

# BIODIVERSITY STARS IN A WORLD PREMIERE AT THE TIN SHED THEATER

Interview & Film Review by Robert Gay

March 29, 2023



Vincent Pinto stands in a creek while describing the importance of water in this region. Screen capture from “Biodiversity in the Heart of the Sky Islands”

The Tin Shed Theater recently hosted a world premiere. On Friday, March 24, 2023 “*Biodiversity in the Heart of the Sky Islands*” packed the house with a hundred viewers. About 50 more had to be turned away. Produced by Patagonia Area Resource Alliance (PARA), the 84-minute film captivated the audience so powerfully that some viewers said afterward its beauty and intensity made them a little moist-eyed. Unobtrusively

unifying the video scenes and spoken words was a classical music background including work by Albinoni, Holst, and Debussy.

The film is narrated by naturalist, ethnobotanist, wildlife biologist, and screenwriter Vincent Pinto. Passionate about protecting the Sky Islands, Pinto conceived the idea for the film, directed it, selected the music, filmed the majority of wildlife, and captured most of the photos. In collaboration with documentary filmmaker and videographer Michele Gisser, Pinto also helped to edit the film. Since 2009 Pinto has written the PRT column "Nature Journeys". Along with his wife, Claudia Campos, he offers nature education and touring in the Sky Islands from their Raven's Nest Nature Sanctuary by Patagonia Lake. A Biodiversity tour-day with him is the prize in an ongoing PARA raffle where 15 winners will be drawn on April 22. Also in April, PARA has arranged a second Tin Shed showing, 6 pm on Friday, April 14. Beyond that, distribution will include pay-per-view online streaming.

As "Biodiversity" opens, Pinto wanders among saguaros in a cactus-intensive area while quickly demolishing the widely held notion that the Southern Arizona lands are strictly forboding deserts. Instead, the 43 Sky Island mountain ranges form a sprawling, bumpy tapestry of wildly different ecological and geological localities which hosts world-class biodiversity. Pinto clarifies the complexity with Meagan Bethel's layer-cake diagram for Sky Island Alliance. It stacks six ecosystems from valleys at 2-5,000 ft up to several peaks over 9,000 feet. Ascending Mt. Lemmon in the Catalina Mountains can be understood as a rapid tour up through these different biomes - from Sonoran Desert through pine-oak woodland to the coniferous evergreen fir forest. It's like

condensing a trip from Mexico to Canada. The Patagonia Mountains, Sonoita and Harshaw Creeks, and the San Rafael Valley are the heart of the Sky Islands area, and provide the bulk of the examples used in the film.

Pinto's naturalist knowledge of local creatures and ecosystems is vast and contagious - the fruit of over three decades of exploration and photography in this area. Viewers of this film get to be up-close and personal with species like elegant trogon, green kingfisher, rare white pelicans, super-organized red ants, spiny lizards, snakes of many patterns, and yes, the elusive and dramatic Gila monster. Pinto shares the wonder of his world with a seemingly bottomless trove of spectacular photos, videos, as well as beautiful drone footage by Gisser. The drone segments quickly pull your awareness back from the scales, fur, and feathers to the landscape as a larger whole, then the focus zooms in again.

For each creature and location, Pinto relates fascinating and sometimes startling facts. Pronghorns, for instance, are not antelope but more closely related to giraffes; the rare Elegant Trogon is dependent on woodpeckers to create a nest hole in a tree; a jaguar's track at the main pad is about four inches wide; jaguars are the third-largest cat in the world; and the seven-inch-long Sonoran toad is the largest toad species in the US.

The stories of each Sky Island location and species quietly convey understandings of habitat, behavior, anatomy, predation and food-chain, lifespan, reproduction, scat, tracks, coloration and coevolution – in a word, the basics of ecology. Unifying them all is the undeniable conclusion that all species, humans included, are intimately connected with all others, constantly dependent on the pervasive web of life for survival.

Biodiversity, Pinto believes, “is like a jigsaw puzzle, where all the pieces are connected, but you can only see some of the pieces, and not others”. There are many species not yet identified – we know only about a quarter of the more than eight million species on earth, and ironically it now looks like many will go extinct before we can identify them.

No Southwest-based movie could fail to mention water, and it’s a frequent theme as the movie progresses from creature to creature and place to place. In a powerful moment along a perennial stretch of Harshaw Creek, Pinto dipped his net into a small pool that initially looked like a small scummy puddle. Poured into a tray and looked at closely, a myriad of life was revealed, including water boatmen, water scorpions, and little fish called longfin dace, declared a Sensitive Species by the US Forest Service. Nearby, he’d found a canyon tree frog, a delicate, superbly camouflaged amphibian he calls “a canary in the coal mine,” - a good indicator of water quality and ecosystem health.

Wandering in the somewhat troubled lower stretches of Sonoita Creek as it approaches the Santa Cruz River, Pinto reveals a landscape becoming less biologically diverse as it languishes from overuse, overdevelopment, and long-term drought. In his post-film dialogue he mentions the desolation he’d seen in Jordan, now only about 2% forested after centuries of bad management and increasing desertification, and wonders aloud if this is the future of the Sky Islands. On a map of the entire Sky Island region, sixteen ranges have red dots indicating the potential for major mineral exploration or mining efforts.

In conversation, Pinto elaborated on some areas of action that could make a difference. Having seen the regenerative and preservation effects created by biosphere reserves in other countries such as Botswana and France, Pinto said, *“the Sky Islands certainly qualify for that kind of protection, but we lack the political will.”* For the changes needed for long-term survival, he continued, *“we lack the education, the connection to nature, and the humility.”* He added, *“environmental education shouldn’t just be one module in one school year, but should be part of every year in school.”*

In its last 15 minutes, the film pivots to mention the two themes of biodiversity and water which have focused PARA’s decade-long stream of actions as water protector and defender of biodiversity in the heart of the Sky Islands. PARA Board President and Mission Coordinator Carolyn Shafer describes the group’s vision this way: *“The health and economic prosperity of our region are tied deeply to the well-being of the Patagonia Mountains and the Sonoita Creek Watershed which are the source of our drinking water, clean air, and the biological wealth that drives our regional nature-based restorative economy. There must be sufficient oversight of proposed industrialized mining activity and mining company accountability to the community in order to avoid short-sighted destruction of natural resources in pursuit of corporate profits.”*

Pinto agrees, adding *“the current growth economy is not sustainable. While mines may come and go, ecotourism is a vastly more sustainable enterprise.”* It’s not just about scenery, it’s about survival, this film insists. After the credits, the movie pivots back to awareness again. The last several minutes are a wordless epilogue that lets viewers soak in the magnificent biodiversity they’ve just been learning about.