

# PRESS KIT

A ONE HOUR DOCUMENTARY



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# POSSUM WARS

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# SYNOPSIS

## ONELINE

When possums and people fight for real estate – it's war! The one-hour documentary POSSUM WARS lifts the lid on the private world of Australia's most unwanted marsupial and its battle to survive in the big city.

## ONEPARAGRAPH

Every night around Australia, thousands of native possums scamper across city rooftops in an endless quest for food and shelter. Forced out of their bush habitats by clearing and development, these mischievous marsupials swarm into cities where their raucous noise and destructive appetites bring them few friends. And when possums and people fight for real estate it's war! The one-hour documentary POSSUM WARS lifts the lid on the private world of Australia's most unwanted marsupial and its battle to survive in the big city.



# ONEPAGE

Every night around Australia, native possums scamper across city rooftops in an endless quest for food and shelter.

Forced out of their bush habitats by encroaching development, these mischievous marsupials swarm into cities where their raucous noise and destructive appetites bring them few friends. They live in our roofs, pillage our fruit trees, plunder our flowers and pee on our paths.

And when possums and people fight for real estate it's war!

Angry residents repel the invaders using stinking sprays, electronic zappers and sonic blasters. When all else fails, they call in the professionals; possum removal is booming as a multi-million-dollar industry.

An intimate and irresistible story, the one-hour documentary POSSUM WARS lifts the lid on the private world of Australia's most unwanted marsupial and its battle to survive in the big city.

We meet Mumsy, the 14-year-old matriarch of Melbourne's Curtain Square, and her growing brood, including new joey, Buster, and elder daughter Scamp, who is forced to search for a new home beyond the safety of the park. For years the ancient elms have been Mumsy's refuge in a predatory world of cats and dogs, cars, people and power lines. But her urban life is about to become tougher.

Angry residents argue the 60 possum residents of Curtain Square are in plague proportions and their voracious appetites are killing the park's historic trees. Killing them or moving them is illegal so the local Council has engaged scientists to implant them with contraceptives.

It's a controversial decision that's divided the community, drawn media scrutiny and infuriated animal activists who will do anything – including break the law – to save them.



# PRODUCTION STORY



Considering POSSUM WARS evolved from a premise that most Australians have a possum story, producer Sally Ingleton should not have been surprised when she had her own possum drama during filming.

“While we were researching POSSUM WARS I had a mum and a baby living in my roof,” Ingleton says.

“We thought they were jumping on to the roof from the trees around the house so we pruned all those back and they started to climb up the drain pipe.



“I realised that they were getting into the range-hood vent so we had to wait until after dark when they left for the evening and go up and put chicken wire over the vent. But they still came back – they just had other access points.”

Then we discovered they were getting in through these tiny holes between the roofing iron and the guttering so we had to block those too. I felt like I was living in my own film!”

The one-hour documentary goes into the roofs and treetops of the inner city to reveal the private world of Australia’s most unloved marsupial and its battle to survive in an urban environment.

POSSUM WARS follows the plight of the 60 or so possums that live in Curtain Square, a leafy park in inner suburban Melbourne.



At the centre of the tale are 14-year-old matriarch Mumsy and her growing family, including new joey, Buster, and elder daughter Scamp, who must search for a home beyond the safety of the park. For years the elms of Curtain Square have provided refuge for native possums in a predatory world of cats and dogs, cars, people and power lines. But their existence is in danger.

Angry residents argue the Curtain Square possums are now in plague proportions and their voracious appetites are killing the park's historic trees. Possums are a protected native species – killing or moving them is illegal – so residents repel the invaders using stinking sprays, electronic zappers and sonic blasters. The local council wants to implant them with contraceptives.

Taking an opposing view are animal activists, such as Rheya Linden, the founder of Animal Active. Linden has been feeding the possums for 13 years and lobbies for their protection.

Conflict is never far away and the filmmakers believe Curtain Square is a microcosm for a situation found in cities around Australia.

"Possums are very polarising," Ingleton says. "Some people are very fond of them and enjoy having wildlife in their garden but many others see them as a pest and nuisance and want to get rid of them. Most of us see them all the time, they're in our backyards, but really we don't know a lot about them; how they rear their babies; how they see at night; where they sleep; what makes them tick. We know very little about their private lives."

