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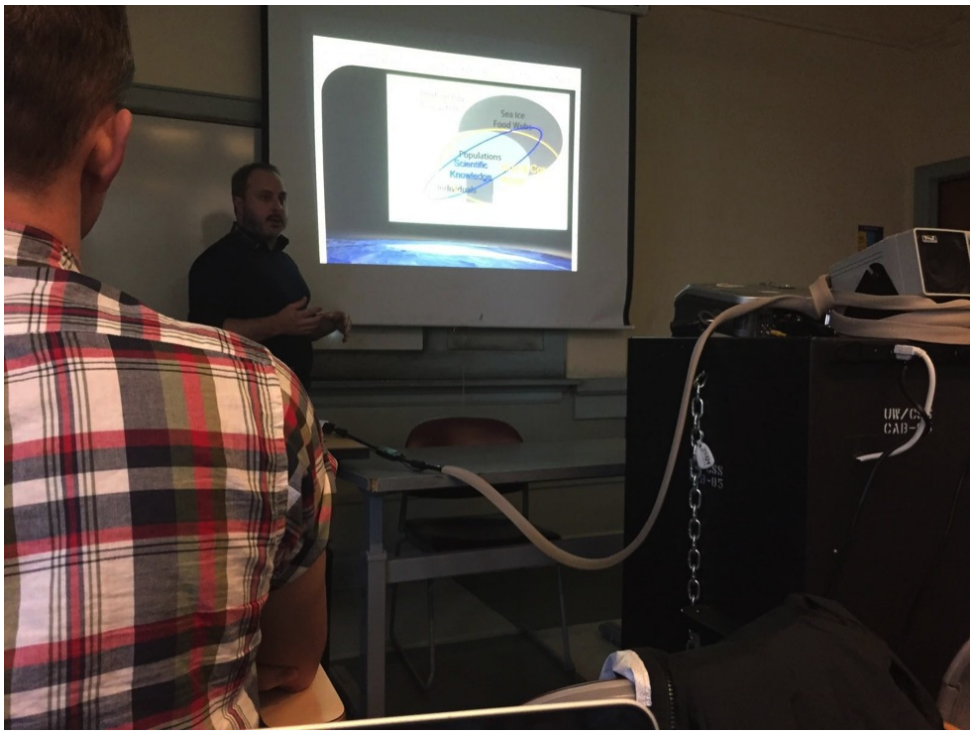

Heath discusses his Ph.D. research with a classroom of students in Thomson Hall. Photo by Jack Truitt.

Documentary film producer is this year's Canada Fulbright visiting chair in Arctic studies

By Jack Truitt
November 17, 2014

The director and producer of the award-winning documentary "People of a Feather," spoke with Jackson School students on Nov. 10 about his research on the eider duck, his film, and the problems that hydroelectric dams pose for the Arctic.

Joel Heath, who is the 2014-15 Canada Fulbright visiting chair in Arctic studies at the Jackson School, spent seven years working on the documentary in the Belcher islands in Canada's Hudson Bay studying the eider duck and its relationships with local Inuit communities. The film went on to receive numerous accolades and was nominated for best feature documentary at the 2014 Canadian Screen Awards in March.

"It's really helped open a dialogue about the issues happening in Hudson Bay," said Heath, who has now returned to his roots in academia hoping to build on the success of his documentary and address current environmental issues the Arctic faces.

The documentary explores the relationship the Inuit people on the Belcher islands have with the eider duck, and how that relationship is affected by challenges of the modern world.

His Ph.D. research focused on the hunting habits of the eider, which gets its food by diving to the bottom of the seafloor where it consumes mussels and sea urchins. By tracking the ducks' hunting trips during periods with different current velocity (which can be affected by climate change), Heath was able to gather all kinds of data on their hunting habits and how they vary throughout different current and tidal patterns, and lunar cycles.

In addition to his academic work, Heath is also the executive director at the Arctic Eider Society (AES), a Canadian charity that works to combine traditional knowledge and scientific research to address issues of local concern.

The eider duck. Photo by Thomas Reich.

Heath and the AES produced educational packages that go along with more culturally relevant material for math and science classes in Canada's northern provinces, which often go overlooked in a country where most of the population lives within 100 miles of the southern border with the United States.

After attending a seminar on research about the significant decline in the eider duck population in the 1990s, Heath pursued his Ph.D. researching eiders in the Hudson Bay and spending time with, and learning from, local communities in the region.

After discussing this research with the class, Heath focused on other issues facing the Arctic, most notably the effect of hydroelectric dams on the region's rivers.

He first looked into the effects of hydroelectric dams after going to the Arctic to study the effects of climate change on the region and hearing more and more about the dams from the local population. "It really took me a while to understand," he said.

The dams create an unnatural changing of the seasons for their rivers. Typically, a river peaks in the spring when all of the ice built up over the winter begins melting. But the dams instead prop up currents in the winter to create electricity needed for things like heating, which is in demand during the wintertime.

This affects the ice levels in the North, which in turn affects the habitat for animals like the eider duck, which may have less water to hunt in.

Heath said it is difficult for someone living in Toronto to understand the impact their behavior may have on Inuit communities in the North, who are on the frontline of many environmental changes.

"These are some of the people that see and feel the effects in their everyday life," Heath said.

In the United States, some efforts to tear down hydroelectric dams have been successful, but this can lead to the building of dams in Canada that are made to export their energy to the United States. This is simply "exporting environmental justice issues to Canada," Heath said.

Environmental issues that know no boundaries are only made more complex by overlapping jurisdictions and other logistical problems.

But these challenges are precisely what the Jackson School's Center for Canadian Studies and its Arctic Studies program seek to solve. And is an important aspect of Heath's role as the Canada Fulbright Visiting Chair in his time at the UW this year.

"It's an opportunity to think about some of the Arctic issues that cross the border between Canada and the United States," he said.