

PEOPLE OF A FEATHER

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A Documentary Film by Joel Heath

Digital (BluRay) / 92 minutes / English & Inuktitut with English Subtitles / 2011



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SYNOPSIS

Featuring stunning footage from seven winters in the Arctic, *People of a Feather* takes you through time into the world of the Inuit on the Belcher Islands in Canada's Hudson Bay. Connecting past, present and future is a unique relationship with the eider duck. Eider down, the warmest feather in the world, allows both Inuit and bird to survive harsh Arctic winters.

Traditional life is juxtaposed with modern challenges as both Inuit and eiders confront changing sea ice and ocean currents disrupted by the massive hydroelectric dams powering New York and eastern North America. Inspired by Inuit ingenuity and the technology of a simple feather, the film is a call to action to implement energy solutions that work with nature.

DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

Motivated by deep personal relationships and intimate first hand experience, the film presents an engaging story of life in the Arctic through the eyes of Inuit. Dialogue among characters establishes context, creating an open discussion of critical socio-environmental issues with limited voice over. Versatile cinematography (Canon 7D) and unprecedented access provide stunning visuals, capturing uninhibited moments, reflecting modern life while maintaining deep roots in the Flaherty tradition. The drama is carried by the unique rhythm of the Arctic seasons, juxtaposing past and present revealing increasing discord as we travel through the seasons that are ultimately being disrupted.

AWARDS



Praise for *People of A Feather*

"Spectacular... Gorgeous... Genius. Great filmmaking - and not just for the enviro-conscious"

-NOW Toronto

"For a movie that starts off talking about ducks, *People of a Feather* ends up negotiating nothing less than man's place, and our role, in the entire life cycle. It's an undeniably elegant feat, and one that could very well reframe the way you live the rest of your life." -Postmedia News

"Movie poetry at work... Astounding... Compelling... Entertaining" -The Vancouver Observer

"Artful and Meditative...a near mystical mix of time-lapse Arctic landscapes, marine-life photography, and interwoven imagery of present-day and historical Inuit life." -The Georgia Straight

"Painterly images... highly cinematic instances in which traditional ways collide headlong with the modern world" -WE Vancouver

"Beautifully put together with an artistic sensibility often overlooked in the environmental documentary department" -RedWire

"Beautifully shot.. incredible images underwater.. amazing time-lapse.. gives new meaning to the word remote" -Vancouver Sun

"Takes the audience on an arctic adventure for an eye opening look into the intricate symbiosis that exists between environmental change and cultural evolution" -The Source

Biographies

JOEL HEATH

Co-Writer/Cinematographer/Director/Producer

Born in St. John's, Newfoundland, Joel has long nurtured passion for both arts and science. A leading Canadian ecologist, Joel worked in Sanikiluaq, Nunavut studying effects of climate change on Arctic sea ice ecology. For his Ph.D. Joel worked with Inuit, developing time lapse monitoring technology and an underwater camera system to capture the world's first images of eiders diving below the sea ice. This led to Joel's involvement in BBC's Planet Earth: Ice Worlds and Frozen Planet. Joel has been leading one of Canada's largest International Polar Year outreach projects. His research was recently published as the cover story in Proceedings of the Royal Society.

During his time in the Arctic Joel listened to the Inuit tell stories of a troubled future due to neighboring hydroelectric dams. To help share these stories Joel collaborated with the community of Sanikiluaq to found Sanikiluaq Running Pictures and began a five-year process to create his first feature documentary, People of a Feather.

SIMEONIE KAVIK

Co-Writer/Character

Sometimes called Nanuaaluk (the big bear), Sim has been one of Joel's closest friends and teachers since he arrived on the Belchers in 2002. Sim has the gravity of the moon, and uses his influence in Sanikiluaq to bring about positive change. Hunter, renowned sculptor and jack-of-all-trades, Sim is respected for his knowledge of the many secrets of the sea ice and animals in Hudson Bay. A mentor and teacher, Sim acts the proverbial guide through the documentary. In the face of cultural and environmental shift, his knowledge is more important than ever.