Writer and director Bruce Permezel sees the situation at Curtain Square as a "lovely narrative that tells a bigger story".

"There are people who love possums and people who hate possums all in a small area," Permezel says. "Then there is the issue of how authorities deal with wildlife populations living up close to humans. The Council is between a rock and a hard place. They want to see wildlife but it's got to be managed."

While dramatic events occurred throughout the two-year production period – including six solid months of filming – the story unfolded gradually.

Permezel is grateful to have encountered strong characters along the way. Wildlife activist Linden, whose devotion to the possums has led to an artificial increase in their population; possum carers Chris Michaelides and Jodie Cox and their tiny charges, Beetle and Sticks, and "Paul the Possum Catcher", whose practical pragmatism and possum tales paint a picture of widespread suburban discontent.

"Paul the Possum Catcher has such a practical, down-to-earth knowledge about possums and the frustrations that possums cause people," Permezel says. "On the first day I spent with him I knew that he would be able to tell the story. Everyone complains about possums and he's heard every story."

It was only during filming that Permezel realised – after his wife spotted a magnet on their fridge – that Paul the Possum Catcher had captured and released a possum from his own roof 10 years earlier. Everyone has a possum story.



But the stars of the film are the possums themselves.

“POSSUM WARS gives an insight into the individual lives of possums and if you get to see their nightly lives and their struggle I think you start to care about the animal,” Permezel says.

“Possums are really marginalised and people just don’t care about them. They’re considered vermin and yet they are a protected native species. They don’t get the respect they deserve.”

Making the documentary wasn’t always easy. Possums are nocturnal and despite their regular interaction with the human world, are not always active. Permezel recalls many cold, wet winter nights driving around Melbourne with acclaimed wildlife cinematographer David Parer in search of possums on the move.

“I was lucky to work with David Parer, who is one of Australia’s best wildlife directors and cinematographers,” he says. “We spent a lot of time driving around in his four-wheel drive spotting possums and probably terrorising neighbourhoods by shining lights into backyards. Most of the time possums are just up in the tree doing very little so you’ve got to have the patience to wait. He has a wonderful ability of wanting to film all night. I’d be looking at my watch at 2am and he’d say ‘let’s just do another hour’”

While the urban-dwelling marsupials were used to human interaction they remained naturally cautious. And as nocturnal animals they were sensitive to light.

“To capture the most natural nighttime behaviour we used a Canon 7D camera modified to shoot in infrared. That meant we could be more hidden and the possums would exhibit more natural behaviour.”





The filmmakers also trawled websites such as YouTube, sourcing footage and stories about urban possum adventures.

“New technology has given us a window into people’s lives and stories,” Ingleton says. “YouTube is a great phenomenon and everyone can be a filmmaker – people have made their own little films about their experiences with possums so we have been contacting these owners and seeking permission to use that footage.”

While Ingleton and Permezel did not take sides in making the film, presenting each point of view and allowing people to reach their own conclusions, Ingleton hopes the film leaves them with a greater understanding of the possums’ plight.

“The most important thing to me is that an audience gets to understand possums and maybe has a little bit more sympathy for them. We would like to encourage people to learn how to live with native wildlife.”

Permezel concurs.

“I did come away with the feeling that more needs to be done to look after our urban wildlife. We’re in a very privileged position in that we do share our lives with native animals and that’s some thing I feel won’t be around forever. Even the possums we see, their habitat is going and who knows if they’ll be around in 20 years time.”

Making POSSUM WARS has changed his life in an unexpected way too.

“I’ve become the go-to guy for people with possum problems now,” he says, laughing. “People text me photos of their possum poo – ‘Is it a possum or a rat, what should I do? Help me’. I try to give them good advice and then I call Paul!”



# ABOUT POSSUMS

A native Australian marsupial, the common brushtail possum is the most widely distributed possum in Australia and can be found in forests and woodlands along the east coast and further inland along tree-lined rivers and creeks.

The brushtail possum is about the size of a domestic cat and has a pointed snout, pink nose, long whiskers and large ears. Their colour varies from state to state, ranging from black or grey in Tasmania to copper coloured in Queensland.



A nocturnal animal, possums are active at night and usually spend the day sleeping. They are expert climbers and have sharp claws, opposable thumbs and a strong tail.

