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Best of Fest to take viewers to the Serengeti, U.S.-Mexico Border and Denmark

By Heather Mongilio hmongilio@newspost.com Jan 24, 2019



A still from "The Serengeti Rules," one of the three Best of Fest films.
Courtesy of ACFE

If You Go

When: Feb. 1, reception starts at 6 p.m., the first film will be shown at 6:30 p.m.

Where: Weinberg Center for the Arts, 20 West Patrick St., Frederick, MD 21701

Tickets: Tickets can be purchased online. Standard admission is \$8.

Zoologist Bob Paine wanted to know what would happen if he removed the top predator from an tide pool.

What he found was a collapse of the diversity in the environment, a theory he penned in a 1969 paper, prompting several years of research by Paine and other scientists to learn more about the importance of the top predator.

But by 2016, Paine had developed acute myeloid leukemia. He was sick, but he agreed to do an interview with filmmaker Nicolas Brown.

"And he was, very literally, on his deathbed," Brown said.

But Paine gave an amazing interview, Brown said, and he chose to begin and end his film with it.

Brown's film, "The Serengeti Rules," follows ecologists and zoologists as they study Paine's theory of the top predator encouraging diversity in a biosphere.

It is one of the three films that will play at **Best of Fest** on Feb. 1 at the Weinberg Theater in Frederick.

Best of Fest is an environmental film festival, showing three of the films that received awards from the American Conservation Film Festival.

Each of the films were among eight that received awards from the film organization and among 36 that were chosen from 300 to be screened at the larger American Conservation Film Festival, said Hilary Lo, festival manager, in an email.

“The Serengeti Rules will amplify your level of wonder at the natural world and demonstrates how we can help nature heal itself. Enough White Teacups takes you around the world with designers that are creating ingenious ways to solve human health and sustainability problems. You’ll leave feeling uplifted, and I think we all need more of that these days. Wildlife and the Wall sheds light on the thriving ecosystem along the border of the U.S. and Mexico and how a physical wall would impact critical access to animals’ migratory routes and water sources,” Lo said in the email.

“The Serengeti Rules”

“The Serengeti Rules” is based off of a book by biologist Sean B. Carroll, who wanted his children to see the Serengeti before it was destroyed. Carroll’s children asked him to explain how nature works and why there were animals at the Serengeti that they would not find in America. Carroll is featured in the film.

The feature-length film attempts to explain how nature works by looking at the importance of the top predator. It follows ecologists and zoologists building off of Paine’s theory that the when a predator is removed, like a starfish in a tide pool, biodiversity collapses.

“So nature is clearly organizing itself in these complex ways, but reliant on certain, what you call, keystone species that hold the structure of nature together in a biodiverse state,” Brown said.

The main focus of the film is the Serengeti, which is currently going through a revival of its biodiversity, Brown said. It had been badly degraded due to a disease from human-raised cattle. But when an area around it was inoculated, it began to rebound.

Brown said the documentary is set up to first explain the science to viewers then pull them into the story, turning it into a bit of a detective tale.

The idea of a predator being so important to biodiversity can be hard to grasp, Brown said. He pointed to the example of red wolves in the Washington, D.C. area. People are afraid of the wolves, he said, and that leads to people killing them or removing them from their natural habitat.

But with the wolves gone, there was an increase in lyme disease. With more wolves, there are more foxes. Wolves hunt deer, and foxes hunt mice, both of which are two carriers of ticks.

The story of the red wolves does not make it into the film, Brown said, due to space constraints. It was one story that was left on the cutting room floor.

The film has won several awards, in addition to the ACFF one, Brown said, and will be on PBS and the BBC.

Brown said he hopes that young viewers, who still have a love for animals, go to Best of Fest and see "The Serengeti Rules."

"I guess the ultimate hope is that a bunch of young people decide to become ecologists after watching the film," Brown said.

"Enough White Teacups"

There are many wicked problems in the world, said filmmaker Michelle Carpenter. But through "**Enough White Teacups**," she said she is hoping to show examples of solutions to some of the problems.

"I consider the film a sort of antidote," Carpenter said.

Carpenter's film follows five winners of the 2017 **Index: Design to Improve Life**, a Danish competition looking at sustainable ideas that can help people. There are five categories: body, work, home, play and learning and community.

"And I flew all over the world and was able to interview these amazing people really trying to improve life for humans," she said.

One of the challenges for Carpenter was the international travel because she did not go with a team. Instead, she was responsible for all of her gear, conducting interviews and filming each of the winners.

While lugging all of the gear was challenging, Carpenter said she enjoyed conducting interviews alone because it became more intimate and comfortable.

"I really do believe being alone changes the whole dynamic of an interview because I think you're able to get on a really personal level," Carpenter said.

One of her favorite inventions was by a professor at Stanford who created a paperfuge — a centrifuge made out of paper. A centrifuge separates different items by weight. It is often used to separate different components of blood.

The paper centrifuge on costs \$0.60 because of the materials, which means it can be used in areas where medical treatment can be hard to access, Carpenter said.

Ultimately, Carpenter would like to have the film on public television where more people can be inspired by the different inventions and ideas, just as she was.

"Oh there are so many great stories. I could go on and on," Carpenter said. "I'd love to keep creating films like this every year so we keep having this great news so we don't feel so depressed or we don't realize it's hopeless because it's not because people are doing great things out there to make life better."

"Wildlife and the Wall"

"Wildlife and the Wall" is perhaps one of the most relative films being shown at Best of Fest as it talks about the diversity of wildlife at the U.S.-Mexico border and how that could change if a wall is built there.

The wall has been a subject of heated debate and the U.S. has now entered the **longest partial government shutdown**, with President Donald Trump's wall a central point in the discussion on reopening the government.

The film is five minutes, which allowed it to go viral on social media, filmmaker Ben Masters said. But keeping the film short came with its own challenges, including limiting Masters to what species and stories he could tell.

"There's so many nuances in the border wall," Masters said. "There's so many other species that would be impacted that I wasn't able to capture on camera, and I wasn't able to tell in that short film due to the time constraints that I was in."

His favorite part of filming was getting close to bears who have come back to the area around the border.

Masters said that his experiences filming "Wildlife and Wall" inspired him to create a **feature-length documentary** following a group of people going from El Paso to the border.

"I hope viewers when they watch that film [realize] that the U.S.-Mexico border is so much more than a line on the map and that a physical border wall would have a ton of impact beyond just immigration," Masters said.

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