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Research resource review: Billy, Y. 2008: Strait through the ice. New York: Icarus Films. 52 minutes. US$390. DVD

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Research resource reviews

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Billy, Y. 2008: *Strait through the ice*. New York: Icarus Films. 52 minutes. US$390. DVD.

The opening of the Northwest Passage could cut up to 7000 km off the shipping route between Europe and Asia. In the past, the passage has been impenetrable because of the sea ice and ice floes found in this region. Under a changing climate regime, however, this will not be the case for much longer and *Strait through the ice* claims to examine the geopolitical and ecological issues relating to such a development.

The documentary is split into seven chapters: 'A new sea way'; 'Environmental concerns'; 'Security and surveillance'; 'The Inuits'; 'Navigating through the ice'; 'The need for infrastructures'; and 'New political stakes'. The film is in English, although several of the interviews are in French with subtitles. The documentary is well filmed, and the seascapes featured throughout are certainly impressive and will appeal to lovers of nature documentaries, although there is little scientific discussion of the environment under consideration.

After a moderately interesting introduction presenting a little of the history of the Northwest Passage, the film goes on to cover the issues of who controls the passage (is it wholly Canadian, or is there an international strait?); what the environmental impacts of the passage opening might be (eg, oil spills); US security fears of the newly opened route (eg, how will the newly accessible Canadian border be policed?); and how it will influence the Inuit population (eg, new trade opportunities). Several academics give their opinion on these issues, but the questions raised are not well explored and never feel sufficiently significant. Indeed, there are several points where more prosaic questions are raised in the viewer's mind, such as whether the current economic recession or the new Democratic administration in the USA are likely to affect these issues more than the factors being discussed in the film.

The film will prove of some interest to those who have little knowledge of the Northwest Passage and the implications of its opening, and who desire an introduction to the key issues, but there is little scientific content here. As such, the film may find some use in universities as a tool for initiating discussion of the future of the Northwest Passage in student seminars, but it is unlikely to greatly advance any debate itself. Perhaps the biggest shortcoming of the film is the omission of any details of the changes in Arctic sea ice or climate, let alone scientific projections. The introduction desperately needs some satellite images showing the changes in sea ice over the last 30 years, but they never appear. Perhaps my background as an atmospheric scientist has informed this objection but these data form the justification for the film and their omission seems unforgivable.

As a film, the only tension came from the scenes where the film crew join the icebreaker *Amundsen* on a voyage through part of the passage that had never been previously navigated. While this introduced some drama to

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proceedings, the whole sequence seemed unnecessary, as the point is that these routes will be open in the future anyway! The same objection also applies to the following scene about the design of ships that can break through the ice.

Environmental documentaries have gone through somewhat of a renaissance in recent years. *An inconvenient truth* won Al Gore an Oscar and a Nobel Peace Prise, *The 11th hour* added Leonardo DiCaprio's celebrity to the cause, and *Age of stupid* made a valiant attempt to look cinematic. So how does *Strait through the ice* sit in this company? Overall, I am left uncertain as to whom it is aimed at, as none of the issues it raises are explored in any depth, nor is the central concept really of wide appeal. Together with inadequate coverage of the background material and the inclusion of some seemingly irrelevant subjects, it is difficult to recommend this film as a research resource or for general interest.

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Polunin, N.V.C., editor 2008: *Aquatic ecosystems: trends and global prospects*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 512 pp. £80 cloth. ISBN: 978 0 521 83327 1.

The global hydrological cycle is so fundamental to life on planet earth or, as Newson (1994) would have it called, 'planet ocean', that a constant quest to better understand, inventory and conserve its many interdependent physical and biological components (including *Homo sapiens*) has become a necessity. This book sets out ambitiously to produce a comprehensive review at a global level of 'the present and possible future states of all the Earth's aquatic ecosystems'. Its origins lie in a series of reviews published in the journal *Environmental Conservation*, and the 5th International Conference on Environmental Future in Zurich, Switzerland, in 2003 is given as the main forum for its progression into book form. There are 21 chapters bracketed by an 'Introduction' which gives a cogent overview of our knowledge of climate change (and the inherent uncertainties in climate models), and its potential impacts on ecosystems and human society, and a 'Synthesis' which summarizes the prospects for the various aquatic domains identified in the 21 chapters. The 21 chapters are split into seven sections including flowing waters, still waters, freshwater wetlands, coastal wetlands, rocky shores, soft shores, and vast marine systems. The chapter authors were asked to seek answers to the following questions. What are the key threats to the status of each of the aquatic ecosystems? To what extent might each of these ecosystems change between now and the 2025 time horizon? How do patterns of threat and likely change vary among these ecosystems and what drives these variations? What information does this overview yield for the conservation science and management of the world's aquatic ecosystems? Inevitably, chapters vary considerably in the way in which they answer these questions, reflecting not only the availability of data, but also the authors' own disciplinary interests and biases, which are on the whole more biological than physical.

Although global climate change tends to dominate as an overarching setting for many chapters, a number of authors make the important point that other causes of environmental degradation are just as urgent to address. For example, Adam *et al.*, in their chapter on saltmarshes, point out that most habitat loss between now and 2025 will be site-specific and related to infill and land claim rather than to sea-level rise. There is a grave danger that, with the increasingly global view of ecosystem change driven by global warming, responsibility for ensuring the best possible stewardship of ecosystems

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