Possums are very territorial and stick to their “home range”, marking their territory with a scent to deter intruders. Possums have adapted well to contact with people and commonly take up residence in the roofs of houses. Urban possums face a constant battle for space – a habitable tree is like an apartment block with every branch occupied – so noisy fights over territory are common. While they make loud and dramatic squawking and hissing sounds when threatened, possums generally will avoid a fight and seldom harm each other.

Brushtail possums spend a lot of their time foraging on the ground. In bush habitats they’ll eat leaves, shrubs, fruit, flowers, grass, fungi, birds’ eggs and sometimes baby birds. Urban dwelling possums will scavenge through rubbish bins and eat just about anything – including ice cream and pizza!

## Did you know?

- A female brushtail possum is ready to reproduce from between 14 -16 months of age. She will have at least one baby a year until she dies.
- Male possums will mate with as many females as they can, but do not participate in the rearing of their young.
- A tiny brushtail is born just 18 days after conception. As little more than an acorn-sized embryo, it crawls to its mother’s pouch where it will suckle for several months.
- Once out of the pouch, brushtail ‘joeys’ ride on their mother’s back for two months.
- A dark layer of pigment concentrates light to their retina and gives them excellent night vision.
- With large bell-shaped ears to gather sound and an enlarged olfactory bulb in their skull, possums have extraordinary hearing and an amazing sense of smell.
- Possums will often eat from one preferred tree, stripping bark and leaves until the tree dies.
- About 50 per cent of female possums and 85 per cent of males die within their first year.
- Brushtail possums have been known to live for 10 to 12 years in the wild whereas they usually only live about six years or less in the city.

# CHARACTERS

## POSSUM LOVER

**Rheya Linden** has been an animal rights activist and pro-possum campaigner for over 20 years. She's the founder and chief organiser of Animal Active, and she's been coming to Curtain Square to feed possums for 13 years. It's a big commitment. She's there at least three times a week, as she believes there's not enough natural food around to sustain them. This infuriates the local 'possum-haters'.



We follow Rheya as she prepares and delivers food to the possums. She has a good understanding of their social networks. Rheya knows them all by name and can tell us the personality and history of each animal. Her favourite is 'Mumsy', a 14-year old female that Rheya calls 'the park's possum matriarch'. Rheya admires Mumsy and even regards her a 'role model for all women' for her resilience and wily ways. While Rheya is both articulate and charming, many in the community consider her the 'mad possum lady'.

Rheya and her supporters are outraged at the council's plans to make the Curtain Square possums infertile and are intent on protecting the animals they consider 'family'.

Along with controlling the possum's fertility, the Council has decided to enforce a ban on artificial feeding. Rheya continues to feed the possums in the name of welfare. She and her Animal Active supporters also are outraged when Council put metal bands on some trees to prevent possums from accessing their foliage. Rheya enters the park late at night and pulls the bands down. She's strong willed, and stubborn, and will do anything to protect her marsupial mates.

## POSSUM SCIENTIST

**Kath Handasyde** is a senior lecturer in zoology at Melbourne University, and an expert on possum behaviour. She has taken on a possum persona and wears her hair in a 'possum tail'!

Kath provides us with credible scientific information about possum biology and helps us understand why these marsupials have adapted so well to city life.



# PAUL THE POSSUM CATCHER

There are more than 50 full time possum removalists around Melbourne. They're the last resort for frustrated residents who have a noisy possum in the roof of their home.

**Paul Nolch** is 49 and has been in the 'possum industry' for more than 20 years. Some time ago he invented 'the Possum Chute', which allows a possum only one exit from its rooftop home, and no way back in. Now business is booming and all the possum catchers in town have copied Paul's device.



We follow Paul as he sets out on his detective mission to find just where the pesky possum is getting in. Possums are extraordinarily agile and persistent. Possums can climb into a roof through a hole no bigger than a tennis ball. The skull is the widest part of its skeleton. If it can get its head in, the rest can follow. By scrunching up its front legs beneath its chin, flattening its body and 'splaying' its back legs, it can force its way in to the smallest cracks and crevices.

Paul takes us through some spectacular examples of possum ingenuity and dexterity, pointing out where they've gnawed through latticework, shimmied along telephone wires and scaled TV antennas in the name of finding a suitable nesting hole.

We join Paul as he sets up the Possum Chute, removes the uninvited guest and returns to an extremely grateful customer!

