

Arts & Travel

Israeli documentary highlights environmental problems

By SHELDON KIRSHNER
Staff Reporter

Preserving our precious environment from human-induced degradation is no small task. Whether we are fighting to save forests in Canada, jungles in Brazil, rivers in Mexico or lakes in Russia, the struggle against mindless polluters

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never really ceases.

At last week's sixth annual Planet in Focus Festival, Toronto's film and video festival, this important issue was highlighted yet again.

Planet Earth Once, a 25-minute documentary by Miri Urman and Amit Miller, which had its Canadian premiere here, focused on problems in Israel.

This engaging film, in Hebrew with English subtitles, follows a group of young Israeli environmentalists, known as Megama Yeruka, around Israel as they try to raise environmental awareness in a country obsessed by security concerns and the threat of random terrorism.

Sometimes dressed as clowns on stilts, or merrily bouncing a ball with a map of the world, they campaign to win hearts and minds with humour and passion.

Their chief concern appears to be the Trans Israel Highway, a north-south road being laid out by a Canadian company.

There is no cogent explanation why this super highway is bad for the environment. But the filmmakers leave the impression that far too many trees are being sacrificed for the sake of this road.

Planet Earth Once, in fact, begins as a young protester tries in vain to stop a bulldozer from doing its work. Pushing and shouting ensue, and the cry of "leave me alone" is heard.

Midway through the film, which unfolds in part to the rhythms of Hebrew hip-hop music, demonstrators chide an Israeli bank for its role in financing the construction of the highway.

In the port of Eilat, the activists warn of the perils of water and air pollution, and in Ashkelon, they rail against a coal-fired power plant.



Megama Yeruka activists in Israel call for environmental awareness.

Stopping at the Israeli Arab town of Um al Fahm, they call for the recycling of garbage, and succeed in persuading schoolchildren to shout in unison, "We will protect the environment."

Pulling up in the town of Netivot in their brightly coloured van, they urge children to preserve energy. And in Jerusalem, they lambaste a municipal decision to raze a forest so that an underground parking lot can be erected.

Ending their tour in Tel Aviv, they demonstrate against air pollution and speak of the spectre of global warming.

They seem to be fighting an uphill battle on behalf of mother earth, but their cause is just, as *Planet Earth Once* suggests.