

American Conservation Film Festival announces changes to schedule, submission rate

SHEPHERDSTOWN — The American Conservation Film Festival is putting a pause on its regular schedule this year, after 17 years of annual seasons. While it would normally be gearing up right now to hold its 18th season in a couple of months, the festival's board has made the decision to wait until 2021 to hold its next season.

This change is, surprisingly, not due to the COVID-19 pandemic, according to ACFF Executive Director Jennifer Lee.

"Our festival has been traditionally held in the fall of each year, but through sheer serendipity, we made the decision in December 2019 to shift the festival to spring, starting in 2021. We've been wanting to switch the festival from the fall to the spring for a while, for a number of reasons," Lee said in a July 7 interview. "With climate change, October is like an extension of summer, but it's also kind of the last month that people can really enjoy getting outside. There was a lot happening in October in Shepherdstown, and there were a lot of issues with getting venues secured."

According to Lee, the festival waited to make the decision until after they had worked out the logistics with its local partners. ACFF works closely with Shepherd University and the National Conservation Training Center to host many of its events.

“For the 2021 festival, it is our current plan to show films at Shepherd University on March 24 and 25, and then spend the weekend of the festival on the campus of the National Conservation Training Center,” Lee said. The National Conservation Training Center is also the host of our annual Conservation Filmmaker Workshop that will be held on March 26-27.”

Lee said she is thankful for the timing of this decision, considering the unexpected arrival of COVID-19 in the U.S. two months later.

“This extra time is allowing us to plan for and adapt to what a post-COVID festival can look like, and to pursue new opportunities for showing our films to a wider audience,” Lee said, mentioning she hopes ACFF will be able to hold its next season in-person. “We so look forward to gathering with our filmmakers, audience members and community next spring for what we hope to be our most engaging and festive festival yet! We are also preparing for the challenges presented by the COVID-19 virus, by finding creative and accessible ways to engage and grow our ACFF community

through online offerings for the festival and throughout the year."

While the pandemic has forced ACFF to postpone about 12 film screenings around the tristate area, it has not stopped ACFF's work. This month, ACFF teamed up together with the Contemporary American Theater Festival to hold a virtual film screening and discussion on the 2013 documentary, "The Vasectomist." ACFF has also recently virtually premiered two films, "Fantastic Fungi" and "Spaceship Earth."

With an additional five months until the festival's 18th season, along with the extra time the pandemic has created for filmmakers to focus on their craft, ACFF's staff can already see an increase in the number of film submissions.

"From Chile to Mozambique to Texas, outstanding entries are coming in from all over the world! And all of these films were finished in the last two years, so they offer fresh perspectives from experts in the field," said ACFF Manager Hilary Lo, mentioning the submissions rate is about 31 percent higher than in 2019. "It's going to be a challenge for the selection committee to narrow it down."

Currently, students ages 5-18 are being encouraged to participate in ACFF's Next Generation Capture Conservation Contest, which is accepting free submissions through Sept.

1 at <https://conservationfilmfest.org/nextgen/>. Older students can submit their conservation films for late submission consideration in the festival's Student Conservation Film category, by Sept. 1. To learn more about this free submission process, visit <https://conservationfilmfest.org/submit/>.