

Life Afloat

As always, the 2017 edition of the *Pêcheurs du Monde* film festival in Lorient, France, showcased examples of the courage, resistance and resilience of fishing communities

At the 2017 *Pêcheurs du Monde* film festival several prizes were awarded to various films from around the world. Among them was one titled *Floating Life*, by the Indian director Haobam Paban Kumar, which won the Chandrika Sharma Award, instituted in honour of Chandrika Sharma, Executive Secretary of the International Collective in Support of Fishworkers (ICSF), who went missing in the disappearance of the ill-fated Malaysia Airlines flight MH370 on 8 March 2014.

The film, made in the same year, highlights the role of women in fisheries while focusing on the fragile situation of traditional fishing communities around the world, and how, despite their disadvantages, they display a determined willingness to resist. The film also draws attention to the situation of fishermen in fresh waters. There are thousands of fishermen on the Loktak, the biggest Indian lake, a wonder of nature, in the state of Manipur, close to the Burmese border.

Here, fishermen are confronted with all the challenges faced by most traditional communities around the world. Lake Loktak is experiencing a profound degradation whose origins are multiple. There is a real population growth, which leads to an increase in the *phumdis*, the floating platforms on which the fishermen's families live. This has implications on the quality of the ecosystem and promotes the loss of oxygen in the lake.

Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) like the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) and the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), as well as the authorities, accuse the fishermen of being the only

ones responsible for the degradation of the lake, thus justifying their expulsion from the *phumdis*.

In reality, though, the fishermen are far from being the only ones responsible for the degradation of the lake. Pollution also comes from the explosion of urbanization along the shores of the lake, which is done without any treatment of effluents and waste, as depicted in the spectacular images in the film. The role of deforestation on the surrounding slopes is also important as it causes erosion and then siltation of the lake. So, there is an urgent need for action; unfortunately, the directions chosen

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are far from resolving the problems and, rather, often aggravate them. These protection measures are part of a plan for the development of the lake and its region, but they result in a violent expulsion of fishing families.

The objectives of this plan are both economic and environmental. NGOs like WWF played an important role in its completion, by focusing the project on the creation of large natural reserves, and banning fishing and settlements so as to protect a species of deer threatened with extinction. From this viewpoint, it has been a success, as the number of deers has increased.

Direct dependence

The economic objectives are also important and concern 1-2 mn

*This article is by **Alain Le Sann** (ad.lesann@orange.fr), President of the *Pêcheurs du Monde* film festival in Lorient, France*

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inhabitants depending directly or indirectly on the lake and its waters. It was decided to build a dam, which increased the surface of the lake, but also profoundly transformed its operation. The aim was to facilitate irrigation and probably the production of electricity. But there is another stated purpose—making this lake unique as a tourist destination for visitors from all over India and abroad. Hotels have been built around the lake, and the fishermen are now taking tourists for trips aboard their boats, while others sell them souvenirs and cater to their other needs. The majority of fishermen had to accept ridiculously low compensation. Promises of access to land are rarely kept, and sometimes fishermen resettled on the shores are once more evicted to make room for tourist facilities.

Added to all this is the state of emergency that gives excessive powers to the army and the police. It is easy then to understand the extreme violence the fisherpeople have to endure. Their huts are burnt and destroyed by bulldozers

supervised by the police and the military. The women cling desperately to the vehicles destroying their homes. The state of emergency is justified by the proximity of the Burmese border and the illegal entry of refugees. The fishermen are offered the development of aquaculture as an alternative to fishing. So, on this lake, we find all the problems faced by traditional fishermen around the world. The film is also interesting since it illustrates the part that cinema can play in defending the rights of these fishermen. The film's director had originally come to investigate the area in order to prepare for the shooting of a fiction film with the participation of the local fishermen. That film, *The Lady of the Lake*, shows the resilience of a fisherwoman, and was presented at various important festivals in 2016.

Testimonial

The film director, however, did not want to merely go on along the same track. On witnessing the violence of the evictions, he decided to testify about them in a documentary. *Floating*

Life has been awarded at many festivals before making it to the *Pêcheurs du Monde* festival.

