

A FILM BY ANDREW BURTON & MICHAEL KIRBY SMITH

NEWTOK

THE WATER IS RISING



RUNNING TIME: 93 MINUTES



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EDITOR: DAVIS COOMBE ORIGINAL SCORE: WILLIAM RYAN FRITCH
DIRECTORS OF PHOTOGRAPHY: ANDREW BURTON AND MICHAEL KIRBY SMITH

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After decades of government inaction put them in the direct path of a slow-moving climate disaster, the Indigenous village of Newtok, Alaska, may still be able to keep their community intact, but their future hinges on the political will of those in power and finding the money to build a new village.

SHORT SYNOPSIS

Water will erase Newtok, Alaska. Built on a delta at the edge of the Bering Sea, the tiny Yup'ik village has been dealing with melting permafrost, river erosion and decaying infrastructure for decades. To keep their culture and community intact, the 360 Yup'ik residents must relocate their entire village to stable ground upriver while facing a federal government that has failed to take appropriate action to combat climate change. In moving their village, they will become some of America's first 21st century climate refugees. It is a film about a village seeking justice in the face of climate disaster.

LONG SYNOPSIS

Water will erase Newtok, Alaska. Built on a delta at the edge of the Bering Sea, the tiny Yup'ik village has seen melting permafrost, river erosion and decaying infrastructure for decades. Warming temperatures have turbo-charged erosion and the Ninglick River, once a mile away, now churns at the edge of the village. The 360 Yup'ik residents face an unprecedented challenge: To keep their culture and community intact, they must relocate their entire village to stable ground upriver while facing a federal government that has failed to take appropriate action to combat climate change. To flee the land they've known for millennia would mean risking the future of traditional knowledge, language and cultural bonds. Either way, the people of Newtok will become climate refugees. NEWTOK follows Della Carl, a single mother of three; Albertina Charles, a widowed community leader and teacher; and Andrew John, a former Marine tasked with helping relocate his community. It is a film about a village seeking justice in the face of climate disaster.



CHARACTERS

YUP'IK / THE REAL PEOPLE



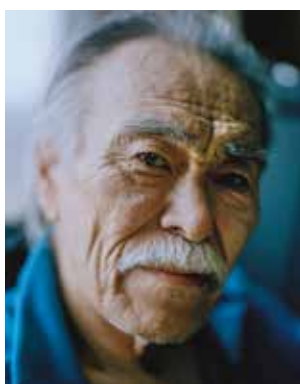
Naunraq / Andrew John

Born and raised in Newtok, Andrew John enlisted in the military and served in both Afghanistan and Iraq. After returning from active duty, he settled into family life in Anchorage and worked toward an associate degree until Andrew's uncle and Newtok Village Council administrator, Tom John, vanished while seal hunting in the Bering Sea in his kayak. Tom's death left a hole in the community's crucial relocation efforts and the village council asked Andrew to step into the role. He moved his family from the comforts of Anchorage to a single-room home riddled with black mold to manage the construction efforts in Mertarvik, where the villagers would be relocated. While Andrew's acceptance of the leadership role came with a price, it also provided an easier path to preserving his culture and educating his children in the Yup'ik ways of hunting and gathering.



Cukayaq / Della Carl

Della Carl grew up and lived in Newtok until she left home to pursue a university education. She studied in Fairbanks and spent portions of her adult life in other Alaskan cities and towns before returning to the village. The encroaching river forced Della and her three children to move in with her parents and extended family. With scarce housing and economic opportunities in Newtok, Della must choose between providing economic security for her children and offering emotional support as they crash headlong into the move across the river.



Cimiugaq / George Carl

Village Councilmember George Carl has been present for Newtok's political struggles and cultural successes since the village was founded. Born in the traditional village of Kayalavik, George and his parents moved to Newtok in the 1950s after federal authorities threatened the Yup'ik people with jail if they didn't assimilate to a Western education system. There, he lived in a sod house before leaving the village for boarding school. He returned to work on the construction crew that built the homes that are currently threatened with collapse. A longtime member of the village council, he has lobbied for support for the move from federal and state authorities. He is Della's father.



