



JUST ABOVE THE SURFACE
OF THE EARTH

A FILM BY MARIANNA MILHORAT

DIRECTOR
CINEMATOGRAPHER
EDITOR
SOUND DESIGN
MARIANNA MILHORAT

ORIGINAL MUSIC
SOUND RECORDING
BRIAN KIRKBRIDE
MARIANNA MILHORAT
PAUL DICKINSON
JILLIAN HANSEN-LEWIS

ADDITIONAL CAMERA
ADDITIONAL EDITING
SOUND MIX
ANDREW MAUSERT-MOONEY
FILÉMON BRAULT-ARCHAMBEAULT
BENOÎT DAME



MARIANNAMILHORAT.COM

Just Above the Surface of the Earth / Marianna Marta Milhorat
2024 / 69mins / 1:78 / 4K video / Colour / 5.1

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Synopsis

A poetic portrait of contemporary wildlife conservation, *JUST ABOVE THE SURFACE OF THE EARTH* reflects on empathy, agency, and the role of hope in the midst of a sixth mass extinction. This debut nonfiction feature examines scientists and citizen scientists who conduct surveys of frogs, which serve as an indicator species; study sea stars threatened by disease; track bats whose populations have been decimated by white-nose syndrome; and collect data on insects declining at unprecedented rates. Set primarily at night, the film weaves together observational and lyrical sequences, texts written by authors including W.S. Merwin and Adam Nicolson, and an otherworldly soundscape. *JUST ABOVE THE SURFACE OF THE EARTH* is a visceral, sensory meditation on what it means to live in a broken world.

Logline

A portrait of contemporary wildlife conservation becomes a visceral, sensory meditation on what it means to live in a broken world.

Director's Statement

JUST ABOVE THE SURFACE OF THE EARTH centers on the relationship between humans and animals within the conservation landscape. At the time of research and production, I was living in the Midwestern United States, which has a rich network of citizen science and wildlife monitoring initiatives. During typical wildlife surveys, participants carry out routine but visually striking data collection protocol to assess the health of threatened species. Although the surveys rely on community involvement, they often happen behind-the-scenes, after dark, or when parks and beaches are closed to the general public, rendering them alien to many. As I began field research for the film, what struck me was the experience—these suspended moments of waiting and searching for wildlife to appear, of spending time with a rather patchwork group of people, of submitting oneself to nature's clock—as well as the odd, sometimes absurd visuals that conservation efforts produce. And from this new questions emerged: How can lived, sensory experience renew and inspire commitments to meaningful action? What do we learn from looking at images of modern conversation efforts?

Within the film, I focus on the poetic, experiential, and otherworldly nature of surveys through expository night visuals, structural techniques, and surround sound. I portray human figures as part of their surroundings, often overtaken by natural processes and phenomena or subject to the rhythms and patterns of their nonhuman counterparts—waiting, listening. I combine a painterly focus on the aesthetic qualities of landscape with audiovisual strategies and structural devices to amplify the psychological aspects and affective qualities of landscape, instigate perspective shifts, and encourage active reflection on our surroundings. In doing so, I wish to interrupt anthropocentric hubris to reveal a web of multispecies interconnectivity and mutual affect, reenchant the landscapes of the Anthropocene, and promote an ethic of kinship and care. For me, such an ethic is an urgent and necessary act of resistance against the objectification of the living world, which threatens the very survival of our planet.

I conducted research and production with the participation and assistance of a diverse range of individuals and groups: biologists and citizen scientists from the Calling Frog Survey at the Peggy Notebaert Nature Museum (IL), Illinois Department of Natural Resources (IL), Orland Grassland (IL), Urban Ecology Center (WI), Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources (WI), Kickapoo Valley Reserve (WI), Illinois Bat Conservation Program (IL), Dixon Springs Agricultural Center (IL), Multi-Agency Rocky Intertidal Network at the University of Santa Cruz (CA), Kitsap Beach Naturalists for the Multi-Agency Rocky Intertidal Network (WA), Partnership for the Interdisciplinary Studies of Coastal Oceans (OR), and The Nature Conservancy in Oregon (OR). Shooting took place over two years due to the short time frame that most efforts happen within: Sea star biologists monitor at the lowest tides of the year—usually a few-day window in the summer during the pre-dawn hours; acoustic bat monitors follow river transects, kayaking or canoeing down rivers at night, and require the light of a full moon; frog monitors count calls during frog mating periods and when the temperature and

wind conditions are just right. The film adopts their patient approach and sits with time, observing the monitors as they observe the night.

