

THE FATHERS OF EXTREME

Extreme sport has become big business for athletes, clothing brands, sports brands, even energy drinks – but for the fathers of extreme sport it was a different world. Literally.



First snowboarding. Utah 1970s. Photo by Richard Palmer.



Real whale watching. Photo by Margareta Engstrom



Forty years ago, Clive Neeson and his mates started exploring the adventure playgrounds of New Zealand and the world. Their motivation was to get out amongst it and with the danger came a certain familiarity.

And along with their adventures came the realisation that these Paradises were not always going to remain untouched. There were indeed going to be global issues to come.

Last Paradise is Neeson's coverage of the journey of a group of Maverick adventurers who, whilst the rest of the world were worried about the cold war and the atomic age, opted to drop out of the mainstream and explore a road less travelled. An adventure they took to by any number of means from surf, snowboarding, wind-surfing, kite-surfing, and skiing. In fact, they invented much of the equipment and pioneered new sports. A concept that is disappearing from our culture.

"The progenitor of innovation is rapidly disappearing from our culture with the availability of ready-made toys, solutions and the consumer economy. Where necessity was the mother of invention, the necessity has gone."

Neeson's love of adventure, outdoors, film and his motivation for thrill seeking was inherited from his cinematographer parents. In fact he spent his early childhood with his parents in East Africa as they filmed the wildlife there.

"With my parents getting as close as they could to film wild animals, it was pretty scary and perhaps danger became the comfort zone."

This was then juxtaposed by a move to the sleepy town of Raglan in the '60s. Life in New Zealand back then was pretty conservative but Neeson and his friends found escape from this in the stunning natural surrounds.

"Africa's land and ocean was an adventurer's paradise. Pristine, wild and unspoiled.

The wild animals were soon poached out and my parents could do nothing to stop it. Our lives have seasons. It was time to find a new place and New Zealand was full of mystery."

It was also this closeness with wilderness that gave Neeson a fascination with science. An interest that would turn into a career.

"Camping in the wilderness a lot gives kids a sense of wonder. That was the real driving force of getting closer to nature and pursue science. Imagining an amazing possibility and believing there's a way to make it happen – that's what drove the characters to innovate and will be the very same driving force for the innovations who will tackle the global issues to come."

Using clever 'number 8 wire' ingenuity, they created their own fun and improvised the filming of it all along the way. This not only set the path for an entire industry of thrill-seeking fun amongst the likes of AJ Hackett, but it also started off an entire archive of adventure footage that would create the basis for Neeson's first feature film four decades later.

"*Last Paradise* is the film I always hoped to make some day. As a teenager in Raglan in 1973 I met two individuals who inspired my journey. Miki Dora, a reluctant surf icon of the Californian Gidget scene, inspired me to film a global safari. And Professor Bruce Liley, an atomic physicist and pioneer of fusion energy who had the ability to solve almost any problem (I ended up as his student for six years)."

In 1974 Neeson saw Mike Firth's epic adventure film *Off the Edge* which set the mark for all adventure films: "Adrenaline, superb camera work and true grit." It was then that Neeson knew what he was chasing. The reality experience where the audience is part of the adventure.



Clive filming in the Outback. Photo Scott Aichner.



The mark of a shark attack during filming in Australia. Photo by Clive Neeson.



Exploring Europe for surf on foot – Clive Neeson, 1970s. Photo by Ian Watkins. The backpack carries tent, cameras and home built water housings.



Clive Neeson Filming Last Paradise with Ton Deken in Indonesia. Photo by Peter Slyfield.

"It was such an honour to remaster *Off The Edge* with Mike 35 years later as part of making *Last Paradise*. Mike inspired me as a kid and now it's gone full circle."

It was while working at Peter Jackson's Park Road Post Production that Neeson was encouraged to turn his archive of footage in a feature film.

"I was invited by Jon Newell to trial my footage for big screen conversion. The results were amazing and I decided to work with them for creating the film. It was a great experience, the best technology in the world, but of course it doesn't come cheap."

