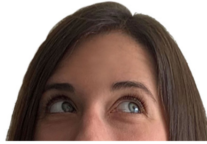
EDF ENVIRONMENTAL DEFENSE FUND

REAL TALK ABOUT PLANET-SAVING CAREERS

Degrees

WITH YESH PAVLIK SLENK



Episode 12: Pete Muller
A National Geographic photographer captures the emotional impacts of climate change

Yesh (00:12):

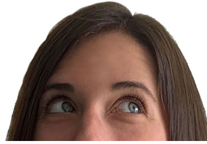
I'm Yesh Pavlik Slenk, and this is Degrees: real talk about planet-saving careers from Environmental Defense Fund. Listeners. One of the crucial challenges we're facing with climate change is communicating about it. That's why the role of artists, journalists, and communicators are essential in helping us really understand what's happening with our planet. Today. We'll feature a guest who became obsessed with a new word, a phenomenon of loneliness and longing born from climate change. That few people understand. National Geographic photographer Pete Muller spent two years traveling the world to learn about the emotional distress caused by climate change and to document it. And I do mean traveling the world: from Louisiana to California. Pete went to the far reaches of Australia and Russia and Peru. Pete used to spend his time documenting phenomenon that we can readily see: wars, epidemics, and violence. And now he was trying to make the invisible crisis of climate change visible--through not just landscapes, but intimate photos of people. The results of his two year odyssey are published in a beautiful national geographic photo essay called: "As climate change alters beloved landscapes, we feel the loss". We're sharing several of these photos on our website, www.degreespodcast.org - click on Pete's episode. We encourage you to look at them while you listen to my conversation with Pete, whether you're a storyteller or a scientist or an engineer or a business executive, this conversation will make you think about your work in a very different way. It certainly did for me. But before I share our conversation with you, I have a few things to share myself. This is the 12th episode of our first season and our season finale. We will be back with our second season, but as we take a little time off to develop it, we'd love to hear from you. Please direct message me on Twitter @yeshsays with your guest and your topic suggestions, or write to us through our website, degreespodcast.org, and I have even more exciting news: Pete Muller was so fascinating to talk with that. We couldn't possibly share the whole conversation with you here. So we're going live on Instagram for a deeper dive with Pete. Please tune in on Thursday, February 11th at 12:30 Eastern, by following the Environmental Defense Fund account, you'll hear more gems about climate change and careers and storytelling with Pete Muller. And now listeners Pete Muller! Pete, welcome to Degrees.

Pete Muller (02:51):

Yesh, thanks so much for having me.

Yesh (02:53):

I want to drill into those moments of conflict that you have been documenting for your entire career, or most of it, anyway. I've seen your photos capturing scenes from war in the South Sudan and Ebola in Sierra Leone. I watched a clip this morning. It brought me to tears and they're absolutely stunning. But a few years ago you became fascinated by the emotional ways that climate change is affecting people--right now in their own backyards. Can you take me back to the idea for this project that really captured you and, and take me to the moment where it wouldn't let you go?



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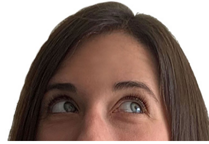
Pete Muller (03:35):

Yeah, I mean, I think, I think at a, at a somewhat more general level, you know, I've, I've, I very much wanted to understand the issues of our time. That's something that I feel like has really been a part of the way that I've pursued my work and what's motivated me. I've I always really wanted to, to be at the ground floor level with people, um, and, and try to understand all of the complexities and the nuances and, and all of the sort of somewhat enigmatic things that make up how each of us are. And, you know, I had been involved in these, these larger projects about, about conflict and, and unrest and repression, but increasingly I could sense that issues related to the environment were profoundly important and infecting people all over the world. And so I wanted to try to bring the kind of methodological approach that I'd often brought to my conflict, um, photography in, in, in different areas to this very timely and expensive subject. So I set about trying to find a way, you know, National Geographic and so many places have done such incredible work as sort of being standard bearers for disseminating all of this information about the physical changes that we're seeing in the world, the scientific realities of what's happening around us. And those of course are the bedrocks of our understanding about the changes that we're seeing. But in some ways, to me, they can feel a little bit distant. They can feel a little sterile and far away and hard to understand, or hard to relate to. And so I really wanted to try to find ways in that made these conversations more, more humanistic and more relatable.

