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‘We Are Galápagos’

It was a school trip with her daughter that brought Kum-Kum Bhavnani to the Galápagos Islands five years ago. Circling above Baltra airport Bhavnani, a professor of sociology at UC Santa Barbara, gazed down at Santa Cruz Island and contemplated the lives of the people who made their homes there.

Thus was born her new film, “We Are Galápagos.”

The documentary, which spotlights the women and men of the Galápagos who spearhead conservation projects aimed at addressing the impact of climate change, will have its world premiere Tuesday, Feb. 6, at the 2018 Santa Barbara International Film Festival. It will screen at 7 p.m. at Fiesta 5 Cinema, 916 State St. A second screening is set for 4 p.m. Wednesday, Feb. 7.

The film aligns neatly with Bhavnani’s scholarly work, which explores how people create social and planetary justice. “As sociology is the study of inequalities, and what to do to ameliorate those inequalities, the film also is firmly situated within sociological thinking,” Bhavnani said. “I interview people — using quasi-ethnographic methods — an approach for which I am recognized within the discipline.”

A province of Ecuador and home to over 25,000 people, the Galápagos Islands are a volcanic archipelago in the Pacific Ocean. With isolated terrain that shelters a diversity of plant and animal species — many found nowhere else on the planet — the islands are considered one of the world’s foremost destinations for wildlife

viewing (think turtles).

Bhavnani’s documentary offers a glimpse of Galápageños making deep-rooted change to preserve their part of the world. It acknowledges our anxieties about the future of the planet, she explained, and provides welcome relief through the portrayal of a community that is taking a hands-on approach to safeguarding the environment.

“I want audiences to know that the people of the Galápagos are making a lot of effort to protect the wildlife and their islands,” Bhavnani said. “They are extremely inclined toward conservation, and I hope the audiences will see some examples of what is being done and, perhaps, try some of those out in their own communities.”

Though production was not without its challenges — securing permission to film in Galápagos National Park, which encompasses 98 percent of the islands, accommodating other tourists and local Galápageños — the process was gratifying.

“The filmmaking experience is always satisfying as people are often so prepared to talk about what they do and to allow you into their lives,” said Bhavnani. “This was especially true in this instance. As a sociologist who conducts empirical work, it is always a privilege to be able to do this.”

In addition to “We Are Galápagos,” Bhavnani has produced a number of films, including the 2012 research documentary “Nothing Like Chocolate,” which tells the story of an anarchist chocolate maker living in the rainforests of Grenada who created world renowned chocolate sustainably and ethically. Her 2006 feature “The Shape of Water,” narrated by actress Susan Sarandon, which spans three continents, highlighting the stories of powerful, imaginative and visionary women confronting the destructive development of the Third World with new cultures and a passion for change.

Bhavnani’s most recent documentary, “Lutah,” focuses on the independent Santa Barbara-based architect Lutah Maria Riggs, who designed, among other spaces, the Lobero Theater and the Vedanta Temple.

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