

ARTS & CULTURE

FILM

Talking trees

New film explores storytelling, Native American wisdom and nature's intelligence

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David Weintraub's neighbors aren't happy with him.

Rather than mow his yard every week, he's been letting the grass grow a little longer than usual before buzzing it back, making him the odd lawn out on a street that otherwise abides by country club guidelines.

"Everyone wants to live on what looks like a golf course, and I'm just trying to let the grass grow a little bit so the pollinators can do their thing," he says. "I'm really just giving it a week off and not using chemicals, and it's just amazing. The buttercups and clover are up, and I'm seeing bees and more birds and all kinds of things enjoying that."

Weintraub's ultimate goal is to completely take out the grass and replace it with numerous native plants. He adds that if his back were in better shape, he would have made that landscape transformation by now, regardless of the complaints he'd almost surely hear.

"I just don't see what the problem is in trying to stay connected with the world that you live in — the living world," Weintraub says. "We're not apart from it. And we isolate ourselves when we believe the commercials about having everything pristine. That's just not real."

The Hendersonville incident brings a similar ethos to his work as executive director of the nonprofit Center for Cultural Preservation, as well as his latest film, *Nature's Wisdom Thru Native Eyes*. The feature-length documentary explores the convergence of storytelling, Native American wisdom and nature's intelligence. It premieres Saturday, June 24, at North River Farms in Mills River. Subsequent screenings take place Thursday, June 29, at The Orange Peel in Asheville and Saturday, July 1, at Trinity Presbyterian Church in Hendersonville.

THE LONG VIEW

Nature's Wisdom Thru Native Eyes marks the 50th film that Weintraub has made for the center. His résumé consists of three dozen short films and over a dozen features, covering topics such as the flood of 1918 (Covey Hill or High

Water), Appalachian music (A Great American Tapestry) and the history of moonshining (*The Spirits Still Move Them*). Despite the wide range of topics, a driving force runs through each work.

"My life has always been at the crossroads of natural heritage protection and cultural heritage protection," Weintraub says. "And it wasn't that long ago that those things weren't different concepts. We know that to survive, we had to treat nature in a respectful manner because it was what sustained us."

He adds that each of his films builds on the previous one, and that, particularly with his more recent documentaries, the main takeaways regarding the intelligence of nature have had a powerful cumulative effect. Those insights made him more mindful of the impact his storyteller mother had on him in his youth, sharing folk tales and stories of Indigenous people, including the Cherokee, Zuni and Apache tribes. Weintraub remembers reveling in these narratives, especially those about nature, populated by such entities as "the tree people and the possum people and the frog people."

"When I was a kid, I always thought that these were just wonderful metaphors for the close relationship that Native people had with the living world. But actually, I was wrong. It was far more than that," he says.

"Western culture sees humans at the top of the hierarchy, with everything else — the plants and animals — below," he continues. "But Native people see it totally different. They tell us that since plants and animals were the first to come, they're our teachers on how to live and how to connect with each other. And it's by learning from them that we learn to live a life that is sustainable. And Western science is just starting to catch up with this ancient wisdom."

In his research for *Nature's Wisdom Thru Native Eyes*, Weintraub came across recent studies confirming that trees are connected through a fungal network that allows them to share resources, communicate with each other, distinguish their seeds from others of the same species and even warn other trees of impending predation or disease.

"This resembles a level of intelligence that's far beyond what we've ever dreamed of — but [it's] in folk



IN THEIR ELEMENT: From left, Davy Arch, Cherokee storyteller and mask maker; Lloyd Arneach Sr., Cherokee storyteller; and Robert "Redhawk" Eldridge, Sappony storyteller and educator, discuss their crafts in the new film *Nature's Wisdom Thru Native Eyes*. Photo by David Weintraub

tales and, of course, in Native stories, which we're now beginning to realize are actually true," he says.

Likewise, he notes that Western science has diminished animal intelligence to merely instinct because it differs from human intelligence. Yet, Weintraub points out, many animals demonstrate "an incredible ability to communicate, excellent situational awareness, the use of tools and an ability to comprehend and learn things far beyond what we've given them credit for." Again, he stresses that Native people have been sharing this knowledge for "tens of thousands of years."

In addition to that theme, *Nature's Wisdom Thru Native Eyes* pits the Indigenous tradition of gratitude and reciprocity with the living world against the Western tradition of the divine right to extract and deplete the same world to oblivion. The docu-

mentary emphasizes that people have a choice over which story to heed.

"This film is looking at reconciling what Western science is teaching us, what Native wisdom is teaching us, what nature is teaching us and how storytelling connects all that together to help us hopefully change our approach so that we can heal our broken relationship with the living world," he says.

SUPPORT SYSTEMS

To help illustrate these concepts, Weintraub tapped into the relationships he's built with various Native tribes over the past 15 years. Interviewees in the film include members from six Indigenous groups, including the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians and Florida's Miccosukee Tribe of Indians.

Pettis and Dave Coyte. All offer their insights on the importance of heeding Native wisdom and using it as a means of reconnecting with the living world.

"It was just this incredible tapestry of knowledge that I hadn't seen put together before, and it made me really excited," Weintraub says. "Of course, the hardest thing of all as a filmmaker is knowing how to take 30-40 hours of footage and distilling that down to a 60-minute film because there's just so much stuff."

As for the unused footage, Weintraub notes that he's "an ardent recycler" and aims to make a variety of short films, vignettes and trailers from what doesn't make it into the final cut. But he hopes that what's there tells the story in a positive way, unlike many environmental activism films he's seen.

Complementing the interviews is copious footage of nature that the director lensed in area national parks and South Florida. The experiences offered him much-needed time away from screens, which he believes have created a society unable to take time to slow down and reflect on the world. And yes, he recognizes the irony of a filmmaker issuing such complaints but also notes the power inherent in harnessing modern technology for good.

"Sometimes you have to use the medium that's out there to hopefully get people to then shut that all down and get out and walk in nature, grow a garden, learn what native plants used to grow here and help to foster that," he says, before returning to a familiar topic.

"Don't cut your lawn every week — just be able to take some time, not just walk up a trail and immediately post [a photo of] that on your Facebook or Instagram but just sit there and look at it and enjoy it and have that infuse your body and your soul. Because ultimately, if we work to heal the Earth, then the Earth heals us."

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