SIZZLE: A Global Warming Comedy

A movie you’ll feel passionate about (even if you don’t know why)

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Basic Information

Running time
85 min.

Production Company
Prairie Starfish Productions
Located at Raleigh Studios
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Synopsis

"Sizzle" is a novel blend of three genres – mockumentary, documentary, and reality. Scientist-turned-filmmaker Dr. Randy Olson, is a fan of Al Gore's global warming movie, but asks, "Where are all the scientists?" He sets out to make his own documentary about global warming featuring scientists, but the only backers he can find are a fabulously flaky couple who top their list of people they want him to interview with Tom Cruise (not a scientist but a Scientologist – "most people don't know the difference") and Kate Winslett ("she does a good British accent which makes her very believable"). They also give him a cameraman who is a global warming skeptic and argues with the climate scientists they interview. Through a series of interviews and an eventual road trip to New Orleans the movie delves to new depths in an effort to understand the confusion around global warming, which may be the most serious problem to ever confront humanity. Or not.
A Note from the Director

What do you do when everyone feels they've heard enough of an important subject? This is the problem with two of the greatest issues facing the United States today – global warming, and the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. The former may be the greatest future threat for Americans, the latter is arguably the saddest chapter in the history of the United States. Yet the general public feels saturated on both subjects. Part of this is due to the excellent films by Al Gore on global warming ("An Inconvenient Truth") and Spike Lee on Hurricane Katrina ("When the Levees Broke"). Both films explored the issues in depth, but global warming is an on-going problem and the full impact of Hurricane Katrina still has not been grasped by the American public.

"Sizzle" is a movie that takes account of this situation and attempts to explore these two topics through something the public can never get enough of – entertainment. To lead the viewer back into this heavy, serious material we use a humorous mockumentary storyline as a device. Extra amusement is tossed in through the "reality" premise of a cameraman who is a global warming skeptic and genuinely interrupts the interviews with the experts. And eventually the film weaves in documentary elements in a manner to put the two issues into context.

The film also presents a new approach to the political side of global warming. Al Gore, with his film, chose to ignore the existence of global warming "skeptics," and instead focused on the "consensus" of scientists who feel global warming is a crisis. But on June 6, 2008 the U.S. Senate rejected the largest current piece of legislation intended to address global warming. The bill did not even get a majority of votes, much less the sixty votes needed to pass (and head to the House before needing to be signed by the President). It was a significant failure for global warming politics.
"Sizzle" takes a different approach by introducing six prominent "skeptics" of global warming. They do not come off particularly well, and what is revealed is a great deal of disagreement among themselves over whether global warming is even happening, if it's caused by humans, and whether humans can do anything to stop it. The Al Gore strategy of ignoring the opposition is similar to the failed strategy of John Kerry in ignoring the Swift Boat Veterans who attacked him. "Sizzle" suggests the time has come to take on the opposition directly, show the public they do not have a case, and seek a new pathway in getting the United States to provide world leadership in this crucial issue.

Randy Olson, Director
Filmmaker's Bio

Dr. Randy Olson

Randy Olson used to tell stories as a scientist. Today he tells stories as a filmmaker. For fifteen years (1978-1993) he was a marine biologist. After spending a year living on an island off Australia, a month diving under the ice in Antarctica, a week living in an undersea habitat 60 feet down, and a day hanging out with the late Captain Jacques Cousteau, he resigned his tenured professorship of marine biology at the University of New Hampshire and headed to U.S.C. Cinema School. His student film, the musical comedy, "You Ruined My Career," was selected for the Filmmakers of Tomorrow showcase at the Telluride Film Festival.

After film school, he teamed up with one of his heroes from the marine biology world, Dr. Jeremy Jackson of Scripps Institution of Oceanography. Together they produced the short film, "Rediagnosing the Oceans," in which they recommended considering ailing coastal ecosystems as being like medical patients for which you need to know the "medical history," before making a diagnosis. This partnership lead to the Shifting Baselines Ocean Media Project which they founded along with veteran Hollywood movie producer Gale Anne Hurd, and fellow marine biologist Dr. Steven Miller. For Shifting Baselines Randy Olson continues to write and direct short films and commercials which have included such comic talents as Jack Black, Dustin Hoffman, Henry Winkler, Tom Arnold, and the Groundlings Improv Comedy Theater. He has also produced Flash videos for Surfrider Foundation (2005) and the Puget Sound Partnership (2008).

In 2006, he directed the feature documentary, Flock of Dodos: the Evolution-Intelligent Design Circus. The film drew on both his
evolutionary biology background and his Kansas upbringing as he visited the controversy raging over evolution in his home state. Flock of Dodos premiered at the Tribeca Film Festival in New York, in April 2006, and since then has played at film festivals all over the U.S. and abroad. The film is currently in rotation on Showtime TV in the US and available on DVD (educational – Documentary Educational Resources, home - New Video).

