

## Can left-brained scientists be trained to be right-brained filmmakers? Montana State University's Science and Natural History Filmmaking program thinks it has the answer.

By JOHN BYORTH

**T**he location of the only science and natural history film school in the United States seems unlikely: After all, the peaks and prairies of Montana are far from the cutting-edge scientific laboratories of the country's East Coast Ivy League schools or the preeminent film schools of New York and Los Angeles. Yet, at closer focus, Montana State University-Bozeman makes perfect sense.

"If you want to use the outdoors as a classroom, where better than Montana?" says Ronald Tobias, founder and director of the Science and Natural History Filmmaking Program in the Department of Media and Theater Arts. The state, along America's border with Canada, remains one of the most rural in the country, complete with full buffalo herds and a high-profile Native American population.

The sprawling old Western town of Bozeman is about 130 kilometers north of Yellowstone National Park and some five hours southeast of Glacier National Park, two of the finest repositories of wilderness and wildlife in the world. Buffalo, elk, deer, antelope, mountain goats, Bighorn sheep, Grizzly and black bear, mountain lion, wolf and coyote can be seen within park boundaries, not to mention a multitude of birds in the skies above and other critters foraging below.

But the flora and fauna don't stop there. The entire Northern Rocky Mountain Range, which effectively connects the two parks, teems with natural wonders waiting to be studied and filmed. As a result, the environment and location wasn't the worry for this first-of-its-kind film school. Instead, the concern was much more fundamental.

"We had one question to ask," says Tobias, an accomplished director and producer of nature films for the Discovery Channel. "Can you really make scientists into filmmakers?"

### Evolution, on Film

Once the signature of the famous oceanographer Jacques Cousteau, scientific films have, traditionally, been expository in nature, featuring what Tobias calls the "God narrative." A voice tells viewers what they are seeing: "This is the way it is, so shut up and listen to God tell you the facts." Part of this tradition is that scientists have generally used film to state a thesis and then support it with visual evidence, ignoring the actual art of filmmaking.

"If you gave a quiz after a traditional scientific film," Tobias suggests, "most of the audience would flunk. But they could easily state two or three ideas. The problem is that scientific film has been

based on fact, not ideas.”

This has raised what Tobias calls the “left brain-right brain debate,” referring to conventional wisdom that says scientific thought is a product of the left side of the brain (meticulous and calculating in nature), whereas filmmakers are thought to be right-brained (creative and artistic). The difference between the two disciplines has always created an uneasy relationship.

“Scientists have had blinders on and only know one way of making films,” Tobias says. “They simply don’t understand the complexity of film and how to use it. Vice-versa, filmmakers have ignored science and natural history since the camera was invented because they don’t have scientific backgrounds and don’t understand the right questions to ask. This program is finding ways to bridge the gap between the two and create a solution: Take scientists and train them to be filmmakers.”

The three-year program requires students to have at least a minor in science. But judging from enrollment, the 60 students here have far surpassed that requirement. Of all the students, 60 percent have a bachelor’s degree and 40 percent have advanced degrees in the sciences, including one medical doctor. Applicants have streamed in from

Harvard, Yale and Princeton, as well as formidable state universities such as the University of Texas and the University of Washington. The program also looks for international students to bring a diversity of backgrounds, which Tobias sees as a healthy attribute for a cross-disciplinary program.

Indeed, Praveen Singh won an Emmy in the student category for *Killing Fields*, his film on his native India’s man-eating leopards. Other students from Korea, Tanzania, England, Scotland and Australia have also brought unique experiences to the program.

### Capturing Life

But not all of these prospective filmmakers come from the hard sciences. The program gladly accepts applications from those holding degrees in the social sciences, which has been a boon for a lawyer like Kelly Matheson.

“My background is in public interest/environmental law,” Matheson says of her former professional life. “But I saw the power of the media and wanted to use film to advocate for the environment.”

Matheson didn’t have to wait until she graduated to use film to those ends. After the first year of classroom work, she went to Costa Rica as part of the

second year production practicum to film an indigenous festival called the Play of the Little Devils. This was more than a cultural experience. It was also political. “The festival celebrates the Brugan tribe’s fight against outsiders dating back to the time of the conquistadors,” or Spanish conquerors, Matheson says. “It is still relevant to this day, as the fight is now against the proposed construction of a hydroelectric dam which would destroy much of their cultural lands.”

Though it is still too early to tell, it looks as if her film and the festival were a success in deterring the building of the dam. But success isn’t a surprise for the students and graduates of the program: In recent years, students’ work has appeared on CBS and CNN news broadcasts, *60 Minutes*, *Larry King Live*, and the National Geographic and Discovery channels.

For Tobias, he’s found an answer as to whether his program can make scientists, of either the social or natural ilk, into filmmakers: “They make very good filmmakers.” □

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*Greg Schneider (right) and Libbey White, first year students of the master of fine arts in filmmaking program, during exercises for the production techniques class in the Revenue Flats area of Montana.*



Courtesy: Montana State University