

In 'Chasing Ice,' climate change gets its close up

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This 2009 photo released by Extreme Ice Survey shows Birthday Canyon in Greenland during the filming of "Chasing Ice." The film, about climate change, follows National Geographic photographer James Balog across the Arctic as he deploys revolutionary time-lapse cameras designed to capture a multi-year record of the world's changing glaciers. (AP Photo/Extreme Ice Survey, James Balog)

(AP)—There is a scene in the documentary "Chasing Ice" that shows the edge of the massive Ilulissat glacier in Greenland collapsing—or "calving"—and violently crashing into the sea below. The piece of ice

that breaks away is compared to the size of lower Manhattan, and appears taller than any building there.

The video of the glacier, also called by its Danish name, Jakobshavn, is what photographer James Balog calls "irrefutable" evidence of [climate change](#). Balog is the subject of "Chasing Ice," which won the Excellence in Cinematography Award at this year's Sundance Film Festival.

Filmmaker Jeff Orlowski followed Balog as he set up more than 20 time-lapse cameras in remote locations around Alaska, Montana, Nepal, Iceland and Greenland to capture images of Arctic [glaciers](#) as they change. Balog designed each camera to withstand [extreme conditions](#), including sub-zero temperatures and 150 mph (240 kph) winds, and to snap about 8,000 frames a year, some of which have been featured in National Geographic magazine.

The film opens Friday in New York City and the following week in select cities.

In an interview with The Associated Press, Orlowski and Balog talked about the film and their experiences making it.

AP: Climate change did not come up during any of the three presidential debates. Do you regret not releasing the film earlier?

Orlowski: I don't think that this is a political issue. It's been turned into a political issue but it shouldn't be. We were considering releasing it before the election but that would have associated the film with a very specific political agenda and we're trying to stay a little bit more neutral in that regard.

AP: Talk about the technical challenges you faced.



This 2008 photo released by Extreme Ice Survey shows field technician, Adam LeWinter on an iceberg in Columbia Bay, Alaska during the filming of "Chasing Ice." The film, about climate change, follows National Geographic photographer James Balog across the Arctic as he deploys revolutionary time-lapse cameras designed to capture a multi-year record of the world's changing glaciers. (AP Photo/Extreme Ice Survey, James Balog)

Balog: I had a number of electronic engineers that were advising and consulting on this thing and these are guys who have been involved with sending equipment to Mars, sending things to the bottom of the ocean, sending remote equipment across Antarctica on these little wheeled contraptions going across the ice, and in the end they said, 'We can't calculate what you need. We can't figure it out just by bench-testing and mathematical formulas. All you can really do is build something and put it out there and see if it works.'

AP: There's a scene when you completely break down. What happened?

Balog: That's in May of 2007. ... I felt incredibly, intensely the pressure of man, this stuff has to work. I'm not here to be a scientist doing a field experiment. Nothing is of any value, any meaning, any purpose unless I can be sure that I come home with pictures. ... I'm not just there with my head on the camera crying because I'm upset that the camera is malfunctioning. I'm upset because I'm thinking the entire commitment, the entire obligation is going to fail. We're going to put out 12 cameras in Greenland and come back with garbage, so that was terribly stressful and upsetting.

Orlowski: It's gut-wrenching. It's hard for me to watch James in that scene, personally.

Balog: He loves to see me come apart, I know he does, really. (Laughs)

Orlowski: It was really powerful.



This 2005 photo released by Extreme Ice Survey shows National Geographic photographer James Balog in Iceland during the filming of "Chasing Ice." The film, about climate change, follows National Geographic photographer James Balog across the Arctic as he deploys revolutionary time-lapse cameras designed to capture a multi-year record of the world's changing glaciers. (AP Photo/Extreme Ice Survey)

AP: What was the absolute worst moment?

Balog: Probably the worst moment in the entire project ... that scene is in the film, when the helicopter pilot turns to my collaborator Jason Box and says 'Ah, we're losing oil pressure.'"... So you look out the window and you realize, 'Well, I hope that other engine just keeps working fine because it's really cold down there and there's icebergs and if we go in that we'll die really, really fast.' And as we were going back and this unfortunately wasn't caught on videotape, he came on the radio again. He said, 'I'm losing oil pressure in engine number two' and we were still a ways out from the landing field and then you're really starting to think 'OK, where's the life raft; where's the life jackets; what happens if we go down? What will this be like?' ... That's what really keeps me awake at night. That's what gets me upset when I'm saying goodbye to my daughters at home.

AP: What was it like watching the Ilulissat glacier in Greenland come apart?

Orlowski: It was just the two of us (Orlowski and Extreme Ice Survey field coordinator Adam LeWinter) watching this monumental event happen and nobody else was there to observe it or to see it. We felt very

fortunate that we were at the right place, at the right time, with the right equipment. ... There's a juxtaposition of emotions that you feel. When you're out there with the camera, you're really excited to capture that and you want that to happen so you can record it and document it, but when you look back at the footage you realize how horrific the story is and what it's actually telling.



This 2007 photo released by Extreme Ice Survey shows James Balog installing a "cliff" camera at Columbia Glacier in Alaska for the film, "Chasing Ice." The film, about climate change, follows Balog across the Arctic as he deploys revolutionary time-lapse cameras designed to capture a multi-year record of the world's changing glaciers. (AP Photo/Extreme Ice Survey)

AP: James, you were once a climate change skeptic.

Balog: Nooo, no no no. Let's not overstate that. No. Look, 25 years ago I thought that maybe there was a lot of hyperbole around this. I thought that the science was based on computer models which I knew at the time

were relatively sketchy. Computer models are quite good now. Also like almost everybody else on this planet back then, it never occurred to me that humans were capable of altering the basic physics and chemistry of the planet.

AP: Why do you think this film might have a different impact than other climate change documentaries like "An Inconvenient Truth"?

Orlowski: What James has been able to accomplish is taking this invisible subject matter of climate change and making it visual, making it emotional and so people can see it for the first time and when you can see it, you understand it in a different way.

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