THE KAVIK FAMILY

In the Kavik's kitchen three generations of family members gather to share a meal of seal meat and fried chicken. Here tradition meets modernity and the young daughter speaks in Inuktitut, while dancing to American pop songs on the radio. Like their ancestors, the Kavik's rely on wildlife, including eider ducks. In the spring, when the ducks are nesting, the family collects eider down that will eventually fill parkas.

Chronology

1913: Explorer Robert Flaherty lands on the Belcher Islands. The grandfather of documentary films the Inuit he found there, but his footage was lost in a fire. His subsequent film *Nanook of the North* was based on a series of recreations made elsewhere, his original story of the Belcher Islands left untold.

1970s: Seen as a green alternative to coal-fired and diesel generation, large-scale hydroelectric projects begin near James and Hudson Bays. Spring run-off is held in reservoirs and behind dams, released in the winter when energy demand is highest. Little is known about the impacts these large-scale dams will have on ecosystems.

1990s: Troubled by a major die-off of thousands of eider ducks, Inuit on the Belcher Islands contact the Canadian Wildlife Service.

1996: Inuit and Cree leaders travel to New York and successfully lobby against further hydro development in the Hudson Bay region, a monumental achievement for First Nation rights.

2002: Ecologist Joel Heath arrives in Sanikiluaq, Nunavut, to study the ducks and sea ice with the Canadian Wildlife Service. He works closely with the Inuit community to establish community-based monitoring programs.

2009: The Arctic Eider Society is established to ensure these programs continue into the future, providing jobs, and supporting Inuit as they combine traditional knowledge with empirical research and address the environmental concerns affecting their community.

2010: The expanded hydroelectric project on the Rupert River becomes operational. The project was approved under the condition that a study into the impacts on marine ecosystems be carried out. To date, no such study has been conducted.

Geography

THE BELCHER ISLANDS

About 1,500 islands make up the Belcher Islands archipelago in eastern Hudson Bay. Most of the islands are uninhabited by humans. The islands' 800 residents reside in Sanikiluaq, located on Flaherty Island. Even today, the Inuit rely on the fish, seals and birds available on and near the islands. The Arctic eider duck has played an important role in the community. Strong currents around the islands in the winter create ice-free areas, called polynyas. These areas of open water allow the eiders to dive for urchins and mussels on the sea floor. Instead of migrating south these ducks stay through the winter. They are an important source of both food and clothing for the Inuit.

Ecology

EFFECTS OF HYDROELECTRICITY

Hydroelectric mega-projects near Hudson Bay send power to many cities in North America. Spring runoff from wild rivers is held behind dams and released into the bays in the winter months when energy demand is highest.

This reversal of spring runoff disrupts ocean currents and influences the dynamics of sea ice ecosystems in the bay, reversing the seasonality of the hydrological cycle. Belcher Islands residents have noticed the effects for many years, but many concerns continue to go unaddressed.

Due to winter input of freshwater from reservoirs, sea ice freezes and breaks up differently. The dynamics of these critical sea ice habitats for eiders and other wildlife, such as polar bears, are now less predictable. A number of winter die-offs of eiders have been documented, while the larger scale effects are poorly understood.

While Inuit have noticed currents slowing down in Hudson Bay, scientists have observed the Labrador Current itself is also freshening and slowing. This cold salty current sinks and heads south, pushing the warm fresher Gulf Stream north, causing Europe's mild climate. This process, called thermohaline circulation, drives ocean currents and global climate. Increased melt from glaciers and sea ice in the summer are freshening the Labrador Current. Warm freshwater released from hydro reservoirs during the winter is likely exacerbating this problem. The long term effects require substantial consideration, as the last time the Labrador Current slowed due to freshening, it extended a major ice age.

Over 50 per cent of accessible freshwater on the planet is now behind dams. We are changing our planet's hydrological cycle with little regard to its consequences.

SCIENCE MEETS FILMMAKING

People of a Feather began as Joel Heath's effort to share his research findings with the community that brought him to the Arctic. On first look, Arctic winters may seem barren and unmoving. Joel used time-lapse photography to better understand the how ice forms and moves. Below the ice, Joel captured the first images of eider ducks diving to the ocean floor to feed. Together these approaches reveal a dynamic, ever-changing landscape that reveals mysteries and beauty of the Arctic sea ice, one of the world's most threatened ecosystems.