His newest production, the feature mockumentary/reality/documentary Sizzle: A Global Warming Comedy, follows in the same tradition of Flock of Dodos, mixing irreverent humor with scientific discussion. As the title implies, the film explores the ongoing debate surrounding global warming as well as visiting New Orleans on the two year anniversary of Hurricane Katrina. Sizzle will premiere on July 19, 2008 at the Outfest Gay and Lesbian Film Festival in Hollywood, California, then will have it’s east coast premiere a week later on July 26 at the Woods Hole Film Festival. The movie stars comic actors Mitch Silpa, Brian Clark, and Alex Thomas. Music score is provided by legendary bluegrass musician John McEuen.
THE CAST OF SIZZLE (by order of appearance in the movie)

RANDY CLASON is a scientist turned filmmaker who long ago lost his mind and ran away with the circus when he resigned his former profession to become the writer/director of everything from a hamacce sex music video.
"Barnacles Tell No Lies," to the feature documentary, "Flock of Dodos: the evolution-intelligent design circus" (Tribeca 2006, Showtimes). He is the co-founder of The Shifting Baselines Ocean Media Project and tries to spend as much time in the ocean surfing as possible.

NICHIL SILPA is a comic actor and 8 year veteran of the famed "Improv Comedy Theater" in Hollywood. He has written and starred in a series of hugely popular Youtube videos including "Banana Conversation," Officer Pick-U, and one of the most-seen video series on YouTube in history (over 27 million views for his "Jikmo" episode), "THE MADE MOTHER marginal." He has also had recurring roles on "Desperate Housewives," and "Glimore Girls," and guest starred on "Brothers and Sisters," "The Office," "Madam," "Malcolm in the Middle," and "Justified." He recently co-executive produced, wrote, and starred in "Just Posted" for FOX.

BRIAN CLARK likes to be wet. He's a swimmer and likes to hold his breath for a long time. He has gone to the hospital for this. His ocean infatuations lead him to his first collaboration with Randy Clason, a short film role as the world's oldest aquarium fish (a.k.a. "Reagan Boy"). He is now cast in the Jim Henson company's "Rupun Up," an importer puppet show for the NBC, performed on dry land (unfortunately). Continuing the ocean theme, he's just shot a commercial where he scuba dives with fake sharks and real clams. Yummm.

VIN CARLSON is a graduate of UC's school of Visual Anthropology and was trained to make films in the highest of environments. He needed all that training and more to enter into the global warming debate. He is the producer of 3 feature films to date, including "Flock of Dodos," which was seen on Showtime, and over 50 environmental shorts and nationally-broadcast psas, for the Shifting Baselines Ocean Media Project.

IFEXI NJUKE is a writer/director/producer of feature films and music videos that is known to his friends as "The Nigerian Spielberg." He speaks his native language Igbo and is producer/director of the platinum DVD selling, Alex Thomas' "TV Special," "Straight Clownin," for Showtime. He has directed over 20 music videos. He also wrote and co-directed the music video, "Work Out Fish," with Kanye West and has worked with such Hollywood royalty as Wil Smith, Jamie Foxx, and music producer ornithologist Dr. Dre. Having worked for MTV and Telepictures, he is currently developing original content and has recently teamed up with Winfrey Publishing in developing an dogs series drama.

MUTTAH MOORE CLASON is the mother of Randy Clason and star of his previous production, "Flock of Dodos." She has her own blog, the MUTTAH MOORE MEMO, which she discusses things of absolutely no importance as her preoccupation with space aliens, her father's war hero, her business for nerves, and in her official reminiscences to a musical number, "Springtime for Hitler" and Germany," in Mel Brooks' "The Producers." She will be 88 in November!

ALEX JORDAN takes his way into Hollywood as an assistant to actors/photographer Bruce Farrow on the hit grassroots show "In Living Color" where he made Keenan Ivory Wayans and brother Demos laugh so much they encouraged him to do stand up. After an interview on The Jamie Foxx Show he appeared in a number of movie including, "Playboy Club," "Peanuts Going That Game," and "Just Married." He also lends his voice to the animated series, "The Family Guy." Known some as the Michael Jordan of "wumrap," Alex made history when Showtime acquired his stand-up comedy special, "Straight Clownin" making it the first independently-shot comedy special to be picked up by a major network. The productions features appearances by Will Smith, Jamie Foxx, Tye Burks, Shag, and Dr. Dre. He is currently a producer on rapper Snoop Dogg's reality show, "Father Hood," on the E! Channel.

NABASSE ASHLEY (telephone voice) comes from an insidious pit (according to the woman opposite her on "Big Love" in her demo reel). She is a massively talented actress who was in Randy Clason's acting class way back when and has appeared in a multitude of tv and film roles (notably her role on "er" which was some sort of coot so many times so far.