## POSSUM CARERS

**Jodie Cox** and **Chris Michaelides**.

Couple, Jodie and Chris are dedicated wildlife carers. At any one time they can have several baby possums in their care. Looking after a possum can involve feeding them by a bottle every four hours and so many sleepless nights.

We meet Jodie and Chris as they are trying to reunite a tiny baby possum orphan with its Mum. In the end they care for the baby and release it into a sanctuary in the wild.





# STORY ANGLES

Interview with producer Sally Ingleton about the inspiration for Possum Wars and her experience with possums.

Interview with director Bruce Permezel and/or David Parer about the logistics of filming possums.

Interview with Sally Ingleton and/or Bruce Permezel about how their perception of possums has changed during the making of Possum Wars.

**Science story:** The science behind the film. What research is being done into urban possums? Interview with the researchers.

**Experience story:** Visit Curtain Square with a possum expert to see the possums firsthand and learn about their habits and issues.

**Political story:** Speak with the Council officers about the issues involved in wildlife management at Curtain Square. This can be broadened out to look at other Councils around Melbourne or any city in Australia.

**New Zealand Angle:** Possums were introduced to New Zealand and are now seen as a pest.

**Social Media:** You Tube is full of clips of possums. Meet some of the people who have posted clips and get them to tell their stories.

**Caring For Wildlife:** Interview carers Jodie and Chris about their life as wildlife carers. Spend a day at Wildlife Victoria to see what they do.





# CURTAIN SQUARE CARLTON

Curtain Square is a small leafy inner city park a few kilometers from the centre of Melbourne. The park is mainly used for recreation, dog walking and there is a children's playground.

The park is home to about 60 Common Brushtail Possums.

In 2000 Melbourne was suffering from a drought that continued for many years. At this time many of the park's deciduous trees suffered from lack of water. On top of that stress they were being grazed upon by the park's possums. The Council responded by putting metal bands around the tree trunks and canopy and even concreted the dens and hollows of the trees which the possums lived in. This was enough to fuel the establishment of Animal Active- a group of animal lovers including Rheya Linden who wanted to protect and care for the park's possums. The group has its own website and Facebook site for supporters.



[www.animalactive.org](http://www.animalactive.org)

<http://www.facebook.com/savethepossums>

Over the years some of the trees have died and had to be removed. Many residents blame the possums and have complained to the local Yarra Council.

The Council is still discussing plans to protect the historic trees and wildlife management strategies. These include banning the feeding of wild animals and introducing a fertility control program to prevent the possums from breeding.

## WILDLIFE MANAGEMENT

The Common Brushtail Possum is the best known of all 27 species of possums in Australia because it has adapted to living in our cities and suburbs. As the suburbs overtake natural areas, animals are forced to live in close quarters with people. While we are privileged to be able to observe native animals at such close range, living with wildlife, however, has its own special problems.

Brushtail possums can get into your roof or cause damage to your trees and plants. However they are protected by law and cannot be taken, trapped or killed except by a permit.

If you need information then there are many government departments and municipal Councils who

provide advice and practical information about how to live with a problem possum.

Wildlife Victoria responds to over 7000 calls a year to help an injured possum.

If you would like to become a wildlife carer you need to undertake special training.

<http://www.wildlifevictoria.org.au/training>

## USEFUL WEBLINKS

### **Wildlife Victoria**

<http://www.wildlifevictoria.org.au>

### **Department Of Sustainability & Environment**

<http://www.dse.vic.gov.au/plants-and-animals/native-plants-and-animals/problem-wildlife/possums>

<http://www.dse.vic.gov.au/plants-and-animals/native-plants-and-animals/problem-wildlife/possums/introduction>

### **Australian Fauna**

<http://www.australianfauna.com/brushtailpossum.php>

### **The Marsupial Society of Australia**

<http://www.marsupialsociety.org/04wi03.html>

### **Animal Active**

[www.animalactive.org](http://www.animalactive.org)

<http://www.facebook.com/savethepossums>

<http://www.facebook.com/AnimalActive>





# KEY CREATIVES ON PRODUCTION

## PRODUCER - SALLY INGLETON.

Sally Ingleton is one of Australia's most successful producers of science and nature documentaries.

