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Foreign Television
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www.der.org

Educational
Documentary Educational Resources
www.der.org
Basic Information

FLOCK OF DODOS is the first feature documentary (85 mins.) to present both sides of the evolution vs. intelligent design controversy that recently appeared on the covers of Time and Newsweek. Filmmaker and evolutionary biologist Dr. Randy Olson chronicles the ongoing brouhaha between condescending scientists and extremist intelligent designers, a movement that evolutionists refer to as “creationism in a cheap tuxedo”. Along the way, Olson finds time to poke equal fun at both sides of the debate, and at the same time delve head first into the seriousness of the issue that is at the heart of our country’s current political division.

Running time: 85 min.
Format: High Definition Video (HDcam)

Distributors
Home Video
New Video
www.newvideo.com

N. American Television
Showtime Networks Inc.
www.sho.com

Foreign Television
Documentary Educational Resources
www.der.org

Educational
Documentary Educational Resources
www.der.org

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Website
http://www.flockofdodos.com

Release Dates
Theatrical: February 6, 2007
Cable TV/DVD: July 2007
Educational DVD: Available Now at www.der.org
Synopsis

_Flock of Dodos: The Evolution-Intelligent Design Circus_ is the first feature length documentary (85 mins) to explore the Darwin vs. intelligent design controversy. Filmmaker/evolutionary ecologist/surfer Dr. Randy Olson pokes fun at both sides of this debate and eventually uses his own mother, Muffy Moose, to make sense out of the issue that both Time and Newsweek recently featured on their covers. He travels to his home state of Kansas, the top battle ground for evolution, where he sits down with his mother’s neighbor, John Calvert, one of the top lawyers backing intelligent design, for a confrontation that leaves audiences squirming in their seats.

“It’s a reflection of the current culture wars,” Olson says. “It’s the age old split between science and religion, with a few new twists.” Labeled by early audiences as “a polite Michael Moore,” Olson challenges top advocates for intelligent design (including Dr. Michael Behe, author of _Darwin’s Black Box_). With a sense of scientific inquiry, he tries to understand a movement that so misfired last year in Dover, PA., a Republican-Bush appointee judge labeled local efforts to teach intelligent design as, “breathtaking inanity.”

School districts are now grappling with the new efforts to introduce intelligent design, the movement evolutionists prefer to call, “creationism in a cheap tuxedo.” However, Olson, in a surprising turn given his evolution background, also paints an unflattering portrait of his fellow scientists. Pulling together eight evolutionists for a night of poker, he reveals them to be arrogant, condescending, and self-certain until they eventually turn on themselves in a spat that sounds like... a flock of dodos.

From the opening statistic (a pie chart in the form of an apple pie) the film provides equal amounts of laughter, guffaws, and eventually enough serious thought to prompt hours of discussion. And unlike recent political rants, the film maintains an atmosphere of fairness, allowing audiences from both sides to watch it together.
A NOTE FROM THE WRITER/DIRECTOR

Greetings Evolutionists, Intelligent Designers, and People Who Don't See What the Fuss is About …

Who is "The Flock of Dodos"? Is it the people who are so certain they see the hand of a designer in nature they’re willing to defy the Constitution? Or is it the evolutionists, allowing their profession to be turned into a debate they feel doesn't exist?

I've always viewed evolution as an obvious fact. So it came as a surprise in 1999 when I began hearing of the Kansas School Board attempting to teach creationism (religious explanations for the creation of life) alongside evolution in science class.

Last year when I heard my mother was neighbors with the top lawyer for the new Intelligent Design movement, I knew the time had come for a film.

I want to thank all the people who have bravely taken part in this project in the spirit of improved communication. I made it clear from the outset my background in evolution, but at the same time, I've also tried to understand the certainty of their opinions.

Hopefully this film will shed a little light on the issue, especially for the broader public who have seen the controversy on the covers of magazines, but still think intelligent design relates to furniture or jewelry.

Randy Olson

Randy Olson, Writer/Director
Flock of Dodos is the brainchild of writer/director Randy Olson, whose background as a scientist-turned-filmmaker gives him the respect needed to wax poetic on the state of science in America, and at the same time gives him the creative freedom to make this film entertaining. . . not just another boring PBS-style documentary.