PRODUCTION CREW

FABIO DODD (Graeme) is an underground DJ who can be found living the dream while filming television shows, music videos, docs and features. His ode to Burnie Man existence, One Minute to Burn is still a can't miss festival favorite for all burners. And his no-budget pic for the Ikana Crown Posse is as outrageous as it is hilarious. Fabio's photographic goals are to amaze and entertain.
KEITH WEICKLER (Sound) is the sound mixer of everything from the Keith Emerson sex music video, "Prelude to a Hope," to the Summer swirl single "Kokomo," by the Beach Boys. He has worked on mixing boards all around the world, but it took Randy Olson and Paul Andersen to get him out on the ocean to ride a surfboard.

DAN MAJOR (Second Camera) is an aspiring DP, who works as a camera operator/AC while studying the craft. He is currently working for Flight33 productions on the history channel show "the universe". Dan claims he had more fun working on Nixie than any other production in his past.

JOHN MCBRIDE (Composer) is like way more famous and talented than anybody in this movie and we're not really sure why he worked with us except that he's a really nice guy. He was a founding member of The Nitty Gritty Dirt Band in the 60s, won a Grammy, nominated for an Emmy, was pretty much the mastermind behind the platinum-selling Will the Circle Be Unbroken triple album which is one of the most important music recordings in American music history, plus he's lifelong band partners with his old high school buddy Steve Martin. The guy is amazing, makes incredible music, and has his own XM radio show, "Acoustic Traveller." He's an American legend (and we're not).

The Enchanted Sea Cottage, Our Favorite Location
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, convincingly and with humor. When scientists he knows 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 backlash 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 stumble. 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.
Filmmaker Randy Olson takes on the environment in ‘Sizzle: A Global Warming Comedy’

Randy Olson is a Kansas City kid and KU graduate who, somewhat unlikely for a landlocked landlubber, became a marine biologist.

More unlikely still, a few years back he declared himself a filmmaker and began making tongues in cheeks documentaries about science.

In 2006 his satirical “Flock of Dodos,” about the evolution/intelligent design debate in Kansas, played at New York’s Tribeca Film Festival.

Now Olson is putting the finishing touches on his latest effort, “Sizzle: A Global Warming Comedy,” which, like “Dodos,” mixes irreverent humor with scientific discussion. It will premiere next month at the Woods Hole Film Festival in Massachusetts and the Outfest gay and lesbian film festival in Los Angeles.

Olson is a fan of Al Gore’s “An Inconvenient Truth” but says he was let down that scientists didn’t get a chance to express themselves in that Oscar-winning documentary.

“Sizzle,” he says, “is a blend of mockumentary, documentary and reality” that follows Olson as he attempts to make a scientifically based movie about global warming.

But his principal financial backers are a flaky couple who demand that he interview Tom Cruise (“Not a scientist but a Scientologist — most people don’t know the difference…”) and Kate Winslet (“She does a good British accent, which makes her very believable.”). In the film even Olson’s crew gives him a hard time — the cameraman is a global warming skeptic who picks fights with the scientists they’re interviewing.

The movie stars comic actors Mitch Silga, Brian Clark and Alex Thomas; the musical score is by bluegrass legend John McEuen (the Nitty Gritty Dirt Band).
Sizzle: A Global Warming Comedy to Heat Up Woods Hole Film Festival

Marine biologist-turned filmmaker Dr. Randy Olson uses laughter as a vehicle for change.

By Julia Cox

For Dr. Randy Olson, a Harvard-educated marine biologist who gave up his life in academia to begin a career in filmmaking, it's always been about storytelling. Even after transitioning from his tenured professorship at the University of New Hampshire to becoming a film student at the University of Southern California to establishing himself as a director, this common theme has endured. "As a scientist, I went into the field, gathered information, then analyzed it in the lab to try to tell a story of what's going on in nature," Olson explains. "In that way, creative storytelling and science share a lot of the same dynamics."

Filmmakers can experience the marriage of Olson's two passions at the Woods Hole Film Festival: Olson's second documentary, Sizzle: A Global Warming Comedy, will screen as the opening night film on Saturday, July 26th. The humor and satire of the film, blended with the opinions of scientists on both sides of the global warming discussion, showcase Olson's theory that good, funny entertainment can be a vehicle for action. At Woods Hole, panel discussions will follow the screening of the film.

As a marine biologist and professor, Olson was frustrated with the bland breed of documentaries in the scientific field, and the storytelling aspects of the hard sciences were beginning to feel a little less than satisfying. He began experimenting as a filmmaker, creating a couple of short films, including Barnacles Tell No Lies (1991), a music video about the sex life of barnacles, that is still popular in biology classrooms.