She is currently producing the 6-part DEVIL ISLAND (ABC, ITV, FRANCE TV) about Tasmanian devils, a single hour POSSUM WARS (ABCTV, SVT, ARTE), ACID OCEAN (PBS NOVA, ARTE, SVT, SBS) and the arts doc A DAY IN THE LIFE OF SIMON STONE for ABCTV.

In 2011 she completed KANGAROO MOB (ABC1, RTBF, YLE, SVT nominated Best Science and Nature Documentary ATOM) and AUSTRALIA'S GREAT FLOOD (National Geographic Channel USA which won the coveted ASTRA Award for Best Documentary in Australia Subscription TV in 2012).



Her film SEED HUNTER (ABC/Arte France/SVT/RTE) took the tricky subject of saving crop seeds and turned it into an adventure thriller which captivated audiences worldwide and turned Dr Ken Street into a cult figure. It picked up a Gold Panda at the Sichuan TV Festival (Grand Prize Nature) and awards in Japan at both the Earth Vision and Japanese Wildlife Film Festivals 2009; Best Conservation and Environment South Africa WILD TALK 2009; Nominee Rockie Award Banff TV Festival 2009; ATOM Award Best Science and Environment Documentary; plus awards at festivals in Finland and China.

Her film MUDDY WATERS: LIFE AND DEATH ON THE GREAT BARRIER REEF (SBS/Discovery) looked at how farm chemicals are killing coral. It also won numerous awards including the Jury Prize at Earth Vision Japan.

Other credits include the nature soap series PENGUIN ISLAND (2010 ABC1, BBC1, Arte France) which achieved great critical and ratings success on BBC1 and was nominated for Best Wildlife Series at the ROSCAR Awards at WildTalk South Africa; contemporary current affairs TIBET: MURDER IN THE SNOW for SBS/BBC2/RTBF/TSR/YLE and arts documentary EYE FOR ARCHITECTURE (SBS/AVRO) which won the National Institute of Australian Architects Award for Best Architecture in the Media. Other award winners include WELCOME 2 MY DEAF WORLD (AFI Best Documentary nominee 2006) and 2 MUMS AND A DAD (Best Documentary Dendy Award and ATOM Awards 2007).



## **DIRECTOR – BRUCE PERMEZEL**

Bruce Permezel is a multi skilled television maker - director, cameraman, editor and producer. His projects have aired prime-time across all major networks, as well as internationally.

Bruce's extensive output ranges from documentary series (SPORTING NATION, THE PROBLEM WITH MEN), natural history (FROM THE HEART, CHRIS HUMFREY'S WILD LIFE), adventure travel (PEKING TO PARIS, PIRATE PATROL), lifestyle (BILL'S HOLIDAY), comedy (THE GAMES, HESSIE'S SHED), current affairs (ATTITUDE) to observational series (CHOIR OF HARD KNOCKS, JAIL BIRDS).



## **NATURAL HISTORY CINEMATOGRAPHER – DAVID PARER ACS**

David Parer is one of Australia's best known natural history cinematographers with credits that include WOLVES OF THE SEA, MYSTERIES OF THE OCEAN WANDERERS and his 3 part series on the Galapagos including the much acclaimed TWO YEARS IN GALAPAGOS. Recently he has worked on the 6 part series PENGUIN ISLAND and AUSTRALIA - LAND OF THE PARROTS. In 2005 he produced and directed TERRORS OF TASMANIA about Tasmanian devils. David began his career as a physicist spending two years in the Antarctic studying cosmic rays. Soon the lure of the electron was replaced by a fascination for the photon and he took to making wildlife films for the newly formed ABC Natural History Unit. Trips to New Guinea, Macquarie Island and the Antarctic resulted in a dozen programs. He and wife Liz teamed up in the late 1970s, working together on many films for the ABC Natural History department including the NATURE OF AUSTRALIA series for Australia's bicentenary.

## **STEVEN ROBINSON ASE – EDITOR.**

Steven Robinson ASE is an award winner editor who divides his time between documentary and drama, features & television. He won the AFI in 2010 for Best Editing on INSIDE THE FIRESTORM and has been nominated four times for Best Documentary Editing at the Australian Screen Editing Awards winning in 2008 for CHOIR OF HARD KNOCKS.