Dr. Olson got his Ph.D. from Harvard University, studying under the tutelage of such great minds as Stephen Jay Gould. He went on to build an impressive career as a marine biologist/evolutionary ecologist, until the mid 90’s when decided to leave that life behind and move to Los Angeles, pursuing a career as a Hollywood director at University of Southern California’s prestigious Graduate School of Cinema/Television.

From there, Dr. Olson wrote and directed a comedy/musical short film called, “You Ruined My Career”, which won multiple awards, including best short film at the Telluride Film Festival. All the awards got him noticed as a filmmaker and led him to the great synthesis of his career, combining science and comedy. Along with colleagues from his marine biology days, Dr. Olson created Shifting Baselines (www.shiftingbaselines.org), an environmental ocean media project that communicates the slow degradation of our oceans with comedic short-films and PSA’s. One Shifting Baselines video, the Ocean Symphony PSA, starred Jack Black, Henry Winkler, Madeleine Stowe, Tom Arnold, and others, and was played around the world on local and national television, as well as at Times Square in New York.

Flock of Dodos, however, would need a little more inspiration to get going than what Dr. Olson could muster. That inspiration came in the form of Olson’s eccentric octogenarian mother, Muffy Moose. Muffy started sending her son newspaper clippings about their home state of Kansas, which was going through major turmoil as the conservative Republican majority was having its way with the Kansas school system. Science was being discredited and alternatives to science were being pushed into the education system. Those alternatives to science turned out to be the beginnings of a new movement in America: “intelligent design”. And why was Muffy Moose so adamant about the dangers of this new issue of intelligent design? Well, for starters, her next-door neighbor is the top lawyer for intelligent design, John Calvert.

But Dr. Olson’s real breakthrough was not that he saw the flaws that have given intelligent design the designation of “creationism in a cheap tuxedo”, but also that he saw flaws in the way scientists communicate with the general public. Why is it that half of Americans don’t believe in evolution? Is it America’s fault? Or is there something awry with the very scientific community that Dr. Olson has been a part of for the last 30 years? This is the central question of the film, and one that finds not just one dodo, but an entire “Flock of Dodos”.

The Real Story behind “Flock of Dodos”
Filmaker's Bio

DR. RANDY OLSON

Randy Olson lived his whole life as a marine biologist, but got so frustrated with boring documentary films about his profession that he quit being a scientist and went to film school to see if he could make something better of himself. After spending most of the 1980’s earning his Ph.D. (Harvard University, 1984) and working in Australia studying the Great Barrier Reef, he began making award-winning humorous short films about sea creatures, such as his music video about the sex life of barnacles, “Barnacles Tell No Lies.” In 1994 he resigned from his tenured professorship at the University of New Hampshire to attend film school at the University of Southern California. His student film at USC, a 20 minute musical comedy, You Ruined My Career, was selected for the “Filmmakers of Tomorrow,” showcase at the Telluride Film Festival and chosen as one of the Top 100 Student Films in the history of USC Cinema School. After film school he began combining his comic filmmaking skills and his marine biology background to create the Shifting Baselines Ocean Media Project (www.shiftingbaselines.org) for which he wrote and directed short films and commercials with Jack Black, Dustin Hoffman, Henry Winkler, Tom Arnold, and the Groundlings Improv Comedy Theater. His newest production, the feature documentary, Flock of Dodos: the evolution-intelligent design circus draws on both his evolutionary biology background and his Kansas upbringing as he visits the controversy raging over evolution in his home state.

Filmography:

Prairie Starfish Short Films (27 film festival awards), 1990–1994
“You Ruined My Career,” writer/director USC musical comedy short film, winner of 8 film festival awards, “Future Filmmakers of Tomorrow” showcase at Telluride Film Festival, 1996
“Rhinos,” producer, director/co-writer, low budget feature film, premiere at 1998 Austin Film Festival.
“The Ocean Symphony P.S.A.,” writer/director, starring Jack Black, Henry Winkler, Madeleine Stowe, Tom Arnold, Sharon Lawrence, Josh Lucas aired over 15,000 times including on CNN Headline News, MTV, and VH1.
“The Rotten Jellyfish Awards,” co-writer/director with Jennifer Coolidge (American Pie, Best in Show) and Daniele Gaither (Groundlings)
“The Groundlings Ocean Comedy Films,” co-writer/director with the cast of The Groundlings Improv Comedy Theater
“The Tiny Fish P.S.A.,” writer/director, starring Cedric Yarbrough (Comedy Central’s “Reno 911!”) currently airing on Outdoor Life Network.
“Shifting Baselines in the Surf,” producer, writer/director, public service announcement with music by Jack Johnson
Producer’s Bio

