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GRABOWSKA FOCUSES ON

Vanishing islands

IN THE ATLANTIC

Ribbon of Sand is a poetic journey through the unique ecosystem of the Cape Lookout National Seashore, a chain of wild, undeveloped barrier islands in the famed Outer Banks of the North Carolina seacoast. The national preserve stretches over some 56 road-less miles from Ocracoke Inlet to Beaufort Inlet.

The 30-minute film premiered at the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of Natural History and opened this spring at the Harkers Island Visitor Center. It features landscapes, seascapes and wildlife as seen from the air, the land and underwater. The breathtaking images are augmented with original music composed by Todd Boekelheide and narration by Meryl Streep.

Ribbon of Sand was written, produced and directed by John Grabowska, a former television journalist and cameraman, who has

been creating films for the National Park Service at the Interpretive Design Center at Harpers Ferry, West Virginia since 1991.

Super 16 format

“The preserve is a national treasure and a tremendously important wildlife area for migratory birds,” Grabowska says. “Shorebirds and wading birds live there year-round, and huge numbers stop to feed on their way to and from the Arctic and South America.”

A Washington Post article about the making of *Ribbon of Sand* estimated that some 90 million people will visit national parks in the United States this summer. Millions of them will see Grabowska's environmental films at parks in Alaska, New Mexico and North

Carolina. His films also regularly air on the PBS network and its affiliate stations.

“I have produced several historical films,” he says. “But for me, natural history is a greater challenge because there is no inherent story, no built-in narrative. The pioneering environmentalist Rachel Carson was a master at translating hard science into poetic language, and her book *The Edge of the Sea* was our main inspiration for a film that connects humankind to the natural world.”

Grabowska and his long-time cinematographer Steve Ruth were the camera crew for land and aerial shots. They began production in November 2004 and made multiple visits to locations over the course of two years.

“We shoot these documentaries in Super 16 format because film has the latitude for recording organic images of the natural world,” he

says. “Film is an archival medium, so the negative will be there for future generations to see what this ecosystem was once like. This is particularly important for coastal areas like these in the midst of dramatic changes due to global warming. Many of these islands are doomed to disappear because of rising sea levels.”

Their basic tools included an Aaton XTR camera on land and an ARRI SR camera for aerial shots. They began shooting on EASTMAN EXR 50D 7245 film and switched to KODAK VISION2 50D 7201 film when it was introduced. Both films are rated for EI 50 in daylight.

They filmed images of the surf, the beach, dunes, the heavily forested coastal plain, salt marshes, estuaries, and the migrating islands of sand. The wildlife was mainly avian, though they also got some shots of red wolves, reintroduced to



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Products**Camera**

Aaton XTR (land), ARRI SR (aerial)

Stocks

EASTMAN EXR 50D 7245, KODAK VISION2 50D 7201 (both films rated for EI 50 in daylight)

the coastal plains.

“The muddy shallows of the estuaries were anywhere from 2 to 10 feet deep,” Grabowska says. “They are the key nursery for ocean-going species, where they develop until they are large enough to defend themselves or evade predators. The first cinematographers I spoke with said they couldn’t shoot underwater in estuaries because it was incredibly murky. Then, I spoke with Michael Male, who had already done it successfully.”

Male worked with a huge tank on the banks of an estuary. When the tide came in, a valve would allow the tank to fill with water and undersea life. The water was clear enough for filming and the marine creatures were temporarily captive. He shot close-ups lit by sunlight, and the tank would then empty into the estuary as the tide went out.

Finishing touch

Grabowska recorded about 20 hours of film. Colorlab, outside of Washington, D.C., processed the negative, and telecine transfers were done by colorist Bob Johanson in HDCAM format at NFL Films in Mt. Laurel, New Jersey. Editing was done at Henninger in Arlington, Virginia. Grabowska timed the completed film with colorist Dave Markun in HDCAM SR format.

The finishing touch was original orchestral music that was composed and recorded by Boekelheide, who was on the sound team that created the Academy Award-winning *Amadeus*. He has previously collaborated with Grabowska on *Crown of the Continent* and *Remembered Earth*, natural history films that are screening at national park visitor centers in Alaska and New Mexico and on PBS.



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In *Ribbon of Sand*, Grabowska himself narrates a sparely-written journey through the coastal ecosystem, interspersed by quotes from Rachel Carson’s writings, which are narrated by Streep. Grabowska says, “Meryl was very patient and involved, and gave me several different reads. She obviously cared deeply about this project and was very emotionally engaged. She did a stunning job with the narration.”

1 DP Steve Ruth films the surf on a barrier island for *Ribbon of Sand*.

Photo by John Grabowska

2 Producer/director John Grabowska on location at Cape Lookout National Seashore.