

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

What if the world were covered in asphalt? What if the only trees that existed were in planters in the mall, the only grass, in the highway median? Putting aside for the moment the incomprehensible ecological implications – what would it *feel like* to know there was no nature, *anywhere*? No place on Earth that was quiet at this moment, no space unoccupied by human activity?

It would arguably be a purposeless, spiritually bankrupt existence. Even if we never leave the city, never go to the woods or the mountains or the ocean, never visit Antarctica or the African Savanna or the subtropical rainforest, we need to know there is a forest, somewhere, anywhere, and that a tree may fall in that forest from time to time, whether we're there to hear it or not. The absence from our world of nature, of wildness, would compromise our lives in unimaginable ways – our sense of self and our place in the cosmos, our connections to our origins, and ultimately, our spiritual wellbeing. And the extent to which we as a race have separated ourselves from wilderness in our world today is likely in some way proportional to the level of cultural strife we now face.

Sigurd Olson believed this. He felt that deep within us all are traces of the primordial elements from which we were formed, and the DNA we share with fishes and bugs and wolves. For most of us these seeds lie dormant, smothered beneath layers of culture, custom, civilization, and technology, and it is only in contact with wilderness – in silence, solitude, and communion with nature – that we can reconnect with that primitive core of our being, our spiritual essence.

He probably first felt it playing in the lakes and woods and streams of his childhood in Sister Bay, Wisconsin:

A school of perch darted in and out of the rocks. They were green and gold and black, and I was fascinated by their beauty. Seagulls wheeled and cried above me. Waves crashed against the pier. I was alone in a wild and lovely place, part of the dark forest through which I had come, and of all the wild sounds and colors and feelings of the place I had found. That day I entered into a life of indescribable beauty and delight. There I believe I heard the singing wilderness for the first time.

- Sigurd F. Olson, *The Singing Wilderness*, 1956

He knew somehow this was more important than the Baptist faith his stern father preached, and he struggled for much of his life to give it expression.

As I grew older, this need became a passion that could not be denied. Unless each day meant some contact with the out of doors, I was unhappy. As long as I could remember it had always been this way, needing to feel the wind and the rain on my face with open sky and vistas around me. I did not know at the time but this growing need was molding me in a way I did not fully understand. All I was aware of was the constant over-riding need and that when I was indoors it could never be too long or something would die within me.

- Sigurd F. Olson, "The Old Ones Speak, - " April 8, 1966.

He tried to write about it but no publisher felt anyone wanted to read this kind of talk. So he took people out into the woods and onto the lakes, and showed them. He became a canoe guide, and he changed peoples lives. But still he tried to convince others. He spoke of the primitive need for wilderness as he tried to save wild places and one day a publisher named Alfred Knopf heard him speak, and was so moved by his charisma and his words that he

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asked him if he thought he had a book in him. And so at 57, Sigurd Olson published his first book of wilderness essays, and people began to understand what he was trying to tell them.

The book, *The Singing Wilderness*, became a New York Times best seller, and Olson eventually became a leader in a new ecological movement, an environmental statesman, an advisor to presidents, and an inspiration to a generation. He published eight more successful books and received the highest honor in nature writing, the John Burroughs medal. He worked to enact landmark conservation legislation such as the Wilderness Act of 1964, was instrumental in preserving places like the Boundary Waters Canoe Area and the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, and is the only person ever to receive the highest honors of four of America's most prestigious conservation organizations. But always underlying this work as a writer, guide, and activist was his conviction that the existence of wilderness is necessary to our spiritual wellbeing.

THE FILM

This one-hour documentary will be an introduction to the life of Sigurd Olson and an argument on his behalf for the importance of wild places in our world. Using Sigurd's life as a point of departure, we'll examine the role of wilderness in our society today. If you ask a kid from the South Bronx why we need wilderness, he might not have much to say. But what happens when you put him in the wilderness for the first time? We can preach to the choir all we want but it's where wilderness is missing in people's lives that is of concern here. While it may be beyond the scope of this project to try and prove that society is breaking down because of the shrinking presence of wildness in our daily lives, I do intend to suggest that, and to show the positive influence wilderness can have.

