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In conversation

Meet **Alec Wohlgroth**, a Swiss filmmaker who loves to spend quality time outdoors. His film *Mountains in the Mist* was recently screened at **Quotes from the Earth**, the second environmental film festival organized by Toxics Link in Delhi, and widely appreciated. Why not, for he carries a totem – his film company, Halsundbeinbruch, translates into German as 'break a neck and leg', an expression for good luck. He speaks to *Sucharita Sengupta* about films on the environment, and emphasizes that they must reach the masses.

How did you start off as an environmental filmmaker?

I have a degree in Media and Communications from the University of Zurich. I am very fond of nature, and during my spare time, I would go out and make short films. These were simple films, but people liked them. Slowly, I started making films professionally. I developed an interest in documenting—it is an ideal media to talk about an issue in an emotional way. After completing studies, I started my own film company. We are two persons working full time, but a lot of freelance movie makers are associated with us. We make films on sports, nature and even promotional films, and we get about one or two environment-related projects a year.



How deep is your interest in the environment then?

Very deep, although I am not an activist. I am not very vociferous in voicing my concerns. Because I like and respect nature, I feel it is very important to protect it. For nearly 20 years in Europe, environment films were considered 'alternative'. That trend has changed and such films are gaining wider acceptance.

Are these environment-based films mainly for commercial purpose or are they documentary films?

It is interesting that you make a distinction between commercial and documentary films. In Europe, a film can be both. Here in India, the films are of a high intellectual level, but certainly not commercial. I think there is a need to redefine a documentary film. Some of the environmental films are wonderful, but then they need to be marketed well using novel techniques. May be there ought to be some creative product placement too. This might not go down very well with the filmmakers here, I know. But such things can ensure financial success. In the past five years, three documentary films have been very successful—*Fahrenheit 9/11*, *March of the Penguins*, and *An Inconvenient Truth*. They have run to packed halls in Europe and America. Of these three, two deal with the environment. So there is a need for well-marketed environmental films.

In India, we have severe budget constraints for independent environmental filmmakers. So how does one get around that?



I have only begun to know about the Indian filmmaking scenario. But if that is a problem, then the only solution is to be creative. Short films can be made and sent around by e-mail or Internet. They might be of a smaller duration, but they could be very powerful.

How would you assess the quality of Indian environmental films; some you saw at the film festival?

I think a lot of these films do not reach a larger audience—often this seems a deliberate attempt on the part of a filmmaker. S/he knows who is going to see the film—probably a few friends who will appreciate it as being artistic and intellectual. These movies are made just for the sake of making a movie, not for the environment. They seem to be made for a small elite circle. If the films are really for the environment, then filmmakers will have to do a lot more researching, so that the films can find their way to a theatre or a television. It should be possible, given that India has a large film industry.

The movies made are very nice, and the filmmakers are highly intelligent and involved with the issues. But they should use this potential to think about how they can reach out to the masses. The subject should be such that it would grab immediate attention. Perhaps they could take a leaf out of the well-researched books or advertisement and public relations, all of which attract public attention. They could learn how to target various groups—students, or people in general, or politicians. They could then think on the marketing lines.

Indian films rarely provide solutions to environmental problems. Do you favour providing solutions in these films?

Well I do not want to hand out cookbook-like solutions. Such films are made to evoke sympathy and provoke thought in people. But movies, even if they do not provide concrete solutions, must still show that solutions do exist. Sometimes, a person is very much affected by a film, but comes out feeling sad after watching it and in the process is not able to do anything about the problem. Just by saying that there is a hope, filmmakers are sending a signal to the individuals that they can make a change. They can thus give a bit of hope. Else people would not like to go and watch such a film a second time. Bollywood films in general are a pointer to what people like—films with a happy ending. So if filmmakers want to reach a broader public, they should make films with a feel-good approach. Nobody will watch a movie that says, 'we're all going to hell'.

Would you like to make an environment-based movie in India?

Definitely. There are very many interesting environmental phenomena one comes across in India. I'm not simply talking about the negative issues such as pollution, and so on, but also about the beautiful flora, fauna, and landscapes. It would definitely be worthwhile to capture all that India offers in terms of environment or environment-based issues.