

Clive Neeson on *Last Paradise*

BY BRANNAVAN GNANALINGAM | JULY 12, 2010

The plight of the great outdoors hangs over Clive Neeson's adventure sports documentary.

Clive Neeson was always a recorder of his and mates' antics, yet he knew that his footage would one day form a powerful film. Forty years on from when he first started documenting himself and his friends practicing sports which his contemporaries wrote off as crazy, Neeson realised that he possessed the footage which would, in his words, "address significant global issues and tell this untold story of what New Zealand is most famous for: being the world capital of extreme sports." The end result is *Last Paradise*, a cheerful showcase of early pioneering adventures in extreme sports that also doubles as a poignant look at the changing relationship humans have had with the Planet Earth. Neeson's film has also captured some breathtaking imagery over the past four decades, whether it's the changing face of sites like Mount Maunganui, Raglan, Noosa or Bali, or the thrill of trying a new sport for the first time. And, as colleges in the USA have been telling Neeson, "it's the best advertisement people have seen of New Zealand."

Neeson's experience with filmmaking got underway early. "I began filming the film when I was in my teenage years. My parents were wildlife cinematographers in Africa. We then discovered this amazing country where you could roam around without being pursued by some kind of beast." At age 17, he met pioneering surfer Miki Dora. "He was one of the USA's greatest surfers but had left the US because of the way things were going [to be fair, he was also escaping criminal charges]. He came to New Zealand and he inspired me and my brother to go exploring the world and see places people had barely heard of." Neeson's adventures included hitching around the world with a tent, attempting to sell a climate prediction device in Silicon Valley, and finding secret surf spots (in the then unknown parts of Mexico, Queensland, Noosa, or Bali).

"I had this idea for a movie when I was 17-years-old and began filming... according to the script I had in my head," he explains. "That's why so much of the footage you see in the film is relevant to the storyline, which addresses quite a few issues globally... I was drawn to things that were scientific, places that were unknown, activities that were not known then, and with people who we met as kids [such as AJ Hackett among others]. but went on to form these new sports which are now the hub of New Zealand's industry, like bungee jumping and rafting."

Neeson and company explored adventure sports such as surfing, snowboarding (then known as ski surfing), free skiing and rafting. "I had no idea of the scale that would be attached to it. We knew one day it might catch on. I remember AJ Hackett was the first person to try and introduce snowboards to New Zealand and he failed."

However, the changes that occurred in the sport (namely, mainstream acceptance) coincided with another major change: humankind's relationship with the Earth itself. Neeson reveals that Dora "had painted a picture of the way things would go in New Zealand and around the world. We were in disbelief and almost laughed it off. We were still influenced by it, and filmed it the way it was then, but had no idea that his prophecy would come true." This shift forms the backbone of *Last Paradise*. "The movie is a satire, it's an eco-adventure. We're using an untold story of extreme sports evolution to tell a movie like Al Gore did with *An Inconvenient Truth*. The concern for me, when I watch documentaries, either educative or environmental, is that they're preaching to the converted. People who really need to see and understand what's happening to the world are the next generation. They're not the ones who are watching these documentaries. What I was trying to do with this movie was use extreme sports and film to serve science, rather than the other way around."

Neeson says re-watching the footage was gratifying for telling the stories of people whose influence in New Zealand's economic development with tourism is largely underrated. "The people in that movie are all mavericks, whether they're world renowned scientists as some are, or whether they're sportspeople. They stood out then as being oddballs, now they're people of repute. To put it into a movie was a way of creating and celebrating a story they knew had never been shown." The reaction by his subjects, according to Neeson, has been "ecstatic and very emotional."

I ask if there's still room for the mavericks, whether children like Neeson could exist today. "There still is, but there's less territory out there. We have to go further and wider. I think what's missing is the inclination to do that. Circumstances do not encourage young people to pioneer as much as it used to. The reason why these mavericks were like they were is because of adversity, because of what they didn't have. They didn't have televisions, they didn't toys, they were very remote from the world. They only had the wilderness." Neeson feels that to his friends, the environment's current degradation is "their saddest loss: to see the wilderness go, because that was the habitat, the playground. They're all very strong environmentalists today, because that was their everything."

And Neeson has seen the transformation firsthand. "So many days of the week now we surf in polluted waters. New Zealand was once surrounded by pristine, crystal clear water. You can still see that, in places that are undeveloped like Stewart Island. It was teeming with life. We got a glimpse of that as children. But every generation accepts the world it was born into as the norm, and with each generation we lose a little bit more." Through this eyewitness account, a reliance on statistics to convey the environmental changes was also avoided. "The idea of the movie is to walk you through the way the world was forty-five years ago, and to relive that journey and make your own mind up, rather than talk about the way it was without giving you evidence of things like climate change. Let's go back and see what the glaciers were like."

Part of the experiential perspective was to also give younger viewers a sense of what the world can be like. "The protectors of tomorrow's wilderness are the kids who play in it today. When you look at where kids are playing today, what does that say about the security of tomorrow's wilderness? The state of our rivers today compared to yesterday are shockingly degraded [for example]."

Last Paradise's stunning footage and wildly enjoyable narrative more than make up for its long gestation and somewhat difficult filmmaking process. Nonetheless, the way the documentary was made is a testament to the 'No. 8 Wire' approach of Neeson and his fellow pioneers. "It was very expensive to film then. It was a huge incentive to make sure of every shot you took. It wasn't always easy because it was a month or so before you got the film back and whether you even had the right or wrong settings on the camera. It cost me two hours of digging for potatoes to pay for every minute of film. It wasn't just building the camera, it was building all these automatic shut-off devices, so if you had a wipe-out, it'd immediately stop the camera from running. Nowadays you wouldn't worry. You'd just erase it and start again. It was about saving film and conserving film. I was a student, it was hard-earned money. I couldn't afford a camera, repaired it and restored it. The pay-off is because you film so carefully, the images probably as a result benefited from it."

'Last Paradise' screens in [Auckland](#), [Wellington](#), [Christchurch](#), and [Dunedin](#) at the New Zealand International Film Festival. For dates, programme details, and screenings in other regions, please visit nzff.co.nz.

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