The film will weave together three primary threads: For the verité, present day narrative element, we'll follow a group of college students into the Boundary Waters Canoe Area in Northern Minnesota – Sigurd's backyard, as it were – for a two week expedition as they study wilderness writers and record their own impressions of their wilderness experience. For the second thread, we'll conduct "man-on-the-street" and "woman-on-the lake" interviews; we'll contrast the urban with the wilderness experience. And in addition to interviews with his son, his biographer, and others who knew him and whose lives he influenced, we'll speak with contemporary scholars from the disciplines of psychology, ecology, biology, anthropology, and burgeoning fields like ecopsychology and sociobiology.

The third thread will of course examine Sigurd's life, the struggles and accomplishments which led him to his "wilderness theology," as it has been termed in his critically acclaimed biography by David Backes. We have the full cooperation of his family, Mr. Backes, and the Listening Point Foundation created to further his legacy, and complete access to a wealth of archival photographs, audio recordings and film footage, including a vintage 1956 film he himself produced and starred in.

AESTHETIC and TECHNIQUE

Olson's greatest and most unique gift was his ability to write about the natural world from a personal perspective and his ability to transport readers to another place. He, to many, expressed their inexpressible feelings about the wild. So we cannot leave his writings out of our examination of his life and ideas. Voice over passages will be accompanied by images

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from nature and serve as chapter markers. Not picture perfect postcard images, not your usual stock photography, but images informed both by Sigurd's subjective, unadorned lyricism and my own aesthetic perspective, developed over many years as a photographer and cinematographer. I have already shot footage using rigs I've fabricated for unique perspectives, from the "porta-cam" (capturing the point of view of someone carrying a canoe over a portage) to outriggers constructed for mounting the camera away from the canoe in order to shoot back at it. I also intend to use camera dollies and jibs arms (camera cranes) in much the way Thomas Riedelsheimer did in his striking portrait of environmental artist Andy Goldsworthy, "Rivers and Tides". I started out shooting on 16mm for these sections but in the future will probably use one of the amazing new generation of DSLRs which shoot HD on a 35mm sized chip, with the accordingly shallow depth of field. I am also using super-8 film to evoke a period aesthetic in certain sequences (I am not trying to fool anyone into thinking it's actual archival footage). There will be no re-enactments per se.

I intend to approach Garrison Keillor to read for these passages of Sigurd's writing. As a prominent and fellow Minnesota author, it seems only appropriate. Keillor's voice has a distinctive quality not unlike Sigurd's own, and his involvement would substantially elevate the project's visibility. There will be no voice over narration other than from interviews.

For the score I hope to use the music of Steve Tibbetts, another Minnesota based artist who uses guitar, drums, and other acoustic instruments as well as synthesizers to create a rugged and primitive tapestry unlike anything you've ever heard – strikingly evocative and beautiful. Steve's music has been an inspiration in most of my films and was used in my narrative feature "Kaaterskill Falls".

IN SUMMARY

While we are born with curiosity and wonder and our early years full of the adventure they bring, I know such inherent joys are often lost. I also know that, being deep within us, their latent glow can be fanned to flame again by awareness and an open mind... recapturing this almost forgotten sense of wonder and learning from rocks and trees and all the life that is found there, truths that can encompass all.

- Sigurd F. Olson, *Listening Point* 1958

Sigurd Olson espoused his beliefs at a time when he felt that modern society was undermining our connection with our evolutionary memory and obscuring an essential self-understanding. And that was fifty years ago. With the burgeoning of the information age and our increasingly reckless plundering of the environment, his message assumes an even greater urgency today. By examining Olson's life – the struggles and achievements which led him to his beliefs – and by evoking the wilderness experience as he did so eloquently in his writing, this film argues for the importance of wilderness for both our spiritual and our physical survival. It is a biography, a celebration of Sigurd's life and work, a cinematic interpretation of his writing, and a quest for his relevance – and that of wilderness – in today's world. It is also a call to reawaken within ourselves that primordial yearning, that burning deep within each of us which few even recognize and which has been all but snuffed out by modern civilization, by technological innovation, by iPhones and uplinks... a call that can only be answered in wilderness. We need Sigurd Olson's voice to fan the latent glow we all carry inside.