

# Sundance goes green as VR makers aim to save the planet

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This year's Sundance Film Festival in Park City, Utah is focusing on climate change, with numerous virtual reality experiences among the usual slate of features and documentaries

When consumers get excited about advances in virtual reality, they are usually thinking about videogaming, new and immersive movie-watching or—let's face it—pornography.

But a number of projects presented at the Sundance Film Festival have a loftier goal in mind—saving the planet.

The annual get-together for indie filmmakers and fans in the Utah mountains is focusing on climate change, with numerous [virtual reality](#) experiences among the usual slate of features and documentaries.

One of the most impressive, "Under the Canopy," highlights the urgency of preserving the Amazon rainforest by focusing on local communities hit hardest by deforestation.

Developed by Conservation International (CI) and content developer Jaunt VR, the 15-minute film takes viewers through the rainforest guided by Kamanja, a member of the indigenous Trio community.

With a headset in place, viewers can look all around as they are guided through the jungle canopy, past sloths and an anaconda snake, and are shown how vital the habitat is for mankind's future.

"Everybody doesn't have the time to go to the Amazon. It's expensive, it's inconvenient," CI marketing executive Jamie Cross told journalists at a demonstration of the technology.

"So we see VR giving us the opportunity to transport people there. It's not just transporting them, it's really giving them the opportunity to make a connection with the people who are there."

## **Urban encroachment**

The Amazon—the planet's largest tropical rainforest—produces 20 percent of the world's breathable oxygen and is home to 10 percent of the world's species, not to mention 30 million people.

Yet 5,800 square miles (15,000 square kilometers)—an area the size of Connecticut—is lost each year to agricultural expansion, urban encroachment and resource extraction.

Researchers at the University of Georgia, Stanford, and the University of Connecticut have shown that VR experiences can give people a more empathic view of the natural world.

In a series of VR experiments, researchers had participants assuming the role of a cow herded into a truck with a virtual cattle prod, or a piece of coral suffering the effects of acidifying oceans.

The results, published last September in the Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication, found that VR gave viewers "greater perceptions of imminence of the environmental risk" than people who were simply shown a video.

Another VR production studio looking at deforestation is New York-based "Here Be Dragons," which immerses the viewer in the entire lifecycle of a single tree, from seedling to destruction by man.

It's not just rainforest destruction that threatens the environment, of course.

Founded by award-winning American-Singaporean filmmaker and former war photographer Danfung Dennis, 34, Condition One has developed "Melting Ice," which transports audiences to vanishing glacial ice sheets.

## **'Compassion'**

It is a companion piece to opening night premiere "An Inconvenient Sequel: Truth to Power," former US vice president Al Gore's follow-up

to the Oscar-winning "An Inconvenient Truth" (2006).

Standing under collapsing glaciers and next to raging rivers of ice melt and rising sea levels, viewers witness the waymarkers to the planet's precarious future.

To capture the enchanting but unstable landscape, Dennis used ice screws to anchor himself and his 360-degree VR camera as he filmed in Greenland.

"For the first time, we are able to capture these inner subjective experiences... We are getting glimpses of being able to truly step into another person's shoes," Dennis told AFP.

"With that ability, we have a powerful way to invoke empathy and compassion for others who may be very different from ourselves."

VR is still something of a novelty but its advocates say the technology is advancing quickly and expect 2017 to be a crucial year.

Taiwan-based HTC, with its Vive VR headwear, is competing with PlayStation VR and Facebook-owned Oculus Rift, with each wooing software developers by constantly refining the hardware.

HTC recently announced a \$10 million fund for creators to produce virtual reality content, playable on any platform, that highlights key sustainability issues around the world.

"VR is at a nascent time in its distribution. It's going to be a slow build before this becomes a consumer market," Dennis told AFP.

"But it will happen. I think this is the next computing platform, the next communication medium."

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