The two juries at the festival also crowned two films that bear witness to the resistance and resilience of the fishermen. The jury of professionals devoted its prize to the film of Loïc Jourdain, *A Turning Tide in the Life of Man*, which traces the long struggle of a fisherman from a forgotten island in Ireland to regain the right to fish. The Irish government has reserved salmon fishing for rich amateurs from all over the world. The fisherman, John O'Brien, for his part, refused the proposed compensation and fought for eight years to defend the rights of coastal fishermen against the government and in the debate on the reform of the Common Fisheries Policy. With the support of NGOs, he secured recognition of the rights of fishermen on his island and hopes to soon regain the right to fish salmon—an extraordinary lesson of courage and resistance of a man confronted with the logic of powers that marginalize the inshore fishermen.

There is, however, a paradox that the film director is not aware of: some of the NGOs supporting John O'Brien's struggle have contributed to the collapse of fishing in several islands (Yeu Island in France, for example) and coastal communities by fighting for a total ban on drift-nets.

These were the very nets used by John O'Brien to fish for salmon, and at the very moment when the rights of these fishers were recognized, the European Union decided to ban drift-nets from inshore fishermen. In addition, new measures to protect the marine environment, promoted by environmental NGOs, can again threaten inshore fishermen like John O'Brien in Ireland. The relationship between artisanal fishermen and environmental NGOs is, therefore, not always as idyllic as in this film.

The youth jury, for its part, awarded an Uruguayan film, *Nueva Venecia*, shot in a village on stilts in Colombia, where the villagers were traumatized by a massacre by the paramilitary. Fishermen and

their families live in very precarious conditions in a mangrove forest and young people dream of football as a professional future. The community is consolidating its resilience by rehabilitating a flooded football ground to organize a tournament. All these films show that the survival of fishermen goes far beyond that of resources, and that it is also necessary to raise hope of a common future.

Several very moving films depict the harsh reality of the living and working conditions of fishermen, in the past and today. At a screening in one school, the children were overwhelmed by the film *Les Oubliés de Saint Paul*, which tells of the tragic adventure of the Breton and Malagasy fishermen abandoned for months by the shipowner on an island in the south Indian Ocean, where they were fishing for lobster. Several dozens of them died of hunger and disease in the early 1930s.

At the same time, hundreds of fishermen were working in appalling conditions to catch cod off Newfoundland on sailing ships. A great French scriptwriter from Saint Malo who had participated in some cod fishing campaigns, wanted to pay tribute to them by interviewing the last survivors in the 1970s. This allowed us to discover their testimony in *Mémoires de Brumes*, which reminds us that the history of the cod fishery, as with many other fisheries, has been marked by a contempt for men and their rights.

Trying conditions

We find such trying conditions in the Russian film *The Pickers of Seagrasses*, which plunges us into the precarious life of seasonal Solovki Islands fishers on the White Sea, the place where the first Soviet gulag was created. A century later, living conditions are reminiscent of those in the early 20th century. In many films we see the importance of migration in the life of fishermen. In Northern countries, European or Southern immigrants come to occupy the jobs abandoned by young people. This is the case in Iceland, as shown by the

Blending Spot

Hardly had I entered the classroom that was to serve as headquarters for the jury of the festival *Pêcheurs du Monde* in Lorient in March 2017, that it dawned upon me that I had emerged into something different, exterior, distant.

Three continents were represented: South America, Africa and Europe. The French came from Marseille, Bordeaux, Paris and Brittany—four women and three men. Their ages ranged from 30 to 60. There were followers of documentary or experimental cinema. Instinct and rationalism were equally shared. Four people came from the world of images, three from the fishing world. We were to leave our daily lives. Watching the films, we were to travel around the world, and, at the same time, we would encounter the others in our jury. I enjoyed this kaleidoscope that would forge in a unit of time, of place, and history, a slice of our life.

Natural traditions, local cosmologies, mental landscapes, regional epistemologies, discourses, temporality, boundaries, and imagination innervated by life, varied from one member of the jury to another. However, after each film, each one was transformed, in our enclave, to better reinvent this immobile dream. Our remarks had undergone, in their navigation towards others, an alteration such as they were no longer ours, and more theirs.

