It can be tricky catching up with Douglas Varchol (MESM 2006), who says of his somewhat vagabond life, “Since I graduated from the Bren School, I haven’t lived anywhere for longer than ten weeks.”

That has everything to do with his work as a documentary filmmaker, which keeps him traveling constantly, with occasional stops at home bases in Los Angeles and Bangkok.

Since graduating from Bren, Varchol has been around the world “a couple of times” as part of what might be called his second career in film.

His first was writing feature films in Hollywood, where he might work with a producer for months only to see his project nixed. When a friend asked him to make a series of TV documentaries for a “Discovery Channel type of program,” he left Hollywood behind. “I segued from the 90-minute Hollywood screenplay to doing interviews on location,” he says. “I began to teach myself how to shoot. And now I’m producer, director, and camera guy.”

That means he also has to sell his ideas for his environmental films to funding agencies and media outlets. “There’s a top tier of people who decide what films get made of the kind I do,” he says. “You’ve got to be right there on the front of the cutting edge. Now for instance, no one will pick up anything about climate change. It’s saturated. So we tend to look at the esoteric stuff. Generally, it’s the kind of under-the-radar material that CNN won’t do.”

The Bren School, and particularly the relationships Varchol has developed with Professor Oran Young and his colleagues in the Bren School’s Program on Governance for Sustainable Development, Durwood Zaelke and Matthew Stillwell, have been crucial in helping Varchol maintain his place on that leading edge.

At Bren orientation, Varchol met Young, who talked about the international governance work he was pursuing, often with Zaelke and Stillwell. “That international level of engagement—international politics, environmental law, and environmental policy—was really intriguing to me,” says Varchol, who, shortly after coming to Bren, accompanied Zaelke on a trip to a meeting of an international law organization in Morocco.

Since then, the filmmaker has continued to network with these experts on governance, policy, and international law, and because of Zaelke’s extensive work for the Montreal Protocol (which led to an international ban on ozone-depleting chlorofluorocarbons), Varchol says, “I became involved in developing media programs for ozone and other issues.”

Varchol was in Denmark for the Copenhagen Climate Summit and has developed a series of films for BBC World, to air in 2010. “They’re kind of post-Copenhagen, what do we do now sort of thing,” he says. “The focus will be on non-CO₂ fast-action solutions, such as cutting black carbon [a subject Zaelke has addressed recently]. I’m feeding into Durwood’s experience. Everyone has been focusing on CO₂, but it’s so politicized with big oil, coal, etc., so the question becomes, what else can I do? Durwood, Matthew, and Oran are at the cutting edge of all that, and I’m able to feed into it.”

Varchol took an unusual route to the Bren School (MESM 2006). He was shooting in India for a nonprofit group that works to preserve ancient Indian Sanskrit texts. When the next leg of the trip, to Saint Petersburg, Russia, was canceled, he came to Los Angeles and considered his options.

“I wanted to take two years off and kind of think about what I wanted to do next,” he says.

He had been accepted to the Bren School but was undecided whether to attend. Then he was offered a job filming the dating experiences of middle-aged women in Las Vegas for a reality show. “Not that the trials and tribulations of middle-aged women are not real and significant to them,” he says. “And it could be very interesting, but not for me in the style that would have been required by the production company.”
So I said, 'No, I can’t do it’ and I went to Bren instead.”

Since graduating, he has served as managing editor for the fall 2007 “Wired Science” series on PBS, but he has spent most of his time making films for the BBC’s “Earth Report” documentary series. Among them are Climate Fever, which investigates the spread of disease caused by factors resulting from climate change; Blast, the story of Filipino dynamite fisherman; Perfectly Cool, which looks at the phase-out of hydrochlorofluorocarbons (HCFCs), the Montreal Protocol, and the air-conditioning boom in China; and The New Ivory Wars, an examination of DNA-based technology that allows ivory to be traced to a specific elephant heard in Africa.

Varchol has just completed filming a new Earth Report about preserving biodiversity in Laos, which will be aired on BBC World News this spring.

Like other Bren alumni, who often must translate science for businesses and policy makers, Varchol makes films for a broad audience. “We’re not making technical pieces,” he says. “We’re making pieces that people will watch and then understand that there’s a real problem. The challenge is to make your message clear to the public and do it with scientific integrity.”

The productions are small and the obstacles many, but the reach of the BBC films is extensive. “BBC is broadcast around the world, and each film runs five to six times,” he explains, “so it’s really effective at getting the word out.”

Through all the stories he shoots, he maintains a heightened awareness of the people who are involved in and affected by the condition or process he is documenting.

“This is very much a people-oriented endeavor,” he says. “When you’re in developing countries, it’s important to help people feel comfortable. The whole business is to get inside wherever you are, and that happens when people talk.”

If people provide the best access to an issue, they are also the focal point of Varchol’s every effort as a filmmaker. “People are the reason I do this,” he says. “I’m trying to make stories that resonate for people.”

More on Varchol’s films: www.bren.ucsb.edu/varchol.htm

In This Issue

Incentivizing Solutions
Page 4

New Dean’s Perspective
Page 5

Climate Pieces—Part 2
Page 7

Shooting for Sustainability
Page 15