



THE NEW Environmentalists

Local Goldman Prize filmmakers travel the world. **EDITED BY MIMI TOWLE**

FOR NEARLY 25 years, the Goldman Environmental Prize, founded by Richard and Rhoda Goldman, has honored one environmental activist each from Asia, Africa, North America, South America, Europe and the island nations. In an annual ceremony at the San Francisco Opera House, the six recipients — in recognition of their courage, creativity and drive — individually receive \$150,000, which is typically spent to further their causes. For the past decade, John Antonelli, Will Parrinello and Tom Dusenbery of the Mill Valley Film Group, currently working out of a modest houseboat in Sausalito, have been commissioned to travel to the winners' homelands to document their stories. The filmmakers feel somewhat like prizewinners themselves each November as they gather their gear to head out to another far-flung corner of the world.

Although the team members wouldn't trade their good fortune for anything, there are some rather daunting challenges to the assignments. Antonelli more than once has had to enter an African country as a tourist in order to film a subject the government didn't approve of and then smuggle the raw footage out of the country. Parrinello contracted dengue fever in Argentina this year, and Andy Black, one of their trusted directors of photography, caught malaria. Two years ago, Dusenbery, his crew and equipment got stuck in Russian customs for several days trying to get onto Sakhalin Island and had to trek across the frozen tundra in subzero weather to film their subject. This year Dusenbery wanted no part of the Russia story. »



Opposite page: Sofia Gatica in the GMO soy fields of Argentina. This page: The 2012 prizewinners at the San Francisco Opera House. Inset: The Goldmans.

Each member of the trio spends about a week on the ground in a location, then heads back home to edit the story and prep the next one. It all works in kind of a tag-team fashion. When one returns, another leaves.

“It’s a gross understatement to say that the stories deserve much more than a week of shooting, and the final pieces, which are under four minutes, could easily be much longer,” Antonelli says. Prizewinners share “an unbridled optimism about the work they are doing and have made sacrifices that are unthinkable to most of us,” he adds. “They are engaged in their cause purely for their love of the planet and their drive to leave a better place than they were born into.”

The complete series of some 60 short documentaries is called *The New Environmentalists*. Hosted by Robert Redford and shown annually on KQED TV, it has won three regional Emmy Awards. The following are first-person accounts from filmmakers describing how their subjects were able to make impacts in the areas where they live.



Left to right: Filmmakers Tom Dusenbery, Will Parrinello and John Antonelli

RUSSIA: Parrinello

AT FIRST GLANCE Evgenia Chirikova, a well-educated Russian mother, seems an unlikely environmental activist. She and her husband, Mikhail, ran a successful engineering firm in Moscow. But they wanted to give their young daughters a better life, so they moved the family to Moscow’s northern suburb of Khimki to be near the forest. When Chirikova discovered that the government planned to route the Moscow–St. Petersburg highway through the old-growth Khimki forest, destroying it in the process, her life changed forever. “At first we thought it was some kind of a mix-up. We were politically naive,” she says. “We said, ‘If we simply write to Putin he will fix this problem.’” Utilizing social media, Chirikova organized protests in the forest. She and other activists threw themselves in front of bulldozers to defend the trees, often getting injured and arrested in the process. The movement peaked in 2010 when 5,000 people attended a rally in Moscow’s Pushkin Square, the largest environmental protest in Russian history. This led to President Dmitry Medvedev’s announcement that he would halt construction of the highway and instead study alternate routes. While Medvedev ultimately reinstated the highway’s construction, some environmental concessions were made. More important, the huge rally was the beginning of what has become a broader popular movement to fight corruption in Russian politics.



As a mother, Evgenia Chirikova cannot, under Russian law, be subjected to administrative arrest or jailed for longer than three hours.



ALL PHOTOS COURTESY OF THE GOLDMAN ENVIRONMENTAL PRIZE, EXCEPT TIM PORTER (ABOVE), ANTONBELITSKY (BELOW)



ARGENTINA: Parrinello

GMO SOY FIELDS surround Sofia Gatica's barrio in Córdoba, Argentina. The crop has become the economic engine driving Argentina's boom. But there's a high cost for Argentina's poor, who are exposed to dangerous levels of the agrochemicals used to grow the genetically modified soy. Crop dusters spray the soy fields near Ituzaingó, Gatica's neighborhood, with thousands of gallons of Monsanto's Roundup product. When she discovered the death of her infant daughter was due to pesticide poisoning, she went door-to-door and organized the Mothers of Ituzaingó, who launched a "Stop Spraying" campaign. The mothers led demonstrations and published materials warning the public about the dangers of agrochemicals. After 10 long years, the president ordered the minister of health to investigate the effects of pesticide use in Ituzaingó. A definitive study by the Department of Medicine at Buenos Aires University linked glyphosate, the key ingredient in Monsanto's Roundup, to birth defects in amphibians. The doses used in the study were far lower than those the residents of Ituzaingó were exposed to. As a result, Gatica and the mothers were able to get a municipal ordinance passed prohibiting aerial spraying at distances of less than 2,500 meters from their homes. In an unprecedented victory, a 2010 ruling from the country's supreme court not only banned agrochemical spraying near populated areas, but also reversed the burden of proof — instead of residents proving that spraying causes harm, the government and soy producers must now prove the chemicals are safe.