The crucible produced unpleasant concepts to each of our common sense and metamorphosed us. In this progressive melting each had left his symbols of power, knowledge, wealth and seduction at the door. We had abandoned our inhibitions, our aggressiveness. We accepted the other individuals as they were, they became our equals, and, finally, we were able to speak. I understood what it is like to feel good

Far from everyone's attention, the secret of our alchemy was not to be found in the depths of a cellar, but here, in a classroom. We were gathered in a room named after the greatest naval engineer in the French navy, who had advised Jules Verne for the *Nautilus*, and *Twenty Thousand Leagues under the Sea*. Unknown to us, these deep roots concentrated in this place were distilled in our conclave open to the world. In order to be up to it, we immediately ritualized our functioning: discussions after each film, to lose nothing, fair roundtable, free expression and note-taking, not to forget the speech distributed by our captain, the final decision to the president of the jury, the only master on board. We were aware that he should be accountable to the crowd and the rights holders. Life became common for four days. The links were gradually cut with the outside world. To my surprise, an eternity passed in a flash. A final acceleration of the time and of our energies made it possible for the prize list to be established. We delivered it by freeing ourselves.

Our jury, which had become part of the show and of the sea, gathered out of time, but united side by side, in front of the tensed crowd, experienced there a moment of collective exaltation. Referring to the link between the jury and the fishers around the world, the winners, the losers, those who made the films and those who will follow, to those who watched them, the prize was announced by the president and explained by some in the name of all. This moment of exceptional communion went right to the heart of all the members of the jury. In spite of our initial differences, we were no more than an egregore, including the jury of the young—a fine idea—who had made other choices. It was rare enough to recommend to the festival the magic of a little humanity, to start again with another jury.

—by **René-Pierre Chever**,
Member of the jury,
Pêcheurs du Monde film festival, 2017

Polish dockers in the film *Keep Frozen*. In the Netherlands, the Poles become, more often, sailors on beam trawlers, while their owners take boats under the British, German or Belgian flags (*Episode of the Sea*). Malagasy and Senegalese provide a share of the crews on the boats of the deep-sea tuna fishing or lobster.

The film *Miss Philippines* described how the fishermen of the Faroe Islands had to marry Filipino women because the local girls flee the islands for the continent, for lack of attractive jobs at home. At the borders of Europe, Italian or Spanish fishermen settle in Morocco or Tunisia to escape the constraints of European policies, often not adapted to the reality of the peripheries (*Once the Sea was Covered with Water*), while *In the Other Direction*, illegal immigration continues. The world of fishermen is far from being fixed; it is in perpetual renewal of practices and men, and the integration of migrants is often the pre-condition for the survival of communities. Several films reveal the destruction of the seas by industrial pollution: *Black Kiss*; the drama of fishermen facing chlordecone in the aftermath of the catastrophe of Deepwater Horizon in *Corexit: The Cursed Remedy*; *Red Zone* on the destruction of all marine life in parts of the French Mediterranean coast. The fishery itself is experiencing drifting from a dehumanizing industrialization, as shown by David Redmon's *Nocturnum Delirium*, a regular at the festival, and once again noticed by the youth jury.

However, there are other, more optimistic, messages that confirm both the capacity of the seas to recover their wealth and that of men to improve their practices and their relationship with nature. *Aral, the Renaissance*, a film by Isabelle Moeglin, who has followed for 20 years the evolution of the Aral Sea, shows the spectacular but fragile rebirth of a part of this inland sea where hundreds of fishermen have regained activity. From America comes good news with a remarkable beginning of the return of cod off Newfoundland. *Sacred Cod*



PHILIPPE HOUSSIN

Participants at the festival: A unique opportunity to travel the seas and coasts of the world and to understand the world as it goes, with its drifts as well as its beauties and successes

shows, however, the desperation of fishermen of New England condemned to disappear because this return is still to come and it is undoubtedly impossible due to global warming.

Other testimonies of hope appear with improvements in management practices by the fishermen themselves. *Sustaining Sea Scallops* describes the upheaval of scallop fishermen's practices with dredging in the United States: they thus regain the same approaches as the scallop fishermen in France. *Prud'homie de pêcheurs* shows the fragile and chaotic renewal of a multi-year fisheries management institution on the Mediterranean coast in France.

Each year, the festival offers an opportunity to discover amazing movies through their creativity, originality and emotion in the diverse and complex realities of the lives of fishermen and their communities. This festival is a unique opportunity to travel the seas and coasts of the world and to understand the world as it goes, with its drifts as well as its beauties and successes. The films show how fishing communities react to the changes in the world. ♣

For more

<http://www.mundusmaris.org/index.php/en/review/films/623-lorient>
Fishermen's Film Festival in Lorient, France

<http://www.pecheursdumonde.org/edition-festival/films/>
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