Title | Manatee Lagoon: Yesterday and Today
Nationality of Film | Mexico
Submitted by
Name | Eileen Smith-Cavros
Affiliation | Nova Southeastern University
Role in the Film | Researcher / Producer / Director

People Involved in the Film
Director | Eileen Smith-Cavros and Guadalupe Almanza
Camera | Eileen Smith-Cavros
Sound | Itzel Alvarez
Editor | Itzel Alvarez
Producer | Eileen Smith-Cavros

Synopsis

Film Summary
Laguna Manatí: Ayer y Hoy (Manatee Lagoon: Yesterday and Today) tells a story of change, loss, and perseverance in the words of the people whose story it is. For two years, an interdisciplinary group of sociologists, biologists, and anthropologists traveled several times, including two trips with undergraduate students, to a rural village in the state of Veracruz, Mexico. The village was surrounded by Laguna Manatí (Manatee Lagoon) and the Olmec archaeological site, El Manati. The primary purpose was not to “make a film” — it was to interview elderly campesinos, rural farmers, and fishermen about their past experiences hunting the Antillean manatee in a place called Laguna Manatí. The manatee are now extirpated in the lagoon, which is reportedly drier throughout much of the year than in recent memory. Species such as fish and turtles that were once common in the lagoon have been depleted. A combination of factors, most related to human activity, economics, and available technology, seem to have altered the lagoon ecosystem and the nearby wildlife. The lives of the campesinos have also been changed, as they describe in their own poignant voices. This film is both an ethnographic record for the villagers and their families and an exploration of how humans change, interact with, and persevere in their natural environments.

Theoretical, conceptual framework/perspective that influenced the making of this film
We approached this film from interdisciplinary standpoints using perspectives in sociology, anthropology and biology. Overall, however, the film was informed by a conflict approach that examined various levels of inequality and how they affect humans, their culture, and their natural surroundings. Inequality from economic, environmental, and social perspectives influences the following: the way in which people use natural resources, have or do not have access to technology, deal with land use issues, and simply make a day-to-day living. Conflicting needs, objectives, and priorities influenced the issues we examined in our research and are evident in the film. Conflict brings change - and the film shows the degradation of an ecosystem and associated changes in the lives of campesinos. At the same time, conflict can reveal and illuminate possibility - as we believe the concept of environmental regret has the potential to do here. "Environmental regret" is our term for the realization and acknowledgement of environmental loss - and it provides room for the possibility of reflection, decision, and positive environmental change. The resilience of the people who inhabit Manatee Lagoon remains unarguable. The future of Manatee Lagoon (and the future of other imperiled ecosystems globally) remains unwritten for now.
**Methodology that influenced your making of this film**

The research our team performed was interdisciplinary. Our team consisted of anthropologists/sociologists (our student Sylvia duluc-Silva and me), marine mammals biologists (Ed and our student Christi Ledon) and two archaeologists from INAH (Maria del Carmen Rodriguez and Ponciano Ortiz). Our published scholarship (citation below) on the research was primarily from social science perspectives but could not have been done without integrating all of the aforementioned disciplines/elements. Somehow, to Ed and I the article was never the end product of the research project, however. It didn’t seem like enough. So before Ed’s untimely passing we decided to create a documentary to allow the campesinos to speak for themselves about their rich lives, their altered ecosystem and the profound changes to both as well as their persevering spirit and happiness in spite of challenges. Our goal in this was not to “make a film” (because none of us are filmmakers) but to give voice to the project participants, to share their stories in their own words (and language) and to give the campesinos this record of their lives and the changes in it and the joys in it to share with their families if they choose. While academic research with participants is common, giving back to participants in meaningful ways can be challenging and it is what we have tried to achieve here. Please forgive the shaky footage, the poor lighting, and the technical flaws instead we hope you will listen to the voices and the story. While these events happened in Mexico, the ecosystem is similar to our own Florida Everglades, and the story resonates in a world of environmental and social changes where inequality and access to resources and protection of resources are consistently contested. Copies of the documentary, enough to share with all families in the village, were sent to our friends and participants in Mexico in May of 2014. Laguna Manati: Ayer y Hoy is dedicated to Dr. Edward O. Keith.

**Main ethnographic and/or social scientific "findings" or insights that you intend your film to convey/present**

The findings of our research were multi-faceted. We described for the first time the hunting and human uses of manatees in this part of Veracruz from anthropological perspectives including their food and medicinal uses as well as myths surrounding them. We found that while manatees were the largest and most charismatic animal in the ecosystem we studied, many of the smaller animals (like fish and turtles) were seen as more primary to the subsistence lifestyle of participants. However, we found a nostalgia for the manatee and what it meant to the people as a symbol of resource changes in the lagoon. Our participants were aware of negative changes to the natural resources, many connecting them to actions and over-exploitation by themselves and/or neighbors and there was a sense of loss and nostalgia for the lifestyle that was diminished. This was not a simple case of people using too many resources. It was connected to economic changes like the move from a subsistence and barter system to a system that required money - with few opportunities to earn it and an increasing privatization and regulation of land and water combined with the encroachment of other activities like larger-scale farming/ranching. In addition, we demonstrated how changes in the natural ecosystem and in people's perception of quality of life and family were intimately connected. Finally, we believe that the recognition of environmental loss and what we called the ensuing environmental regret may provide a path to environmental preservation and conservation that can enhance the ecosystem and the human experience.

**Key scholarly references**


http://dti.inah.gob.mx/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=1048&Itemid=150