ALASKA: Dusenbery

FROM SAN FRANCISCO, no fewer than four flights on progressively smaller airplanes carried me and my crew to Tikigaq, better known as Point Hope. The single paved runway stood out like a black line in a sea of white ice and snow as we made our final approach. Remnants of sod huts and whale bones left over from ancient gatherings punctuated the landscape on either side of us. Around 700 people call this rugged settlement home. For hundreds, perhaps thousands of years, hearty and determined native Inupiat Alaskans have lived off the Arctic Sea. But recent efforts to open up the Chukchi Sea to oil exploration and drilling have put the land, the people and the biodiversity of the region in grave danger. Not only would a spill or leak like the one in the Gulf of Mexico be disastrous to the area, but getting to the site in the long, dark winter would be nearly impossible. The U.S. Coast Guard itself admits that no feasible plan to do so even exists. Caroline Cannon was tagged by community elders to spearhead efforts to stop any future plans to drill or any new leases by the federal government. They told her, "It's your job to save our land and the ocean, which is our garden." With those orders in hand and heart, she has led a determined fight from her coastal home, taking her to law offices in Anchorage and finally to the halls of Congress in Washington.



Above: Sophia Gatica organizes concerned mothers in Argentina. This photo: Caroline Cannon's people chose her to lead the fight against oil drilling.





THE PHILIPPINES: Dusenbery

WHEN I MET UP with Rev. Edwin “Edu” Gariguez in Manila, we began our journey by car south to the industrial port of Batangas. From there, a three-hour ferry trip took us past a mere sampling of the Philippines’ more than 7,000 islands, then to our final destination of Mindoro. It is a genuine tropical paradise whose indigenous peoples, fisheries, agriculture, water supply and rain forests had been endangered by a proposed nickel mine. The eventual salvation of this island had culminated in one final desperate push by Gariguez and his supporters in the form of a 12-day hunger strike, back where our trip had begun, at the front door of the nation’s environmental agency. The government finally relented by denying mining permits on Mindoro. A rare combination of tenacious determination and bravery tempered by a pure love of and devotion to those of lesser means made Gariguez not only a success in his struggle to stop the mine, but also a hero among many on the island.

KENYA: Antonelli

IN FEBRUARY, I TRAVELED to Africa to produce the story about the prizewinner in Kenya. Ikal Angelei, a 31-year-old Turkana native, was fighting to stop a massive dam from being built in Ethiopia that would severely impact Lake Turkana, the largest desert lake on the planet. Kenya-born, U.S.-educated Angelei was elated about several important victories she had recently achieved that seemed to at least slow down the \$60 billion dam. Due to efforts made by the group she formed, Friends of Lake Turkana, the African Development Bank withdrew its money from the project, the Kenyan Parliament (her dad had been a member years ago) decided to stall its support of the project and UNESCO declared Lake Turkana a World Heritage site. Once I set foot over there, the gravity of the situation was shockingly clear. The lake is massive and it is the lifeblood of the indigenous people who live near it. Other than the lake, the entire region is a parched, brittle, unrelenting landscape. Without the vital water source, the native people feel they will have no chance to survive. Despite Angelei’s triumphs, the dam is currently under construction and Angelei is still fighting the fight.



Top: It took a hunger strike for Edwin Gariguez to stop the planned nickel mine on his island. Bottom: Ikal Angelei continues to fight efforts to build a dam in Ethiopia.

CHINA: Antonelli

MA JUN IS THE MAN behind the website that mobilized millions of his fellow Chinese residents to influence companies like Apple to clean up their supply chain, which has severely polluted waterways and air quality. What is so impressive about Jun is his ability to work with the government. Through IPE (Institute for Public and Institutional Affairs), he set up a web-based interactive water pollution map giving people access to information not only about how polluted their water is, but where the toxins are coming from. His main source for the data is the Chinese government. He equipped the population with the information they needed to participate in putting pressure on international corporations like Walmart, Nike and Apple to clean up their acts. While we were in China shooting the piece, the story about Apple's toxic supply chain was hitting the media here in the United States. A news story broke about one of Apple's major suppliers, Foxconn, reporting that employees were committing suicide due to the dismal working conditions in the massive factory. For the next two months, while we were editing, the story began to build until virtually every major news outlet was reporting on the issue. Coverage hit a high point when *The Daily Show* did a piece about Foxconn. As each new story broke in the media, I was acutely aware that Jun was the pebble in the lake that caused ripples across the entire planet.



This page: Ma Jun created a website that gave millions of his fellow Chinese residents valuable environmental information.