Ultimately, dabbling turned into a career change when Olson enrolled in film school. He laugh, "I lost my mind, ran away and joined the circus." He's never looked back.

At USC, Olson proved his talent by creating a picture that was selected as one of the Top 100 Student Films in the history of USC Cinema School. Following his film education, Olson juggled part-time teaching gigs as well as teaming up with fellow marine biologist Dr. Jeremy Jackson of the Scripps University School of Oceanography; together, the two scientists made environmentally-focused short films and founded the Shifting Baselines Ocean Media Project, a compilation of films and commercials that raise awareness about the toll pollution takes on our environment, while maintaining the sense of humor characteristic of Olson's work.
His first feature documentary, *Flock of Dodos: The Evolution-Intelligent Design Circus* (2006) utilized the formula that entertainment spawns interest and awareness, tackling the highly controversial question of the teaching of intelligent design in Kansas schools. After premiering at the Tribeca Film Festival, it ran the festival loop and is now in rotation on Showtime. In *Dodos*, Olson demonstrates his devotion to involving real experts, scientists on both sides of the debate, in the discussion. He also proves the importance of communication, especially in terms of inspiring the masses about environmental concerns: "Communication is the weak link in the world of science. Many scientists can't communicate well, and work becomes isolated," Olson notes, referencing the very theme that was explored in *Dodos*, and remerges in *Sizzle*. "Moving images, films, are one of the most powerful ways to reach people," he says.

"*Sizzle* is really a combination of three genres: mockumentary, documentary and reality," comments Olson, explaining that the film’s primary purpose is to entertain and engage, not necessarily to inform or educate. He laughs, "It’s not particularly profound and deep, but it’s fun. The panels will provide all the information; they will serve as the outlet for discussion and action." Two such forums will take place in Woods Hole: one will discuss global warming and one will explore the role of film in environmental awareness.

The concept for the film grew out of Olson’s reaction to Al Gore’s Oscar-winning global warming documentary, *An Inconvenient Truth*. "I liked it," Olson insists, "but I wondered: where are all the scientists? There was virtually no emphasis on global warming specialists." Olson set out to make a documentary of his own on the topic, vowing to include the opinions of scientific authorities.

This catalyst also serves as the premise for *Sizzle*. Olson plays himself, a filmmaker struggling to find sponsorship and a crew for his documentary. Here, reality and mockumentary overlap: "In the film, no one in Hollywood will back my documentary, and the only producers I can land are these two crazy guys." The couple, played by Mitch Silpa (of YouTube’s famed *David Blaine Steel Magic*) and Brian Clark, are not terribly knowledgeable about global warming itself, but are tireless in their pursuit of the one thing every documentary needs: celebrities.

In terms of possible interviewees, Tom Cruise is at the top of their list. "But, he’s not a scientist," Olson insists. "He’s a Scientologist," Silpa and Clark counter, "and most people don’t know the difference." The team is also stuck with a cameraman who is a global warming skeptic; he’s prone to voicing his virulent opinions during Olson’s interviews with scientists ("I’m not trying to interrupt or anything, but I think it’s a scam," he says). Clearly, *Sizzle* is a "complete departure from Al Gore’s strategy," which Olson identifies as the film’s most important element.
Mingled with the outrageous, largely improvised humor are the experts and their opinions about the global warming issue. "Hardly anyone is free from some kind of joking," Olson admits, but that does not detract from the seriousness of the film's topic. Olson and his producers are finally advised to seek the human face of global warming, so they take a road trip to New Orleans. Years after hurricane Katrina ravaged the homes and lives of Louisiana residents, very little has changed. The environmental catastrophe that shattered New Orleans still plagues the region. The film links this reality with the lack of substantial legislation, and the United States' failure to emerge as a leader on global warming issues, with actual footage of US Representatives' discussions. "The US, the wealthiest nation in the world, has had immense trouble dealing with this. Legislation is in shambles. The US has made a mess out of global warming," says Olson softly. "and that's the real tragedy." Even in the context of laughter and entertainment, the intensity of Olson's message shines through.

The world premiere of Sizzle: A Global Warming Documentary will take place at the Outfest Gay and Lesbian Film Festival in Hollywood on July 19th. Its East Coast "academic" premiere will kick off the Woods Hole Film Festival, where Olson will be in attendance. For more information about Sizzle or to view the trailer, visit www.sizzlemovie.com. For scheduling details, see www.woodsholefilmfestival.org.

Julia Cox is student of creative writing, screenwriting and political science at Boston University.
Reel Funny
An interview with climate mockumentary filmmaker Randy Olson

BY ERIK HOFFNER
10 Jul 2008

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Randy Olson became a filmmaker after fifteen years as a marine biologist, so the perspective he brings to the craft is rooted in science -- but blended with his own irreverent humor. His hilarious new film on global warming is a perfect example.