Ty Carlisle

A graduate of the University of Southern California School for Visual Anthropology, Ty was trained to venture into the harshest of environments in order to make films. He needed all that and more to venture into the evolution–intelligent design debate. Ty was born and raised in rural Illinois, but now lives and works in Los Angeles.

Ty doubles as the Director of the Shifting Baselines Ocean Media Project. www.shiftingbaselines.org

Filmography:

Flock of Dodo’s Cast

Head Dodo

Muffy (“Moose”) Olson: As the mother of Randy Olson and nearly 40 year resident of Lake Quivira, Kansas, her credentials for the evolution issue consist of … nothing. But she reads all the letters to the editor in the Kansas City Star and has plenty of opinions, and she was the starting point for this film when she informed her son that her neighbor, John Calvert, had become a major spokesman for intelligent design.

National Intelligent Designers

Dr. Michael Behe: Biochemist, Lehigh University (Ph.D. Pennsylvania Univ., 1978) and senior fellow of the Discovery Institute. The author of the foundation intelligent design text, “Darwin’s Black Box,” (1998), Behe's current research involves delineation of design and natural selection in protein structures. In addition to publishing over 35 articles in refereed biochemical journals, he has also written editorial features in Boston Review, American Spectator, and The New York Times.

Dr. John Angus Campbell: Dr. Campbell (Ph.D., Rhetoric, University of Pittsburgh) is a Professor and Director of Graduate Studies in the Department of Communication at the University of Memphis and past President of the American Association for the Rhetoric of Science and Technology. Dr. Campbell has written numerous award winning scholarly papers. Most recently (2003) he was the recipient of the Oleg Zinam Award for best essay in the Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies.

Dr. Jonathan Wells: Jonathan Wells (Ph.D., Molecular and Cell Biology, University of California at Berkeley, Ph.D., Religious Studies, Yale) has worked as a postdoctoral research biologist at the University of California at Berkeley and the supervisor of a medical laboratory in Fairfield, California. His book Icons of Evolution is regarded as one of the most important Intelligent Design texts. In addition he has taught biology at California State University in Hayward.
**National Evolutionists**

**Dr. David Bottjer:** President, The Paleontological Society. He received an M.A. from the State University of New York at Binghamton and his Ph.D. from Indiana University. After leaving Indiana, David spent a post-doctoral year with the United States Geological Survey at the Smithsonian Institution. He began as assistant professor at the University of Southern California in 1979, where he has been ever since.

**Dr. Michael Donoghue:** Director, Yale Peabody Museum of Natural History. B.S., Michigan State University, Botany and Plant Pathology (high honor, 1976) Ph.D., Harvard University, Biology (1982). Dr. Donoghue is a professor of Ecology and Evolutionary Biology at Yale.

**Dr. James Hanken:** Embryologist and Herpetologist, Harvard University. Ph.D. Univ. of California, Berkeley. He has been the Director of the Museum of Comparative Zoology at Harvard University since 2002. He also serves as the Museum's curator in herpetology and is professor of biology in Harvard's Department of Organismic and Evolutionary Biology.

**Dr. Karel Liem:** Henry Bryant Bigelow Professor of Ichthyology, Harvard University, and Curator of Ichthyology, Harvard’s Museum of Comparative Zoology. He is also the recipient of both the Hoopes Prize for Excellence in Teaching and the Phi Beta Kappa Teaching Award.

**Dr. Donal Manahan:** Embryologist, University of Southern California. He received his Ph.D. at the University of Wales, U.K. and his B.A. at The University of Dublin-Trinity College. His specific area of research is the environmental physiology of development of marine invertebrates, especially the larval stages.

