

Film

An ill wind

Silent Snow

By Jan van den Berg and
Pipaluk Knudsen-Ostermann
2011, 71 min, Netherlands
English subtitles

For more information see <http://www.silentsnow.org>

Pipaluk Knudsen-Ostermann is from Greenland. That the country is at the sharp end of global warming, no-one doubts. In the year they filmed *Silent Snow*, Pipaluk's hometown saw the sun emerge from its winter slumber earlier than usual: the mountains on the horizon are getting smaller, the polar caps are melting. These days, there is not enough ice to go hunting in the winter, although there is too much for fishing, at least for now. "Our country is slowly disappearing" sighs Pipaluk.

But global warming is not the main focus of the slender and sombre *Silent Snow*, which is directed by Jan van den Berg and is currently making its way around the European film festivals. The film is subtitled "the invisible poisoning of the world". On the film's website, a quote from Jens C Hansen of the Centre of Arctic Medical Research says "Monitoring of human exposure to persistent organic pollutants (POPs) and heavy metals has taken place since 1994. The study has confirmed that Arctic populations relying on marine food have an exposure level of POPs and methyl mercury related to the amount of traditional food eaten. There is a need for dietary advice to Arctic peoples so they can make informed choices concerning the food they eat".



Pipaluk Knudsen-Ostermann in Greenland

It is becoming clear that pollutants are accumulating in the fatty reserves of the seals, narwhals, and other sea creatures that make up the traditional Inuit diet. "Our lives are threatened by dangerous chemicals", explains Pipaluk, early in the film. "They travel up north by ocean currents and winds; it has horrifying effects on people's health, causing all sorts of cancers and fertility problems". High levels of toxic chemicals have been found in several Arctic regions. Worse still, huge quantities of these contaminants are locked into the ice caps, and we know what is happening to the ice caps. "The poison never leaves your body", adds Pipaluk, "and it's passed on to the next generation". Whether it is in the food they eat, or the air they breathe, the Inuit are being poisoned by chemicals released years ago in places far away, places like Tanzania.

Our guide in Tanzania is the delightful Ellady, a young girl from the Masai tribe. Pipaluk is astonished to learn that in parts of the country they still douse huts with dichlorodiphenyltrichloroethane (DDT), in an effort to fight malaria. The USA banned DDT in 1972, and the Stockholm Convention in 2001 put in force a worldwide ban because it has been linked to many disorders.

Our next stop is India, the only country to still produce DDT. Here, we meet V J Jose, a gussy activist for Greenpeace. In Kerala, hundreds of chemical factories pump effluent into the River Periyar. A band of environmentalists secretly gathers water samples—they have to do so at night, and en masse, for fear of attack from the security guards patrolling the local area. In one sample, they find levels of hexachlorobutadiene 655-times higher than the safe levels prescribed by the USA. This is a big problem, explains one participant. Hexachlorobutadiene is a marker for

dioxin, a persistent carcinogen that travels all over the world.

In Costa Rica, a brace of mournful indigenous workers explain how their lives have been blighted by contact with nemagon—banned in the USA for more than 30 years—and other pesticides used in developing the country's banana crop. They talk of sterility, impotence, and a cluster of cancer deaths.

The overarching theme of *Silent Snow* is the economic imperative that drives man to destroy his environment (this is particularly pronounced in India, a country in the midst of a galloping industrialisation). Pipaluk—who coauthored the film—seeks out several indigenous people, invariably finding commonality in their dietary habits and profound investment in nature. But just as prominent is the threat that shadows these people. With the Masai, it is drought. The Inuit are literally losing ground.

Silent Snow makes no secret of its environmentalist ideology—nor is this a bad thing—but a few interviews with some of those responsible for the degradation that the film highlights would have been useful, if for nothing else than to advance the familiar argument that economic progress lifts people out of poverty. It would also have been worth iterating the point that the developing world must work to establish institutions and governing bodies capable of ensuring that companies do not flout the Stockholm Convention, and that safe environment disposal practices are adhered to. Nonetheless, this is a well meaning and instructive film. A melancholic reminder that environmental treaties only work if everyone complies: if they are spraying DDT somewhere, they are spraying it everywhere.

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