After quitting his university job in 1993, Olson went to film school and teamed up with one of his heroes, renowned marine ecologist Jeremy Jackson of the Scripps Institution of Oceanography. Together they produced the short film Redesigning the Oceans, and their partnership led to the founding of the Shifting Baselines Ocean Media Project. Shifting Baselines creates short films and commercials on ocean conservation starring the likes of Jack Black, Dustin Hoffman, and the Groundlings Improv Comedy Theater. It also produces a truly indispensable blog.

In 2006, Randy's inventive documentary Flak of Fades: the Evolution: Intelligent Design Circus drew on his biology background and his Kansas upbringing as he exposed the anarchic battle over that state's effort to open the teaching of evolution to interpretation. It premiered at Tribeca and has more recently been shown on Showtime.

His new film is Sizzle: A Global Warming Comedy, a mockumentary in which he plays a climate scientist trying to make a hard-hitting documentary on global warming and climate disasters like Katrina. Throughout the film -- which weaves in interviews with actual scientists, skeptics, and activists -- he is dug by an earnest if clueless production team and a disrespecting film crew peopled with delinquents. It's An Inconvenient Truth meets Waiting for Guffman, and the result is funny, informative, and also gut-wrenching: when the characters visit New Orleans on the two-year anniversary of Hurricane Katrina, the true cost of inaction on climate is painted with such stark overtones that the film takes on an important new weight. It's a narrative that seems antithetical to comedy, but it works brilliantly, finding a balance and gravity that completes the film.

Sizzle, which also stars comic actors Mitch Silpa, Brian Clark, and Alex Thomas, will premiere on July 19 in Hollywood, then has its East Coast premiere a week later at the Woods Hole Film Festival in eastern Massachusetts. Grist caught up with Olson to talk about his new project, the power of narrative, and the urgent need to improve the communication of climate science.
Q. Why make a humorous film about global warming?

A. We've had the serious, heavy films -- too many of them at this point. Ask any film distributor -- they've seen more than enough somber, depressing documentaries detailing the ways in which we have damaged the planet. The problem is, film is more of an entertainment medium than an educational medium. While academics watch movies in hopes that they will be educated, most of the mass audience goes to films to hear a good story and be entertained. Failing to accept that limitation of the medium is equal to driving a square peg in a round hole. You can do it, but the results usually aren't very satisfying.

Q. But didn't Al Gore already convince the world that we have a problem?

A. Al Gore made a truly great movie -- unquestionably the most important piece of environmental media ever created. Spike Lee did the same thing for Hurricane Katrina with his excellent four-hour series [on HBO], "When the Levees Broke." Both were very effective in the short term in calling attention to these issues. But what about the long term? Both movies have produced a distinct feeling of "medicine" -- people feel like, "I took my dose of that, I've done my part, please, no more."

Do we need more media on these two topics? Absolutely. The country jumped to the edge on June 6, when the SOUTHERN SENSE WARMING RIS -- failing to even score a majority of votes, much less the 60 votes needed to pass it. Hurricane Katrina is quite simply the darkest chapter in the entire history of the United States, and we need to make sure the experience is not forgotten. It played out an O'Neill. There was no uncertainty about whether Americans were suffering and whether injustice was occurring. It was punished by a president who didn't show up until five days after. In 1985 when the levee failed, President Lyndon Johnson was there within a day. Katrina needs to be hung as heavily as possible over the head of George W. Bush for the rest of time. It is representative of his style of leadership.

Q. How is the mockumentary format conducive to talking about global warming?

A. The first challenge in filmmaking is to tell a story. The issue is so important that if it takes me making an idiot of myself to help create a narrative structure through which to engage the issue, then so be it. The vast majority of documentaries fail to tell much of a story. They are overly constrained by the information and desire for accuracy. The result is that they aren't just entertaining and storytelling, producing media that ends up being unwatchably accurate.

Q. In the film within your film, you interview real-life global-warming skeptics. Some of them are such characters that I couldn't decide if they were actors or not. But why give them air time?

A. You must be referring to Dr. George Chilingarian, Professor of Petroleum Engineering at [the University of Southern California], aka "Dr. Chill." It's usually the first comment people make about the movie: "Dude, that guy's not real -- no way." As for giving skeptics air time, it's about storytelling. This is where scientists and environmentalists, with their emphasis on information and failure to understand basic storytelling, don't realize that their opponents can actually be valuable communicators.

A good story needs a source of conflict. And yes, I'm sorry to inform Al Gore and the environmental community of this, but the time has come to accept that there are two sides to the issue of global warming. Gore tried to ignore the opposition in hopes they would go away. With the failure of the Senate bill, the time has come to at least acknowledge there is an organized resistance. No other American film to date has presented this opposing faction. It's not to say the other side is the least bit right, only to admit they exist.
Q. Your last film explored this issue of how scientists are notoriously ineffective at communicating their findings to the public. Is that the case with climate science, too?