Some of the films he has edited include KATH AND KINDERELLA, DIRTY BUSINESS, (Documentary series SBS) MDA (Winner Best Drama AFI 2003) GALLIPOLI FROM ABOVE, CHARLES BEAN'S GREAT WAR, MONASH THE FORGOTTEN ANZAC, MENZIES AND CHURCHILL AT WAR (doco-dramas), BED OF ROSES Series 2 & 3 (drama series), THE TRIAL also co-writer (documentary), KATH AND KIM (AFI winner), EYE OF THE STORM: Monsoon (Winner Chicago International Television Festival), OUTBACK HOUSE (documentary series), SOMETHING IN THE AIR (Winner Best Episode in a Drama Series AFI) SILVER SUN, (children's drama series) BUSHFIRE SUMMER (documentary) DUSTY: LITTLE BY LITTLE also associate producer (documentary series) THE ART OF BILL HENSON (documentary), WHATEVER HAPPENED TO THAT GUY? (comedy series).



## **DALE CORNELIUS - COMPOSER**

Dale Cornelius has written scores for a diverse range of films, recently including; MARY AND MAX - opening night film for Sundance Film Festival, CLIFFY - the feature length biopic of ultra marathon runner, Cliff Young, THE DOCTOR BLAKE MYSTERIES - 10 x 1hr murder mystery series on ABC1, PENGUIN ISLAND - BBC1 and ABC1 documentary series, and DR SAMASTS MUSIC SCHOOL - which won the 2013 AACTA award for best sound and music in a documentary. He is currently composing for the 3D Imax film, HIDDEN UNIVERSE.

## **TRISTAN MEREDITH – SOUND DESIGNER**

Tristan Meredith is an accomplished sound designer, mixer, narration recording specialist and musician. Over the last 10 years he has worked on a variety of award-winning programs as sound mixer/designer. Just a few of his recent documentary credits include PENGUIN ISLAND, IMMORTAL, JOHN GOLLINGS: EYE FOR ARCHITECTURE, TIBET: MURDER IN THE SNOW, 10 CONDITIONS OF LOVE, INSIDE THE FIRESTORM (AFI Award Best Sound 2010), THE EXTRAORDINARY TALE OF WILLIAM BUCKLEY, CATCHING CANCER and feature credits include BLIND COMPANY, PREY and DAMMED BY DAWN.

## **JOHN DOYLE - NARRATOR**

John Doyle is one of Australia's finest writers for stage and screen. His work spans the theatrical success of The Pig Iron People for the Sydney Theatre Company to the small screen acclaim of series such as MARKING TIME and CHANGI for the ABC.

John started life as a jobbing actor in 1980 appearing in productions with the Hunter Valley Theatre, the Sydney Theatre Company and the State Theatre of South Australia before creating the character of Roy Slaven in 1985, for ABC radio Triple J. Since 1986, Roy has appeared alongside HG Nelson on various television series including Club Buggery, The Channel Nine Show, Win Roy and HG's Money, The Dream, The Monday Dump, The Ice Dream, The Cream, The Dream In Athens and The Memphis Trousers and on the long running Sunday afternoon radio sports program This Sporting Life on Triple J. Roy and HG recently co-hosted The Life on the Triple M radio network.

John has been honoured by the Australian Writers Guild for comedy on eight occasions and for both his mini-series, Changi and Marking Time. Club Buggery won a Logie Award for Most Outstanding Comedy; The Dream, a Logie for Most Popular Comedy; and Changi, the Logie for Most Outstanding Drama. Marking Time received a 2004 Logie nomination for Most Outstanding Mini-series/Telemovie, a 2004 AFI Award for Best Screenplay in Television and the 2004 NSW Premier's Literary Award for Script Writing. John also received a 2004 Logie nomination for The Cream for Most Popular Sports Program and a 2005 Logie nomination for Most Popular Sports Program for The Dream In Athens.

In 2006, John joined Dr Tim Flannery for the documentary TWO MEN IN A TINNIE which explored the degradation of the Murray Darling River system. TWO MEN IN A TINNIE won the 2006 SPAA Award for Best Documentary. In 2008, he joined again with Dr Tim Flannery for a second documentary series, TWO IN THE TOP END which was nominated for Most Outstanding Factual Program at the 2009 Logie Awards. In 2012, John and Tim explored the Great Dividing Range in their third documentary series, TWO ON THE GREAT DIVIDE.