**Dr. Jane Pickering:** Curator, Yale Peabody Museum of Natural History. Pickering holds an MA degree in Natural Sciences from the University of Cambridge and an MS in Museum Studies from the University of Leicester. She is a graduate from the 2001 Getty Leadership Institute's Museum Management Institute.

**Kansas School Board Members**
**Sue Gamble (Moderate Republican):** Elected in 2000 to represent the far eastern Kansas school district (District 2). She is a social worker and practicing realtor.

**Kathy Martin (Conservative Republican):** Elected in 2004 to represent the northern Kansas school district (District 6). Kathy is a retired elementary teacher.

**Connie Morris (Conservative Republican):** Elected in 2002 to represent the western Kansas school district (District 5). Connie is a former elementary teacher. She is up for reelection in November 2006.

**Bill Wagnon (Democrat):** A member of the school board since 1996, Bill was reelected for his third term in 2004, but announced he will be retiring from the board when his term ends in 2008. Bill is a professor of history at Washburn University.

**DOVER, PA. SCHOOL BOARD MEMBERS**

**Pastor Edward Rowand:** Elected to the Board in December, 2004, he is an energetic fan of Intelligent Design.

**Jeff and Carol Brown:** The only pro-evolution members of the Dover School Board, they quit in 2004 to protest the adoption of intelligent design into the curriculum.

**Kansas Intelligent Designers**
**John Calvert:** John is a lawyer and the Managing Director of Intelligent Design Network, Inc. Mr. Calvert is a member of the American Bar Association and Missouri Bar Association and has been admitted to practice in Federal and state courts.

**Dr. William Harris:** Ph.D. University of Minnesota (Nutritional Biochemistry), B.S. Hanover College (Chemistry). Co-founder of the Intelligent Design Network. Dr. Harris currently holds an endowed Chair in Metabolism and Vascular Biology and is a Professor of Medicine, U.M.K.C. and is the Director of a Kansas City lipoprotein research laboratory.

**Kansas Evolutionists**

**Dr. Steve Case:** Besides holding the chair of the Writing Committee for the Kansas School Board, Steven B. Case is CEO and developer of Pathfinder Science L.L.C. His academic appointment is as a Research Assistant Professor at the University of Kansas, with the Center for Research on Learning and as an Assistant Director of the Center for Science Education.

**Dr. Daphne Fautin:** Daphne received her Ph.D. in zoology University of California, Berkeley (1972) and her B.S. in biology from Beloit College, Beloit, Wisconsin (1966). Currently Daphne is the curator of the KU Natural History Museum. In addition, Daphne is a professor of both entomology and ecology at KU.

**Other Kansas Cast Members**

**Jack Cashill:** Conservative author, film producer, columnist and magazine editor, Jack’s website is [www.cashill.com](http://www.cashill.com). He is the producer of “Triumph of Design and the Demise of Darwin,” which is the most authoritative documentary to date on the subject of intelligent design.

**John L. Burch:** John L. Burch is a biotech business analyst in Lawrence, Kansas, and has been a follower and participant in the Kansas State School Board hearings.

**Members of the Dodos Poker Game**
Thomas Givnish, Plant Evolutionist, Ph.D.
Princeton (1976), Henry Allan Gleason
Professor of Botany, University of
Wisconsin

Steven Orzack, Population Geneticist,
Ph.D. Harvard (1984), Research Scientist,
Fresh Pond Research Institute, Cambridge,
MA.

Mark Skinner, Evolutionary Plant
Ecologist, Ph.D. Harvard (1986),
Botanist, National Plant Data Center,
Baton Rouge, LA.

Mark Patterson, Evolutionary Marine
Ecologist, Ph.D. Harvard (1985), Professor
of Marine Science, Virginia Institute of
Marine Science

Bob Muller, Computer Scientist, Ph.D.
Boston University (1985), Professor of
Computer Science, Boston College

Ron Etter, Evolutionary Marine
Ecologist, Ph.D. Harvard (1985), Professor
of Biology of Univ. Mass., Boston

Randy Olson, Evolutionary Marine Ecologist,
(1997)

Geoff Trussell, Evolutionary Marine
Ecologist, Ph.D. William and Mary (1998),
Assistant Professor of Biology,
Northeastern University

Production Cast
Ed Leydecker: Former fraternity pledge brother of Randy Olson at K.U. (at the recently evicted Sigma Nu chapter), Ed is now the co-owner of Wide Awake Films (www.wideawakefilms.com) producing films and commercials.