Apurin / Albertina Charles

Albertina is a teacher and one of the people who holds the Newtok community together. When she speaks, the community listens. Over the years, Albertina has taught the Yup'ik language to hundreds of children, expanding her classroom to the land and water surrounding the village. She has held several positions of leadership in the village and her home—now one of the closest to the erosion line—has acted as a refuge for children who found themselves in need of support.



NIUGTAQ / NEWTOK BACKGROUND

The Yup'ik people have hunted, fished and lived on the lands surrounding the village of Newtok for millennia, but Newtok as a permanent village is much younger. In the 1950s, a barge carrying supplies for a Bureau of Indian Affairs school landed at Newtok when it couldn't navigate any further and began unloading construction materials. Traditionally, the Yup'ik people followed seasons across the landscape, but the federal government decided that this marshy, estuary zone that Yup'ik used during the winter's freeze would serve as the permanent school location. Under threat of imprisonment, the US government coerced the Yup'ik community to settle in Newtok in order to educate their children. By 1983, erosion of the banks of the Ninglick River caused by a combination of waves, currents and melting permafrost—a permanently frozen layer

of ground below the earth's surface—already posed such a threat that geologists and engineers concluded it would likely be less expensive to relocate the village than to try to stop the approaching river. It took Newtok residents decades of work, but by the end of 2003 they completed a crucial land swap with the federal government for a new village site. But full funding for the relocation repeatedly fell through even as the river threatened the community's drinking water and residents began abandoning their homes. By 2019, the village secured enough federal aid to build new homes across the river on solid ground for a third of the villagers. Today, the Newtok Village Council continues to lobby federal and state agencies to reunite the community.



Globally, an estimated 1.4 billion people may have to move due to rising seas by 2060—but Newtok, Alaska must move now.



A DANGEROUS GROWING TREND

According to the International Displacement Monitoring Centre, in 2017 alone an estimated 18.8 million people worldwide were forced to move due to natural disasters. Forecasts say that between 25 million and 1 billion climate migrants may be forced to relocate by 2050. The village of Newtok is part of a growing trend that can be seen in the United States, too: Climate change is here, but it doesn't affect us all equally.

Across the country, families must decide whether to stay or leave their home, to relinquish or to rebuild, to keep families together or to separate. Climate change disasters—growing in frequency and intensity—are disproportionately impacting low-income communities, Indigenous people and people of color. Yet too little is being done by state or federal agencies to prepare those most impacted, as is the case with Newtok, which is only one of more than 30 Native villages in Alaska that will need assistance to relocate.

How do we make sure that climate change does not continue to accelerate already powerful inequities and injustices in our country? Can we come together as a nation and demand that we transition to a future that is more just? The list of communities on the front line of climate change continues to grow. Thankfully, so does the list of the ones fighting for justice.



A NOTE ON AGENCY FROM THE DIRECTORS

We were the only journalists granted almost unfettered access by the Village Council to one of the most important stories unfolding in America, and we were keenly aware of our position as outsiders. The community didn't need this story to be told in order to relocate their village, but the rest of America needed to hear it. Mass climate migrations are on our doorstep.

We rooted ourselves in the history and issues by interviewing dozens of scientists, historians, anthropologists and elders. We are grateful to Marie Meade, who helped produce and lead our interviews and reporting in Yup'ik. She knew the questions we didn't know to ask. We assembled a majority women and Indigenous editorial and cultural advisory board made up of scholars, historians, philosophers and village members to review the film and to cover the blind spots that inevitably existed in our perspective. Our goal was to have the people of Newtok lead the story.



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elders/teachers

Warren Jones

Yup'ik philosopher and writer

DIRECTORS

Michael Kirby Smith and **Andrew Burton** are documentary filmmakers and photojournalists who have covered conflict, protest, natural disasters and presidential campaigns for outlets including The New York Times, The New Yorker, National Geographic, The Washington Post, TIME and Getty Images. Their work has been honored by the Pulitzer Prize (Finalist, 2016); Sundance Institute (Grantees, 2019); Photographer of the Year International (2011); American Photography (32 & 34) and PDN Photo Annual, amongst others.

In 2016 Burton and Smith set out to make a film that showed the impact of climate change on an American community in real time. They logged nearly 300 days in Newtok, Alaska, until production ended in 2020. In the coming years, they hope to continue supporting Newtok's efforts to complete its move through the body of photography and reporting they completed during the creation of the film.

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