

Documentaries could give green tinge to the Oscars

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Animals search for food at a landfill in Niteroi, Brazil. "Waste Land," a film about the difficult life of rubbish pickers surviving on a Brazilian landfill, is up for an Oscar on Sunday, reflecting Hollywood's growing interest in addressing pollution, waste, climate change and threatened wildlife.

Two out of five documentaries vying for Oscars on Sunday focus on the environment, reflecting Hollywood's growing interest -- but also its dilemma -- in addressing pollution, waste, climate change and threatened wildlife.

Up for awards in the feature documentary category are "Gasland," investigating the dangers of drilling for shale gas, and "Waste Land," about the difficult life of rubbish pickers surviving on a Brazilian landfill.

Green groups hope a gold statuette for either film will boost public

interest in a much-ignored issue, just as Al Gore's "An Inconvenient Truth" placed global warming in the centre of public consciousness in 2006.

After that film, "suddenly [climate change](#) became a mainstream topic," said Sudhanshu Sarronwala, marketing director for the World Wildlife Fund International.

"Whether we are talking about oil and gas issues or landfills, these are things that people don't connect to on an everyday basis. But it needs to be mainstreamed because it's something that is connected to people's daily lives."

"Gasland" explores the impacts of extracting a form of natural gas through [hydraulic fracturing](#) in the United States.

It was first screened in January 2010 and broadcast on US television last June, coinciding -- fortuitously for its makers -- with the BP oil spill in the [Gulf of Mexico](#).

Director Josh Fox began filming "Gasland" after he received a letter from an energy company offering him \$100,000 for permission to drill for natural gas on his land in Pennsylvania.

Curious about the drilling technique the company proposed, he set out with his camera across the country to interview families in Texas, Colorado and Wyoming living near drilling sites.

Also called "fracking," this technique blasts water and [toxic chemicals](#) deep below ground to create mini-earthquakes that help release gas deposits.

Many critics have praised the film, but the oil lobby Energy in Depth,

which is connected with Halliburton, BP and Shell, called for the film to be taken out of Oscars running because of what they say are errors.

The film notably features shocking scenes of residents lighting gas-contaminated water as it comes out of taps.

A second nominee, "Waste Land," draws attention to the millions of tonnes of waste generated by consumer societies.

It follows an artist, Vik Muniz, as he creates art with the help of garbage scavengers in an immense landfill outside of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil.

Director Lucy Walker filmed Muniz as he worked with "catadores", men and women who sift out recyclables for 20-25 dollars a day at the Jardim Gramacho landfill.



"Gasland" director Josh Fox is seen at a film screening in Washington DC earlier this month. "Gasland," investigating the dangers of drilling for shale gas, is up for an Oscar on Sunday, reflecting Hollywood's growing interest in addressing pollution, waste, climate change and threatened wildlife.

Walker first became interested in waste in 2000 as a graduate student in New York City. During that time she visited the Fresh Kills landfill in Staten Island.

"It was a shocking place, with chain-link fences clad with teeming nightmare quantities of plastic bags making the nastiest noise imaginable, and pipes outgassing methane," said Walker in a press release.

Seeing the hills of trash there -- some taller than the Statue of Liberty -- convinced her to make a film about garbage.

Walker said the film is also "about getting to know people who you do not normally meet in your life."

"I aim to create an opportunity for the audience to feel they are getting under the skin, to emotionally connect with the people on the screen."

Reporting on the environment is to describe a drip-drip-drip of relentlessly bad news and throws down the gauntlet to consumer society, which according to conventional wisdom is too depressing or radical for mainstream movie audiences.

The challenges facing such films are "telling the truth while offering an upbeat story; dealing with anti-intellectual skepticism; confronting the fact that wealthy consumers continue to want to drive cars, fly planes, eat meat -- and go to film theatres," explained Toby Miller, chair of the media department at University of California at Riverside.

Miller points to "An Inconvenient Truth", "March of the Penguins" and "Wall-E" as successful films that entertain but also raise the issue about

the worsening health of our planet.

"None of these are depressing -- even 'Inconvenient Truth' tells us we can still remedy the problem," he said. But "for real box-office success, and Hollywood attention, anthropomorphism seems to be the way to go."

"Gasland" took home the special jury prize for documentaries at the Sundance film festival in January 2010, while "Waste Land" won for top feature at the International Documentary Association in December.

The other movies in best feature documentary are "Exit Through the Gift Shop," "Restrepo" and "Inside Job."

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