As the film progressed, I was continually moved by the quiet, humble dedication of the citizen scientists and scientists involved, yet could not help but question the exact utility of their efforts. This led me to reflect on the role—and utility—of empathy and hope in the midst of mass extinction. In post-production, I began incorporating diverse, lyrical texts—from authors including W.S. Merwin, William Golding, Cormac McCarthy, and Leonard Dubkin—as ways to further reflect on related questions. What I hope results is a film that conveys how embodied understandings of the natural world can inspire new forms of empathy and hope needed to not only fuel and sustain meaningful action, but also re-envision the future.

Dialogue List

https://mariannamilhorat.com/jatsote_dialoguelist/

Production and Post-Production

Director, Cinematographer, Editor, Sound Design: Marianna Milhorat
Original Music: Brian Kirkbride
Sound Recording: Marianna Milhorat, Paul Dickinson, Jillian Hansen-Lewis
Additional Camera: Andrew Mausert-Mooney
Assistant Camera: Jillian Hansen-Lewis, Kasandra Skistad
Assistant Editing and Additional Editing: Filémon Brault-Archambeault
Re-Recording Mixer: Benoît Dame
Colourist: Hamed Aleali
Title Design: Dan Popa
Additional Music: Alvin Lucier, Chihei Hatakeyama

Participation

Orland Grassland for the Calling Frog Survey at the Peggy Notebaert Nature Museum (IL)
Multi-Agency Rocky Intertidal Network at the University of Santa Cruz (CA)
Partnership for the Interdisciplinary Studies of Coastal Oceans (OR)
The Nature Conservancy in Oregon (OR)
Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife (OR)
Illinois Bat Conservation Program (IL)
Illinois Department of Natural Resources (IL)
Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources (WI)
Kickapoo Valley Reserve (WI)
Kitsap Beach Naturalists for the Multi-Agency Rocky Intertidal Network (WA)
Urban Ecology Center (WI)

Adapted Text Excerpts

Julianne Lutz Warren, *Remembering Nature As Hope*
Cormac McCarthy, *The Road*
W.S. Merwin, *For A Coming Extinction*
William Golding, *In My Ark*
Donald Culross Peattie, *The Book Of Hours*
Leonard Dubkin, *Squirrels In The Attic*
Adam Nicolson, *The Sea Is Not Made Of Water: Life Between The Tides*
Louis MacNeice, *Wolves*

Original Haiku

Marnie Baker

Narration

Wendy Hayden, Marnie Baker, Marianna Milhorat, Jacob Mahfoud, Sara Lefort-Depras, Nori Wei, Abdou Mbowe, Adam Mbowe, Jela Dela Peña, Natasha Hernández Canett, Anthony Jean-Louis, Anthony Vicente-Pereira, Wojciech Jakubiec

Director's Biography

Marianna Milhorat is an American-Canadian filmmaker and artist based in Montréal. She has presented her work at festivals and galleries worldwide, including the International Film Festival Rotterdam, Whitechapel Gallery, Ann Arbor Film Festival, Curtocircuíto International Film Festival, Kassel Dokfest, Videonale, and the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago. Her work has been supported by the Canada Council for the Arts, the Conseil des arts et des lettres du Québec, and Finlandia Foundation National.

Milhorat's films examine ecology through human and nonhuman relations. Taking extended approaches to nonfiction film, her work pushes form and aesthetic to provoke new ways of seeing and thinking about the current geologic era and to create a more fluid, evolving picture of nature. She is Assistant Professor at the Mel Hoppenheim School of Cinema at Concordia University in Montréal.

Director's Filmography

As Director:

Just Above the Surface of the Earth, 4K, 69 minutes, 5.1 sound, 2024

Sky Room, 16mm to DV found footage, sound, 2017

Landscaper Rap, HD, 2 minutes, sound, 2013

Une Terre familière, HD, 19 minutes, sound, 2012

Sing as We Go, 16mm, 6 minutes, sound, 2011

L'Internationale, 16mm to DV, 10 minutes, color and b&w, sound, 2010

this is not an anchor, this boat is not an anchor, 16mm to HD, 11 minutes, color and b&w, sound, 2007

As Editor:

Roy's World: Barry Gifford's Chicago [dir. Rob Christopher], HD, 75 minutes, sound

Support

We acknowledge the support of the Canada Council for the Arts (canadacouncil.ca)

We thank the Conseil des arts et des lettres du Québec for its financial support (calq.gouv.qc.ca).

We acknowledge the support of Concordia University.

In partnership with the Forest Preserves of Cook County.