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Wilma Dykeman, Marjory Stoneman Douglas hailed in film 'Guardians of Our Troubled Waters'

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ASHEVILLE
– The opening scene is enchanting.

Kayakers paddling down the Green River Narrows, a silvery, bubbly, pristinely clean, whitewater stream. It is the picture of the paradise, perfectly captured on film that has come to symbolize the outdoor wonders of Western North Carolina.

As filmmaker David Weintraub's latest documentary, "Guardians of Our Troubled Waters," really gets flowing, though, with historians, activists and conservationists recalling the days when Southern rivers including the French Broad, and its largest tributary, the Pigeon, were "floating cesspools" polluted with raw sewage and toxic effluent from factories that could be smelled for miles away, and led to alarmingly high rates of cancer deaths in paper mill towns, the blissful image fades to black.

But at the heart of the film, which premieres June 20 in Hendersonville, June 22 at the North Carolina Arboretum and June 23 in Black Mountain, is the deep connection of people to these rivers, a love that led "river heroes" to bravely fight for the rights of the waterways, to clean them up,



Center for Cultural Preservation film director David Weintraub interviews Jill Hodges, member of the Dead Pigeon River Council, of Newport, Tennessee, along the Pigeon River, for the documentary "Guardians of Our Troubled Waters." (Photo: Courtesy of Center for Cultural Preservation)

set water quality standards, and prevent dams, and a hope that their legacy will forever trickle downstream.

Two of the guardians highlighted in the film, and the women whom Weintraub said inspired him to create it, were two ladies known for their signature hats and outsized personalities - Asheville's own Wilma Dykeman, and Marjory Stoneman Douglas.

Dykeman, who died at age 86 in 2006, was a writer, historian and social and environmental activist, who famously fought for the protection of the river flowing through the heart of Asheville in her 1955 history book, "The French Broad." Weintraub shows footage in the film of Dykeman's wit, and determination, when she says including the chapter on the river's severe degradation was not popular with the publisher. But she titled it "Who Killed the French Broad," so people might think it was a murder mystery.

"There is no honesty or courage in denying death and hoping it won't be noticed, won't reach any farther. There is only one respectable course for a free citizen and that is to shoulder his share of the responsibility for the 'killing,' for the pollution," Dykeman wrote. "Because just as the river belongs to no one, it belongs to everyone - and everyone is held accountable for its health and its condition ...

Every city and town, and every industry is responsible for cleaning up the pollution it creates."

While Douglas' name has been tragically linked to the high school in Parkland, Florida, where a former student shot and killed 17 students, she was a well-known, tough as nails journalist and environmentalist, who lived to be 108 when she died in 1998, fighting for her beloved Everglades in South Florida.



Asheville native Wilma Dykeman is one of the "river heroes" featured in the new documentary "Guardians of Our Troubled Waters."



Marjory Stoneman Douglas is one of the "river heroes" highlighted in the new documentary "Guardians of Our Troubled Waters."

Her book, "The Everglades: River of Grass," published in 1947, depicted what many thought of as a worthless swamp that should be drained and developed, as a life-giving ecosystem that deserved protection. In her 80s, she formed the nonprofit Friends of the Everglades.

Weintraub said he doesn't believe the two women ever met, although they shared many similarities, from their hats to their gift of persuasion without preachiness.

Author Robert Morgan appears in the film, along with UNC Asheville history professor Dan Pierce, who said of Wilma Dykeman:

"A big part of her legacy is her ability to inspire, that optimism that says, 'this is terrible what we have done to this river, but we can do better and make it into a place that is the treasure it should be.'"

Other river guardians, such as Jere Brittain and Jill Hodges, are depicted in the film, including early heroes who stood up against the destruction fighting against toxic pollution from factories, rampant draining of wetlands and the damming of tributaries that would have forced thousands of farmers from their ancestral land, Weintraub said, including the protectors of the Pigeon River, the Dead Pigeon River Council, and many others who carry on the fight today as the eyes and ears of our waterways.

Although he has made 30 films, this is Weintraub's sixth feature film as executive director of the Center for Cultural Preservation. While his distinct Brooklyn accent can be deciphered in background narration against the Southerners', he is no novice to the local land and its rivers.

He grew up in cement-encased New York City, but Weintraub said he became a nature nut at age 7, becoming obsessed with animals, especially turtles (he released a sea turtle documentary, "Call of the Ancient Mariner," in 2015). He was also director of the nonprofit Environmental and Conservation Organization in Henderson County from 2007-13 before it merged with Mountaintrue, and he left to work with CCP.



Filmmaker David Weintraub interviews Matthew Tooni, Cherokee musician on the Qualla Boundary for his latest documentary, "Guardians of Our Troubled Waters."

Why the focus on rivers?

Weintraub lived in South Florida for 10 years, well acquainted with Douglas' legacy, and said he has essentially been working on this film for the past 15 years. "I think back to original peoples, the

Cherokee, Catawba and the sacred connection they had to waterways. They were here 13,000 years. When settlers came, it was only three generations later when our rivers have become sewer systems," Weintraub said.

"People get dazzled by these things around rivers, all the festivals in summer, kayaking, fishing, boating ... For a lot of people it was unimaginable that not that long ago, our rivers were stinky, disgusting places that no one would even consider going near."

While legislation like the 1972 Clean Water Act and state regulations have cleaned up our waterways to the point they are now used as drinking water sources and a thriving venue for rafting, kayaking, tubing and fishing, Weintraub fears the pendulum might be swinging too far backward again.

There are still sewage and fuel spills in our rivers, sometimes with pollution so high the rivers are closed by the Health Department, and some weekends the rivers are thick with paddlers and the trash they leave behind.

This is where the future river stewards come into play, such as MountainTrue, Conserving Carolina, Haywood Waterways Association, Friends of the Everglades and Clean Water Expected in East Tennessee, as well as local farmers working to make their operations more sustainable.

"So much of what we take for granted today, whitewater rafting and kayaking, fishing, drinking water and the thriving brewery community

harkens back to those who refused to allow profits to come before human health and the health of river ecosystems," he said.

"These stories are vital

because they remind us about who we are and why our natural resources are critical for our survival and that of our cherished wildlife."