

HOMETOWN



CONTRIBUTED PHOTOS

"Decoding the Driftless" director Jonas Stenstrom looks over scenic Devil's Lake.

'Decoding the Driftless'

Documentary wins pair of prizes at LA film festival

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La Crosse Tribune

"Decoding the Driftless," a 2018 documentary exploring the unique geology, ecology, archaeology and local communities of the Driftless Region, took home two awards from the monthly Los Angeles Independent Film Festival, including Best Picture in February.

"It's very exciting, very thrilling to get that kind of recognition," said Tim Jacobson, one of the producers. "More importantly, these awards help us advance the mission of sustaining the Driftless. People don't necessarily realize that this uniquely beautiful region exists, so we want to communicate it to the rest of the world."

The documentary is a follow-up to the shorter documentary, "Mysteries of the Driftless," which won a regional Emmy in 2014. Three of the four producers who worked on "Mysteries" also produced "Decoding the Driftless," including Jacobson, who is president of the board of directors at Sustainable Driftless Inc., a La Crosse-based nonprofit organization created to raise money for the film. Its mission is to promote resource conservation, lo-



Jonas Stenstrom, director of "Decoding the Driftless," surveys the Mississippi Valley from a helicopter during filming of the documentary.

cal communities and sustainable growth in the Driftless Region.

Jacobson called the documentary the centerpiece in the nonprofit's toolbox to promote geotourism in the Driftless Region.

The hourlong film devotes more time to the Mississippi River and conservation success stories, including that of the peregrine falcon, whose populations

were decimated by the mid-20th century because of the pesticide DDT. Populations have since recovered after the federal government restricted DDT use in 1972 and raptor breeding programs were put in place.

"People need to realize and recognize that they can make a difference and can accomplish things that do good for our natural environment," Jacobson said.

And, filmmakers were able to take production values to a whole new level, said Jacobson, who is also a pilot. "The cinematography is mindblowing. We did a lot of drone filming, we used airplanes, helicopters. There's just a lot of aerial imagery, which really showcases the beauty of the region."

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The Driftless Region spans southwestern Wisconsin, southeastern Minnesota, northeastern Iowa and a tiny slice of northwestern Illinois.

The region gets its name from the lack of glacial drift, or deposits left behind by glaciers as they retreated during several thousand years. As such, the topography is not defined by lakes, but by steep ridges and valleys carved from fast-moving streams and rivers millions of years ago.

Because the region escaped glaciation, the ecosystems in the Driftless are unique as well. Rare microclimates support federally threatened or endangered species, including the Northern Monkshood and the Iowa Pleistocene Snail.

Meanwhile, the area's cold water streams offer prime habitat for trout. The upper Mississippi River, which cuts through the Driftless, is also a rest stop for 19 species of migrating waterfowl in the fall and Upper Mississippi Valley National Wildlife Refuge provides habitat

for 305 species of birds.

It's also a great place for outdoor sports and recreation, Jacobson said.

Just as people immediately associate Napa Valley with vineyards and lush landscapes, Jacobson said, "we want to have that same sort of recognition level for the Driftless Region, not just for people in La Crosse or Viroqua, but for people in New York, Los Angeles, Tokyo, Paris."

The documentary has been shown at Flyway Film Festival, Driftless film Festival, Frozen River Film Festival and Oneota Film Festival.

While the team is busy setting up additional screenings, applying to film festivals and editing the documentary to a suitable length for television, Jacobson said they're starting to think about their next documentary.

Jacobson refused to give away any details, but said it would be a significant departure from the previous films.

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