A. We see the same patterns in Sizzle, but with this film I haven't been as confrontational with the science community. Hock of Dodos implied that science and science communicators are inept, i.e., dodos. Sizzle suggests that when it comes to global warming, the scientists are mostly just caught in the crossfire between the skeptics and the environmentalists.

The way I see it, at one end of the spectrum we have the skeptics saying there is no reason to worry about global warming. At the other end we have environmentalists saying it is the end of the world. Caught in the middle are the scientists, just trying to tell the world what their data indicate. As soon as a scientist publishes a major climate-change paper the two groups descend on it and use it to support their agendas. I do believe, in the end, the only solution to this is to improve the overall communication of scientific facts to the public. There is an endless amount of work to be done toward this end.

Q. The guys who play your camera crew are very believable characters, unlike the real-life communications director of a major environmental group you interview. What did you make of her inability to express her group's position on global warming on film?

A. There is a cluelessness about mass communication when it comes to the major environmental organizations. They seem to be unable to present their voice beyond the same old goody-goody recyclers who are ready to "take action" whenever their favorite NGO says to. There's nothing wrong with those folks -- it's just that they are only a small slice of the mass audience. There are ways to reach a broader demographic, but it requires an understanding of the mind-set and attitudes of the average non-environmentalist. And that is who [fictional cameraman] Marion Jenkins is meant to represent: the average guy who doesn't have very deep thoughts or opinions on global warming; he just thinks it all sounds like a bunch of hot air.

Q. So where will those average Joes go to see Sizzle?

A. For the next few months they will have to see it at film festivals and special screening events at universities and museums listed on our website. It's a very small movie, paid for out of my own pocket from the skimpy revenue generated by Rock of Dodos. I don't have the finance to distribute it myself so we will be seeking a theatrical distributor. For Dodos it took us a year to secure the Showtime and home DVD deals. Sizzle has no major celebrities, so most distributors will take a while to get interested.

Q. How did the recent New Orleans screening go?

A. On June 20 we pulled together a group at Mickey Beas Bar in the Lower Ninth Ward, including the folks who are in the movie. As I began my introduction, one woman realized I was about to show documentary footage of Hurricane Katrina and got up and left, crying. She said her mother died in the flooding and she doesn't care to hear anything more about it. As the movie got to the New Orleans segment and Brenda McCree, one of the Lower Ninth Ward residents, tells her painful story of driving past the thousands of people standing on a highway overpass near the Convention Center, you could hear people around the bar weeping.

There is a tragic sadness in New Orleans that hasn't gone away. I really hope this film, among other things, can reach people, both in their guts and in their hearts, with the sheer emotional intensity of the New Orleans material. As Naomi Oreskes says in the film: "This climate change stuff isn't just about polar bears in the Arctic. It's about things happening right here in our own country."

Erik Hefner is the coordinator of the Orion Grassroots Network. Based in Massachusetts, he is also a freelance photographer and a frequent contributor to Gristmill.
An Interview with Randy Olson, Maker of Sizzle

Randy Olson is a Harvard ('84) trained marine biologist with field experience on the Great Barrier Reef, in the Antarctic, the US Virgin Islands, and elsewhere. He even spent a little time with Jacques Cousteau.

But an extensive career in marine biology was not to be.

Randy started to change careers around 1990, with the production of a number of short films including "Barnacles Tell No Lies" (which I've placed at the bottom of this post for your enjoyment). In 1994 he literally jumped ship, walking away from a tenured professorship in New Hampshire, and went to USC to study film. With various collaborators, Olson made a series of award winning films primarily about the oceans and their plight.

In 2006, Olson directed Flock of Dodos: the Evolution-Intelligent Design Circus (currently showing on Showtime and available on DVD). Dodos is the first major production of any kind ... in film and in print ... to take a truly even look at the personalities and politics of the Intelligent Design movement in relation to Evolutionary Biology. While there was never a doubt throughout this film that Evolutionary Biology is the real deal (and Intelligent Design is nothing more than renamed creationism) the fact that the movie poked fun at individuals on both sides won Olson both new friends and strange looks (and the occasional cold shoulder) from old allies.

After Dodo's tour around the country, I started to get to know Randy as we have discussed the problem of communicating science to the general public in new and more effective ways. Some of you will know Randy as a 'member of the framing camp' ... and in that case you may think of me as one of the 'anti framers.' The former makes sense because of Randy's work with with science communication, and the latter makes sense because of my extensive ranting about framing on my old blog and here on scienceblogs.com.
But in truth, Randy Olson and I have yet to disagree significantly about anything in the area of communicating science. I've come to respect his approach, his attitude, and his talent a great deal. So, it was a pleasure for me to watch an early version of this soon to be released mockumentary film, *Sizzle*, and to interview him about that movie.