Randy Olson: Filmmaker/Evolutionary Ecologist, Ph.D. Harvard (1984), spent most of the 1980’s in Australia, Professor of Marine Biology, University of New Hampshire (1988-1994), then in 1994, just after receiving tenure, jumped ship and ran away to Hollywood where he went to film school at USC (94-97) and now runs the Shifting Baselines Ocean Media Project, a partnership between Hollywood and ocean conservation, based at Raleigh Studios.

Ty Carlisle: Producer, rabbitologist, chick magnet. Ty drank a lot at the University of Southern California’s semi-prestigious school of Visual Anthropology. An environmental and political filmmaker, Ty is interested in a dead-end career trying to save the world.

Erik Alden: FORR (Friend of Rabbi the Rabbit). He had no idea his rabbit ate its own poo and is shocked to this day. He has been quoted as saying, “Holy ****”.

Rabbi the Rabbit: “Rabbi” is known for eating his poo. He also enjoys carrots, celery, and long walks in Erik’s backyard. His dislikes include coyotes, Nazis, and intelligent design.
CREW

Writer/Director: Randy Olson
Executive Producers: Steven Miller, Julie Janata
Producer: Ty Carlisle
Co-Producers: Thomas Chan, Ed Leydecker, Peter Logreco
Director of Animation: Tom Sito
Editor: Pascal Leister
Original Music: Amotz Plessner
Camera: Shane Seley
Sound Editor: Thomas Chan
Sound Mix: Tennyson Sebastian III
Music Supervisor: Robin Urdang
Graphics: Gary Reisman
Colorist: Laura Jans
Legal Counsel: Robyn Roth
Errors and Omissions Counsel: Robert Woods
Accounting: Ed Skinner
Stock Footage Researcher: Tuan Nguyen
Associate Producer: Steve Polyi
Media Coordinator: Ryan Mitchell
Head Dodo: Muffy Moose
Not Pictured In Movie (but should have been): Mike Olson

The Discovery Institute and the Smithsonian Institution declined to appear in this film.

Our Sincere Thanks
To The Following Organizations:
Yale Peabody Museum of Natural History
National Center for Science Education
Harvard Museum of Natural History
York Daily Record Newspaper
Kansas City Star Newspaper
Intelligent Design Network
What the media is saying:

If you like "Wordplay," you'll flip for ‘Flock of Dodos.’

New York Times

Intelligently designed for popular appeal, docu seems poised for instant success.

Variety

The result is "Flock of Dodos: The Evolution-Intelligent Design Circus," a humorous and entertaining documentary...

Reuters

Olson deserves accolades for his spirited defense of evolution. He has made an entertaining film that will gently prod its viewers in the direction of the truth. For the sake of sound thinking, this is an important accomplishment.

National Review

...it’s downright funny and imaginative.

Cinema Blend

Randy Olson's "Flock of Dodos: The Evolution-Intelligent Design Circus" is akin to Morgan Spurlock's wildly successful "Super Size Me" in terms of its audience...

Beliefnet.com

...a welcome surprise that Flock of Dodos: The Evolution-Intelligent Design Circus is so utterly engaging.

Cinematical
Tribeca 2005

A Flock of Dodos: The Evolutionary Intelligent Design Circus

(Documentary)


With: Randy Olson, Muffy Olsen, Dr. Michael Behe, Sue Gamble, Kathy Martin, John Calvert, Jack Callin, Dr. David Botter, Dr. Steve Case.

By RONNIE SCHEIB

Scientist turned filmmaker Randy Olson deploys a wide range of humorous teaching aids in "A Flock of Dodos" to fabricate an illustrated wake-up call to the scientific community to abandon its obsessive search for truth and start inventing catchy slogans before it loses control of education to the religious right. A Michael Moore-type populist without the anger or the edge, Olson's message, as befits an environmentalist, is not to change but to adapt. Intelligently designed for popular appeal, docu seems poised for instant success.

