

National Association of Interpreters
Region 9 Spring Workshop
Rising Tides: Riding the Waves of Change
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**“Getting Personal:
Storytelling as a Tool for Climate Change Education”**

INTRODUCTION

RISE: Climate Change and Coastal Communities is a media series exploring the impact of sea level rise and extreme weather, caused by climate change, on people living near the water. What is the connection between climate change and both sea level rise and extreme weather? What is already happening along our coasts? What are the future scenarios predicted by climate scientists as global warming progresses? How can we adapt to climate change impacts that we can no longer halt?

RISE looks at this national – and international – issue through the lens of a single place; The San Francisco Bay.

Underlying all of my work is an attempt to find ways to use media to educate the public about environmental issues of the day. How does one do this? And how does one then inspire an audience to learn more, to share what they’ve learned and possibly to take action?

There is an on-going debate among climate change educators about how to present this topic. Should we lay out the full, terrible reality of the biggest crisis faced by human civilization and threaten people into sitting up and listening? Or should we soft sell through entertainment and coax them into engagement? I tend to come down on the “entertainment” side. I feel that media with a “bummer” message only scares people away.

One way to approach a hard, depressing subject like climate change is through storytelling. I call this “Show-not-Tell”: Let your audience enter into the lives of someone who has an interesting story to tell and in the process they come to understand a broader idea.

I call my principal subjects “characters.” They are, indeed, real people telling real stories. But they also have to be real characters. Interesting, articulate, funny, engaging. They need to “wake you up.” In this way, the

audience comes to like them, identify or empathize with them, and see the connection between the character's story and their own lives.

In this talk we'll view some of the RISE stories and explore the ideas of building a story, using characters and addressing difficult issues without scaring your audience.

BODY

In order to reach a wide and diverse audience, I planned, from the outset to create this piece in three distinct formats: radio, podcast and webstory. Each has its own distribution strategy. And each is geared to reach a different segment of my target audience, which is – everybody!

Please take a look at the RISE website at: www.searise.org

The RISE radio series is comprised of three hour-long documentary Audio Specials. In a three-hour format I am able to go deeply into the complexities of the issue, to spend time with my characters and let the audience into their lives. Distribution of the radio Specials was very successful. They were broadcast on over 170 public radio stations in the U.S. Internationally they were distributed via NPR Worldwide throughout Europe, the Middle East, northern Africa, western Russia and to every U.S. base in the world through Armed Services Radio.

The six 20-minute RISE podcasts are designed to be streamed or downloaded on mobile devices. Earbuds (or earphones) allow an audience to appreciate the high quality audio in stereo. Podcasts are fast becoming a powerful medium for sharing stories and information and are, in particular, entering the mainstream for young adults. Primary audiences for this format are Bay Area locals and visitors including ferry boat riders and Bay hikers.

RISE has also been formatted as six short multimedia webstories. The audio is a rich mix of voices and sound beds. These short stories do not allow for the level of complexity of an hour-long radio documentary or a 20-minute podcast. But I can reach a different audience. The RISE webstories have been showcased on a variety of outlets including climateinterpreter.org, National Geographic and the San Francisco Aquarium of the Bay, the Monterey Bay Aquarium's website and on a kiosk at the California Academy of Science.

[Beside the Tide](#)

The first piece in the webstory series is *Beside the Tide*. This is the “overview” piece. It addresses questions such as:

- How is climate change creating sea level rise and extreme weather?
- How are they working together to create greater flood risk?
- What impact will this have along populated coastlines?
- How “real” is this?
- How are we measuring it?
- What do people think about it?

Along with a few primary voices, I designed what I call the “Greek Chorus” for this piece. This is a “Vox Pop” which is a technique often used in radio. It’s also called *Voce Populare* or Voice of the People or Man on the Street. To record our Greek Chorus, we went to the Financial District five or six different times. We approached a lot of strangers and asked them all a set of the same questions. Then we edited their responses based on themes.

Please watch *Beside the Tide* now:

<http://www.searise.org/webstories/beside-the-tide/>

[Hard Choices](#)

This is our “Solutions” piece. How are we going to adapt to sea level rise? We explore the two primary solutions: levees and wetlands. And then we talk about how we also have to start thinking outside of the box if we are going to solve this huge problem.