The process required going through over 60 hours of film and narrowing it down to 10 hours of the best quality film, which was then mastered from a variety of formats to 35mm quality. While Neeson got a good deal for the processing he still had to pump thousands of his own money into the feature.

"My budget estimate was a Million. I spent a lot of time and money chasing the traditional funders, and decided to go it alone and remain true to my own vision on what I was trying to create."

This required Neeson to take care of many of the tasks himself – learning as he went – while working at his normal engineering job to pay for it. An arduous five years. But in the end Neeson managed to get it completed for under half the budget. Still an investment of \$500,000 mind you. But the prospect of recouping his financial investment is not so much of a factor for Neeson.

"The true meaning of wealth is clearly defined in the film itself. For sure I will recoup my investment. I made the film to profoundly change in the world. Now the film is working whilst I'm sleeping. I recoup the investment every morning when I open emails from people abroad who tell me how it inspired them or their future career. In that way its already paid off."

While the commercial side of Neeson's investment might not be realised, the film has garnered much critical acclaim from here and overseas. Including: Best Eco-Adventure at XDance in USA (the Academy awards of action sport films), Selection for the "Best Of Banff" Canada 2011 in which it is currently touring the world and Most Popular NZ Film, at the last NZ International Film Festival.

But it was in the Santa Barbara International film festival where it was really recognised as a "new genre" by local professors who invited Neeson back to America for special event screenings at the Arlington Theatre.

"That was a huge success and has resulted in calls for a Californian tour."

And *Last Paradise* isn't just an adventure film or a documentary. Neeson describes the film as a re-definition of documentary. A typical documentary is clearly recognised as such and usually the audience has a prior interest in the subject matter. As such, documentaries often preach to the converted. It was when Neeson saw Al Gore's film *An Inconvenient Truth* that he realised that it wasn't targeting the most important audience for this message.

"To capture a wide audience you need to provide both entertainment and thought provoking content. Intrigue is the seed of education. *Last Paradise* uses subliminal education through the hook of the exciting Kiwi adventure story. There is never a feeling you are watching anything but fun entertainment. Yet you leave enlightened and inspired on many levels. The film leads you to work the answers out for yourself and that is the most effective and enjoyable path to enlightenment."

Over 45 years, we witness on film full undeniable evidence of climate change. And Neeson hopes that this isn't a message lost.

"The loss of paradise is an insidious process. During the last five years of making *Last Paradise*, politicians have already set the scene for the demise of the 'last paradise' which features in the film.



Big Ozzy wave by Rick Jackovich, appearing in the film sequence.

Without even knowing it. One feels not hope but despair. A key aim of the film is to show why this occurs and to create value of what is left. As for my greatest hope, it's that the key politicians get to see the film."

The film does capture the devastating loss of the world's most precious areas, but it also captures the pioneering spirit of the New Zealand adventurers who first set out to explore the last paradise and then to save it.

"International audiences are intrigued about the psyche of this tiny isolated country and the individuals it produces. In particular our innovative spirit, from the world's greatest scientist, Ernest Rutherford, to 'whacky' extreme sports pioneers like AJ Hackett. Overseas audiences are astounded by how much of the world's great innovations had their beginnings in New Zealand."

And while many of the innovations covered in the film are of the thrill-seeking adventure kind, also uncovered is a solution to get the earth back on track – a solution that has its roots in New Zealand innovation.

This is a remarkable film in the sense that it doesn't fearmonger, it doesn't sensationalise yet is still manages to portray the very desperate situation of the world's natural state while still inspiring hope that we can actually change things. Despite the power of the film and its early success, Neeson doesn't actually foresee a career in filmmaking.

"I don't see myself as a filmmaker per se, just a guy who made a film. Making the film is half the journey. Screening it is the other half, and a great adventure in itself. I generally like to do one film every 45 years. One or two more would be nice." 📺

Last Paradise will be released in all towns at selected cinemas from May 19.

lastparadisefilm.com