**Laden:** In *Flock of Dodos*, you depicted the two sides of the Evolution/Creationism debate as having their own special ways of being... well, dodos. But in *Sizzle*, the documentary maker (you) is the dodo. Is that how you see the world?

**Olson:** I'm definitely the dodo. Long ago there was a brilliant comedy group called Firesign Theatre who made an album titled, "We're All Bozos on This Bus." I think I would update that with "we're all dodos in this world." The age of polyvalence is over, there are no true know-it-alls, so we should all begin by accepting we're less than perfect communicators, then see how we can improve.

Looking at myself in Nebra is fairly shocking. I'm a dork, and I've studied acting. I've spent fourteen years living in Hollywood, trying my best to be hip and cool, and after all that, I'm still the same scientist I was back at the start. Which comes out in the scene when my crew members are making fun of my uptight air. That's not staged. It's really what they thought. And it was incredibly funny to see that scene, a month after our trip to D.C. since I wasn't in the room as they were filming it.

I think the voice of a scientist gets pretty much solidified when you do a Ph.D. - it's a developmental thing, there's no going back after that. Only figuring out what you're stuck with and trying work within the constraints.

**Laden:** Is *Sizzle* an indictment, or suggestion, that documentary films should be made differently?

**Olson:** It's somewhat of a plea for better storytelling and more innovation in science documentaries. In *Dodos* I pulled together a poker game expecting a quiet night of gentlemanly discussion. What I got was a very entertaining spat between two academics which became the most powerful element of the film. It was basically a slice of reality television - like an episode of "Big Brother." I suddenly saw, first hand, the potential power of reality programming. Then I saw "Borat," which was a brilliant synthesis of reality and narrative structure. Which led me to the simple idea of, "what if you had a crewman who disagreed with the almighty director on the subject matter?"

In terms of storytelling, the movie offers up a highly contrived somewhat silly story, but we've already seen in our last meetings, it makes the material more accessible to audiences that have no interest in the subject matter. That's what storytelling can do for you.
Laden: Why is this film funny? I mean, why did you make it a comedy? Isn't global warming serious business?

Olson: Malcolm X made popular the phrase, "by any means necessary." My feeling is that global warming and Hurricane Katrina are two issues that are so important they need to continue to be examined broadly by any means that can possibly work. Al Gore did a great job of tossing global warming in front of the American public, and Spike Lee did a heroic job of documenting the immediate aftermath of Katrina. But those sorts of efforts should be followed by an array of other communicators, exploring other ways to reach different demographics. Sizzle is a somewhat experimental film in that regard. It is intentionally not like either of those two films simply because they have already done a good job with that approach. Furthermore, when all else fails in reaching people on a subject, a little bit of humor (if it works) is always a viable option. The only question is whether it works (yeeeks).

Laden: There are a lot of aspects of climate change that you do not cover. You ignore carbon sinks. You do not discuss the Atlantic Conveyor and the role of ocean currents in general. There is not a single mention of Hadley Cell or the Inter Tropical Convergence Zone. What's up with that?

Olson: To paraphrase James Carville's statement, "it's the communication, stupid." These attacks on science, whether it's evolution, global warming, or modern medicine, are not about science. They are about communication dynamics. We have people who know how to point to entire textbooks of science, say that everything in the book is wrong, and much of the public has a hard time disagreeing. In my interview with Mark Morano (spokesman for Senator James Inhofe), who is an incredibly impressive and aggressive spokesman for the skeptics, he takes off on a rant about how every pessimistic environmental prediction of the seventies turned out to be wrong. But he includes the oceans in his examples, and when I stop him to say, "Wait a minute, the oceans aren't doing very well," he answers, "well, at least they're not dead." These are communications dynamics we're talking about — when folks know how to pitch their story forcefully and quickly enough that it's hard to argue with what they say, and they end up being more convincing than their opponent.

There was a debate in New York City last year where the global warming skeptics trotted out six foot ten Hollywood mega-player Michael Crichton who cleaned the floor with the opposition. One of the scientists on the opposing team told me it simply wasn't a fair fight — the amount of star power that guy brought into the room overwhelmed any set of data that could be presented. This is what communication is about — substance and style — BOTH are important.

Laden: Was there ever a point in time, while making this film, that you considered getting a celebrity? Is the search for the film's producers for a "star" a little bit of a reflection of reality?
Olson: We tried to interview Anna Coulier (too busy), Ifeanyi and Alex thought they could get Snoop to do a cameo (too stoned), we asked Richard Simmons (who is from New Orleans) to make an appearance at the end (no reply), and I spent a couple months trading a fascinating series of emails with Michael O'Keefe, but in the end he passed.