Like Moore's debut "Roger and Me," Olson's jocular first-person voice identifies him as a homely boy of the very community at the heart of the debate; the beleaguered state of Kansas. Here, notorious school board battles raged, first pitting science-based evolution against faith-based Creationism, and now pitting it against the reconfigured notion of Intelligent Design.

Olson's eccentric, redheaded 82-year-old mother Muffy Olsen, aka Muffy Mouse (who figures prominently here), first triggered Olson's interest by sending him local newspaper clippings.
Olson begins by giving the floor to proponents of intelligent design, including Dr. Michael Behe, a leading scientific spokesperson. John Calvert, a lawyer and director of the TWC, Van Camp and Jack Callin, a conservative author, columnist and film producer. He finds their arguments less than convincing but finds them articulate and likable.

Olson discovers the opposite to be true with the evolutionists. Their ideas may be rock-solid but the scientists themselves come off as arrogant, elitist and tongue-tied. He fears they will go the way of the dodo.

Pics then moves into the political sphere, interviewing members of the Kansas School Board. Here, too, he judges the right-wingers hardliners to be friendlier and more moderate, serious-minded colleagues.

But the same personality-versus-truth dichotomy, which Olson previously set up with some success in the section involving the scientists, seems forced in the case of the school board members. Similarly, his unfailing joviality and visual puns start to pall after a while.

Yet perhaps it is Olson’s generosity toward the analysts of intelligent design that grants him the aesthetic license to question their integrity. The big fish turns out to be the Discovery Institute, a well-funded West Coast organization with an annual budget of $5 million, added by SRC, the PR firm responsible for the “Swift Boat VeIs for Truth” smear campaign against presidential hopeful John Kerry.

Tom Sito’s animated dodos are fun and never overstated. Lending by Shane Seeley and other tech credits are pro.

Variety is advisory to present the most thorough review database. To report inaccuracies in review credits, please click here. We do not currently list below-the-line credits, although we hope to include them in the future. Please note we may not respond to every suggestion. Your assistance is appreciated.

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Variety readers discuss topics as varied as U's "United 93," JJ Abrams becoming the next Gene Roddenberry and "American Idol." Join the discussion.
Eager to Tell the Stories of Science, a Biologist Evolves

By CORNELIA DEAN
Published: April 11, 2006

If a Harvard-trained evolutionary biologist makes a film about creationism’s cousin, intelligent design, and calls it "Flock of Dodos," you know who he’s talking about, right?

Maybe not.

The biologist, Randy Olson, accepts that there is no credible scientific challenge to the theory of evolution as an explanation for the diversity and complexity of life on earth. He agrees that intelligent design’s embrace of a supernatural "agent" puts it outside the realm of science.

But when he watches the advocates of intelligent design at work, he sees pleasant people who speak plainly, convincing and with humor. When scientists talk about evolution, they can be dour, pompous and disagreeable, even with one another. His film challenges them to get off their collective high horse and make their case to ordinary people with — if they can muster it — a smile.

Otherwise, he suggests, they will end up in the collective cultural backwash just like the dodo.

The 84-minute film, which will be shown on April 30 at the Tribeca Film Festival, focuses on Kansas, where state school authorities have embraced intelligent design, last year going so far as to define "science" as including the supernatural. Dr. Olson, who went to high school and college in the state, kept up with the debate through newspaper clippings from his mother, Muffy Olson, who lives in Lake Quivira, Kan., a suburb of Kansas City, and is one of the stars of the movie.
"Flock of Dodos" does not attack intelligent design. Dr. Olson just lets its adherents talk. His view, expressed as a Latin motto at the start of the film, is "res ipsa loquitur" — the thing speaks for itself.

But he also lets the scientists talk. Asked to come up with a slogan to match intelligent design's "teach the controversy," they fumble. Asked to make the case for evolution, they get into arguments or discuss it in terms so fancy they require on-screen definitions. ("I did not realize 'mendacity' was a 50-cent word," Dr. Olson said. "That's what academic life has done to me.")

Will scientists accept his film's message? If they regard him as a fellow scientist, maybe yes. But Dr. Olson is no ordinary scientist — in fact, some might say he is no longer a scientist at all.

