous. I was also aware of the things it did

not cover. While it dips into the past to bring particular messages home (the story of Love Canal as a cautionary tale about industrial contamination and environmental rights; the reversal of the Chicago River and associated canal construction in the late nineteenth century as an indication of the dangers of breaching watershed boundaries), the history of a commercial fishery that brought desirable species, one by one, to the point of near (and in some cases, complete) collapse, receives little mention. Viewers seeking a history of the policy landscape surrounding the lakes will also be disappointed. Major developments in the regulatory history of the lakes receive some mention in the narrative, but the historical context for these developments is largely elided. As Margaret Beattie Bogue concludes, jurisdictional divides on the lakes are in part what facilitated their overexploitation. Finally, the problem of climate change features surprisingly little in the film, and its potential repercussions are unclear.

Some of these subjects, difficult to cover in a film that already covers so much, are addressed creatively in the project's equally luminous companion Web site, <http://waterlife.nfb.ca/>. Here one can further explore the themes of the film through images and documentary clips, and, with a little digging, connect with other organizations and government institutions working to better the condition of the lakes.

Some will be frustrated by the director's choice to identify the "authorities" in the film—from scientists to policymakers to activists and lakeside residents—by context alone, rather than through the more standard documentary practice of intertitles (textual identifiers). Although all voices are identified in the credits, it would be difficult to trace the provenance of particular statements within the film. This is evidently a deliberate choice by the filmmaker, and one that contributes to the film's unconventional presentation—something McMahon describes as an "epic cinematic poem" rather than a standard "talking-heads" documentary.

To conclude, *Waterlife* is a great achievement: a comprehensive overview of the key ecological challenges facing the lakes that is at the same time aurally and visually magnificent. For historians unfamiliar with the range of issues that intersect here, in this massive watershed at the heart of the continent, this is an excellent place to start. The filmmaker's decision to focus in on selected issues through a series of "mini-documentaries" on the stories of particular places around the lakes, and the individuals, groups, or enterprises at work there, works effectively to provide deeper context to problems of such sweeping magnitude. The film's contribution to our understanding of the interconnectedness of the lakes with our lives, and the insidiousness of the consequences of our actions, cannot be understated. While it may lack the narrative cohesion that made Bill Mason's *Paddle to the Sea* such a classic, *Waterlife* will doubtless be the Great Lakes documentary of choice for educators of the 2010s.

The film would make an excellent addition to undergraduate courses in North American environmental history, global history, or more focused courses on the Great Lakes region. The DVD comes equipped with a Teacher's Menu (a scene selection index with a textual summary of each "chapter" in the film), which is useful in navigating the diverse range of issues that the film covers. And for those with a weakness for vintage NFB films of the 1960s, the DVD also features Mason's twenty-eight-minute short, *Paddle to the Sea*.

Notes

[1]. Margaret Beattie Bogue, *Fishing the Great Lakes: An Environmental History, 1783-1933* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2000).

[2]. Director's statement, <http://waterlife.nfb.ca/>.

[3]. Elinor Ostrom, *Governing the Commons: The Evolution of Institutions for Collective Action* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

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