But so what. It doesn't bother me. I'm not sure any celebrity would want to be in a movie that makes fun of celebrities as we do. And more wonderfully, in an example of life imitating our art, one festival didn't even look at the movie, but said they would screen it at their festival if... we could provide a major celebrity to introduce it. I just love that tidbit. Celebrity dynamics are so much fun.

Laden: Did the experts you were interviewing know that your crew members were going to do what they did during the interviews? Were the interviewees in on it, or did you just surprise them Candid Camera style?

Olson: No comment.

Laden: How close is Sizzle's film maker character, whom I have come to think of as "Hapless Randy," to the real Randy Olson? Or shouldn't you care?

Plenty of comment. I was very hapless nearly twenty years ago when I first started making trips to Hollywood and pitching ideas. The motto of the U.S.C. Cinema School is, "Reality Ends Here." As a scientist, it's very difficult to make peace with that slogan. For scientists, reality is the be all and end all. But for storytelling, which is the essence of good filmmaking, it's like a frivolous add-on. When I headed off to film school at U.S.C. I thought everyone would be fascinated to hear my real world stories from my career as a marine biologist. But after a while, you come to realize that if your stories don't include celebrities or space aliens or miracles... they're kind of dwarfed by the stuff that Hollywood people work with every day. Which doesn't mean it's impossible to communicate it; it only means it's very challenging. Which makes it that much more interesting.

Laden: No film is complete without its outtakes, in fact, of all the out takes I've ever watched (I'm kind of connoisseur of outtakes) those from Dodos were among the most spectacular, meaningful, and impressive. When is your outtake reel coming out? What can we expect?

Olson: I've already told Marc Morano he needs to be thankful I didn't use everything from our interview. We have a two shot of him looking us with his finger wagging right in front of my face. He caught himself in the middle of it and said, "Please don't use that." We didn't, but it's one of several things that will probably make up another, "Pulled Punches" reel as I did for Dodos.
Laden: OK, I have three final questions for you. Yes or no answer, please. 1) Do you think the earth has warmed over the last 100 years? Do you think humans have contributed significantly to that warming? and 3) do you think there is anything humans can do about it?

Olson: Not fair. Where's Marion when I need him.

But seriously, of course my answer is yes to all three. The earth has warmed, and I think one of the most important elements in Sizzle is the graphic that summarizes the views of the six skeptics which shows very clearly how all-over-the-place they are when it comes to these simple questions. (The answer is of course yes to all three for the global warming folks).

And yes, of course humans have contributed significantly to the warming. As to whether humans can do anything about it, for me personally, the single most distressing thing I've read on the subject was Tom Friedman's excellent editorial in the NY Times about visiting Dalian (China) and Doha (Qatar). This one sentence from him sort of says it all for the time being, "Hey, I'm really glad you switched to long-lasting compact fluorescent light bulbs in your house. But the growth in Doha and Dalian ate all your energy savings for breakfast."

Laden: OK, well, that's all I've got. Thanks for the interview, Randy!

Olson: Right, no problem, any time.

Laden: Good. Cheers, see you around.

Olson: OK, bye.

Laden: Later

Olson: Later, dude.
No one could accuse Randy Olson of shying away from risks. This PhD marine biologist gave up a tenured professorship at the University of New Hampshire in 1994 to move to Los Angeles, enroll in film school and become a filmmaker.

Olson's last film, "Flock of Dodos," unleashed his quirky brand of humor to look at the differences between scientists trying to explain evolution and the forceful advocates of intelligent design. Now his focus has shifted to global warming. Olson mixes a mockumentary storyline, comic actors and a bit of raw emotion around the impact of Hurricane Katrina to address a topic that, as he puts it, "has already reached saturation for the general public."

The West Coast premier of Sizzle comes at 7 p.m., Saturday, July 19, at the Fairfax Theater in Hollywood as part of Outfest: The Los Angeles Gay and Lesbian Film Festival.

"We intentionally submitted the first finished cut to this gay and lesbian film festival to make the point that the film is for broader audiences — more than just scientists and environmentalists," Olson said. "The film is about our society in general and how we're going to deal with climate change in a fair and compassionate manner."

Nancy Knowlton, a leading marine biologist at the Smithsonian Institution, said she got an early peek and gave it a thumbs up. "It is excellent," Knowlton said, "with its bizarre mix of off the wall comedy and dark reality — its split personality perfectly captured in its opening at the Gay and Lesbian film fest in L.A., followed by the Woods Hole Film Festival." That East Coast premier will occur July 26, as the opening night film at the Woods Hole Oceanographic Institute in Woods Hole, Mass.

— Kenneth R. Weiss