



The AFI DOCS Interview: INTO THE OKAVANGO Director Neil Gelinas

Description

Posted by [Larry Gleeson](#)

National Geographic photographer Neil Gelinas makes his directorial debut with INTO THE OKAVANGO, a visually stunning journey along the titular river that is the lifeline for wildlife throughout the African continent. Gelinas follows three passionate individuals — an ornithologist, bushman and a young scientist — as they embark on a four-month mission, plagued with uncertainty, to discover why the Okavango Delta is rapidly drying up. Spanning three countries, and witnessing Africa's animal and bird population in visceral, jaw-dropping close-up, the team encounters the natural world in all its beauty, sadness and even danger, while trying to understand how to save one of the world's last untouched wildernesses.

AFI spoke with director Gelinas about the film, which screens at AFI DOCS on Thursday, June 14, and Friday, June 15. Get tickets [here](#).

AFI: There's inevitably a point where, as a filmmaker, you read or see or realize something that lights that fire to make a subject into a documentary. When did that happen for you here?

NG: In 2012, I took vacation time to meet Steve and his brother Chris in the Okavango Delta in Botswana. They were doing their research on cavity nesting birds and I took along a camera. I'd film them working and exploring, and eventually put together a little reel. Steve was clearly a compelling character and the delta landscape and wildlife were so cinematically rich that I knew this was going to be my first attempt at a feature doc.

Into-the-Okavango_[Roger-Horroks]_4

AFI: There's such an obvious and incredibly difficult craft to making a documentary like this. What would you say was the most difficult scene to accomplish?

NG: It was really clear to me how we should introduce Water and Adjany, but Steve was far more challenging, because we're simultaneously introducing this place, the Okavango Delta. How do you make it informative, but also emotionally engaging, without becoming too saccharine? It took so many

iterations and interviews to get the tone right. In the end, it became like a romance that Steve has with the wilderness. At least, that's what Brian and I were going for.

AFI: Steve appears incredibly personable, even vulnerable, right from the start. Was he readily happy to appear like this on camera or did this develop over time?

NG: I've known Steve since 2011, and the majority of the filming took place in 2015. We've worked together to materialize both the project and the film. He's the closest thing I've ever had to a brother. So, by 2015, for him to be filmed by me, it was a safe place. He and I share a lot of trust and respect for each other. We have to. We've taken this giant leap together.

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AFI: How did Water come into your life?

NG: Steve worked with Water years ago in the delta. Steve was a camp manager and Water was a guide. Steve had kept in touch with him over the years, and it was sort of a shot in the dark when he asked him to join on the 2015 expedition. I hadn't met Water, and was counting on GB to fill that on-camera role. GB's still in the film, but it was clear there's something magical about Water. It was a four-month expedition, but I think it was by day two that I'd made up my mind that Water would be a leading character.

AFI: There's so much happening beyond Steve's mission, things like the difference in background of the people involved, Adjany's first memory being one of war. How did you find that balance of capturing both the personal motivations and stories within the film and the vast scenes of wildlife and the wilderness?

NG: Before even starting the 2015 journey, I knew the expedition wasn't going to be compelling enough to carry a feature doc all by itself. I could rely on natural history, but for this character-driven story to mean anything, the audience was going to have to care about them. And of course, each character moment has to be motivated by the larger narrative. So it turned into a lot of time in edit trying to make a delicious sandwich that had the right combination and balance of meat, veg and bread.

AFI: What are you hoping that people will take away from this documentary?

NG: Beyond understanding what the Okavango is and wanting to help save it, I hope they value the relationship we as humans have with wilderness, and that we need to conserve the few wilderness areas we have left. Not just for the sake of wilderness or nature, but for us as human beings.

(Source: afi.com)



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Date Created

May 30, 2018

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