Until about 10 years ago, his science career was more or less unremarkable. He comes from an Army family (he was born in 1955 in Heidelberg, where his father was stationed) and lived in Germany, Hawaii and Virginia until 1967, when his father retired from the military and the family moved to Kansas.

He studied at the University of Kansas and the University of Washington, and earned a doctorate in evolutionary biology at Harvard in 1984.

He had postdoctoral fellowships at the Australian Institute of Marine Science and Harbor Branch Oceanographic Institution in Florida before accepting a position at the University of New Hampshire, where he received tenure in 1999. His specialty was the study of larvae of marine organisms.

"His work on larval dispersal on coral reefs is still considered some of the best work in that field," said Jeremy Jackson, a geologist and coral expert at the Scripps Institution of Oceanography.

But even as Dr. Olson was winning academic prizes, his life was melting down. His marriage ended, and then his parents' marriage ended.

Marine biology — which had taken him beneath the ice of Antarctica, to the bottom of the sea in submersible vehicles, and on forays lasting for months to the coral reefs of Australia and the Caribbean — had lost its savor. Diving, once a joy, had become mere routine. He realized, he recalled, "about the only thing I really enjoy doing is telling stories."

This realization began to dawn in 1989, he said, when he was hired as an emergency replacement expert on a Harvard-sponsored alumni cruise to Scandinavia. He took a microscope with him, hooked it up to television screens in the ship's lounge and began showing the passengers what the region's plankton were up to.

"Everyone would be fixated on the video screen," he said. "I began to realize the power of moving images."
Back in New Hampshire, he started making films. First they were shorts, like "Barnacles Tell No Lies," which is still used in college courses, and "Lobstahs," which features a biologist dressed in a lobster outfit and a song. Dr. Olson’s first, that goes “lobsters may be spineless but they taste the best to me.” That led to a longer film about lobstermen, "Salt of the Earth," which was shown on public television in Maine.

Eventually, Dr. Olson said, "I realized if I wanted to get really serious I had to go to film school."

But abandoning a tenured faculty position at a major university was no small step. He recalled that on his first visit to the University of Southern California, where he ultimately enrolled, he hid when he saw a New Hampshire colleague on campus. When he finally began taking courses, he took a leave of absence from his teaching post, in case the venture turned into a disaster.

Instead, it was a success. Even though he entered film school at 38, far older than his 49 fellow students, he was one of four chosen to produce a student film, and it was shown at the Telluride Film Festival.

After graduation, he made videos for the Rutgers University ocean science program and for the Shifting Baselines Ocean Media Project, which he and Dr. Jackson organized. The Web site for the project, shiftingbaselines.org, features short films, a blog, links to news articles and studies. Its aim is to convey serious information about environmental issues, but always with humor.

He also made his first film on science communication per se — "Talking Science," a guide for researchers. (One who volunteered to be filmed giving a presentation discovered to his dismay that he said "um" on average every seven seconds, and spent 87 percent of his time staring at his own slides, ignoring his audience.)

"Flock of Dodos" opened earlier this year in Kansas, where the reception was just what a filmmaker might dream of: cheers, jeers, questions and discussion from a highly engaged audience. Since then it has been shown at several college campuses, where it has drawn enthusiastic crowds.

So Dr. Olson hopes the film has commercial potential. That would certainly be useful. Though many in science bemoan their collective inability to get their messages across to the public, big grant-makers have yet to embrace Dr. Olson’s approach.
"I get hundreds of inquiries from students and graduate students wanting to do what I am doing, to get into this interface between science and the media," Dr. Olson said. "There just isn’t any financial support for it. The science world does not understand media, does not support it. They don’t see the need for innovation."

Dr. Jackson said some scientists, even those interested in communicating science, "squirm" at Dr. Olson’s irreverent approach. Others wonder whether his wry humor will translate to a wider audience.

Dr. Olson says, "We’ll find out at Tribeca."

Meanwhile, he lives in Hollywood, financing his films with money from his family, sympathetic researchers and off-and-on teaching gigs — he was for years a part-time member of the biology faculty at U.S.C.

"I have health insurance, but just barely," he said. "I think it runs out next month." But he says he does not regret his decision to abandon the security of the academy for the uncertainty of filmmaking. "I have a much greater fear of boredom than I do of poverty," he said.