Please watch *Hard Choices* now:

<http://www.searise.org/webstories/hard-choices/>

There is a trade-off between short and long format; the hour-long version of this piece allowed time for digressions. For example, when I recorded wetlands restoration in Cooling Landing, I was running with all my equipment across the mudflats, after our scientist. I sunk into the mud, down to my knees. Stuck like tar baby. So we put this story into the longer version. It serves to humanize me, the recordist and add some levity to the subject.

[Rooted at the Water’s Edge](#)

This is the first real story-based piece in the web series. *Rooted at the Water’s Edge* raises a single, but complex question: Even when we do understand what’s coming, why don’t we act? To address this question we

tell the story of a single character, Delta Farmer Steve Mello. In Steve's case, his need to create a family legacy blinds him to the reality of his situation. We spent a lot of time with Steve and his family. And we include lots of details that "show-not-tell" the point about family legacy. These vignettes don't add hard facts to the piece, but help the audience understand who Steve is, his relationship with his son and his wife and why his family's legacy is so important to him.

Please watch Rooted at the Water's Edge now:

<http://www.searise.org/webstories/rooted-at-the-waters-edge/>

It was important in telling Steve's story that we didn't blame him for the decisions he is making. We don't make him look stupid. Instead, we try to show him as a sympathetic individual. And hopefully the audience can identify with him and see connections to their situation, without feeling threatened.

[Mortgaging the Future](#)

Like the last piece, Mortgaging the Future is a portrait of a single person, T. Jack Foster Jr., and his family. We spent a lot of time with T. Jack, eating pizza with his family and touring the town he built. This piece asks the same question at Rooted: Why aren't people at the edge of the water acting, even when sea level rise directly threatens their home? But this story suggests another answer, based on T. Jack's situation, namely that many of us have a financial stake in the status quo.

Please watch Mortgaging the Future now:

<http://www.searise.org/webstories/mortgaging-the-future/>

This was a trickier piece because it is saying that T. Jack can't admit there's a threat because he's made millions of dollars while destroying the Bay's wetlands. I tried to represent his point of view fairly, without compromising the science. And when the family saw the finished piece, they did say that they thought I gave them a fair hearing, even though they didn't agree with the conclusion.

[The Flood Next Time](#)

Please watch The Flood Next Time now:

<http://www.searise.org/webstories/the-flood-next-time/>

One thing I love about this piece is that we have a character, Chuey's cousin Jose, who is just an regular guy, explaining the threat to his home town of Alviso. Jose happened to have seen a documentary on KQED-TV the night before we recorded the family that talked about the climate change threat to Alviso, so he had the facts fresh in his mind. Unlike climate scientist "experts," Jose talks about the issues in ordinary language that anyone can relate to. Then through wildlife biologist Mendel Stewart and narration we explain the details of how it works. Again, it's the real people and real stories that can make the greatest impact.

Another thing that I like about this piece is that our climate "expert," Mendel Stewart, is a natural part of the story. His wetland's operation is right in front of Alviso and his work directly impacts Chuey's family. In the longer version it is clear that they all know one another. Whenever possible, I try to make the expert testimony a natural part of the story I am telling.

[Tide Ride](#)

This piece is actually not about climate change, but it is certainly science education. Tide Ride is a celebration of the San Francisco Bay. It gives people a reason to care about the Bay, its incredible biodiversity, the powerful forces of current and wind that shape it. To do this we invite the audience to take a tour of the Bay with kayaker and journalist Paul McHugh.

Please watch Tide Ride now:

<http://www.searise.org/webstories/tide-ride/>

From the beginning, it was clear that Paul was a real "character." He is a journalist who writes about the environment and nature. And he is an outdoorsman. He knew a tremendous amount about the Bay. And he's also the kind of guy who comes to dinner bringing his own appetizer of roasted venison – that he shot, butchered and cooked himself.

Recording Paul was a challenge, but really fun. We used binaural microphones, clipped to his hat beside each ear. Wherever he turns his head, we hear what he heard. With headphones or earbuds you can follow him paddling: left, right, left...

Paul also talks a lot about the impacts of climate change on the Bay, which we wove into the longer versions of the other pieces.

CONCLUSION

I do hope you can take the time to listen to the longer versions of RISE. It's all up on our website at: www.searise.org.

And if you have a use for these stories – in your museum, visitor center, library, small theater or website – I'd love to hear from you!

Thank you,
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