Yesh (05:11):

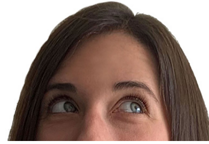
So Pete started trying to figure out a way to do just that: to capture the immediacy and the emotions around climate change. One day reading and researching, he ran across an article that made him sit upright. It was about a guy named Glenn Albrecht, a philosopher from Australia who lived in an area that had been beautiful, but was now virtually ruined by strip mines. He'd coined the term for the feelings of loss and longing that were plaguing him and his family. And for the melancholy that was troubling people all over: people who were feeling the effects of climate change right now, Albrecht called that "solastalgia". And Pete was fascinated. He ultimately to make solastalgia the focus of his project. And as I mentioned, the project would take him all around the world. Of course, one of those stops was to meet the Albrechts. As I'm looking at these photos and listeners can look at them along with us. Uh, this couple has lived in this community, their entire lives, they and their neighbors have raised families in this community. And, uh, despite their best efforts, the land around their home was subject to super pit clusters in Australia's Hunter Valley. And as I'm looking at this picture, I'm seeing a two lane highway with green to the right and to the left is just this unending mass of gray and white and black. So it, and, uh, I don't even know what you'd call it. When you say the word strip mine, as part of the planet looks like it has been stripped of all that is alive. And the couple that you spoke with drive 20 miles out of their way every day to avoid seeing their home having been destroyed. And there's a really striking photo of the woman's hand. She probably tries to, you know, like anyone else clean their home in regularity. And it seems like every day she could wipe any surface of her, uh, backyard and her hand



would be completely covered in this soot that is in the air that they breathe. And can you take me back to that experience, to that, uh, connection with those folks and talk about first, what it feels like to stand at the edge of a strip mine in Australia, and second, how meeting these people changed you?

Pete Muller (07:53):

Well, so this, this place is called the Upper Hunter Valley and it's this really bucolic beautiful place, about three and a half hours North of Sydney and new South Wales. And this was such an important place to visit because this was really the birthplace of this concept of solastalgia that was coined by this Australian environmental philosopher, Glenn Albrecht, and, um, Glen who was working as a professor of sustainability at the time was working with two other colleagues that were doing these sort of, uh, impact human impact surveys. And some of that had to do with physical health and some had to do with mental health and, and Glen in particular became keenly interested in the emotional impacts that these major major mines were having on the communities that lived around them, because that had always been a very rural community. There were lots of dairy farmers and alfalfa fields and citrus groves and various things over over time. And then with the introduction of this discovery of a lot of high quality coal underneath the Valley floor, these companies came in and started to open these absolutely gargantuan holes. And is, as you say, Yesh, as you're describing, it's like, it's almost hard to describe until you see the photo and you think, geez, I mean, these things are absolutely massive. They're visible from space and they started to open all throughout the place. So what started to happen in the Upper Hunter was that there was all of this transformation, not only the sort of physical transformation of the digging of these holes that are kilometers long and kilometers wide and a thousand meters deep, which means of course the hole is there, but it also means that all of the stripping that you're describing that what's called "overburden", which has all of the earth that has covered the coal seams has to be removed and piled to the side of this hole. So this is massive topographic transformation in the place. Coupled with that is all of this noise and dust and light pollution and social transformation of some people leaving and all of these new people who are coming in to work in the extractive industries. So everything changed in this place. And Glenn Albrecht started to notice this feeling of distress among the people that they had a difficult time articulating-- you know, they would have to be very verbose in describing all of the various features of how they felt, you know, and that's ultimately, I came to learn over time of studying the relationship between phenomenon language, and if, and when a, you know, a phenomenon becomes prevalent enough in a society to give rise to a word, to describe it. That is always a response to a prevalent enough experience in which people are having to go through the laborious process of describing the features of how they feel. Which is hard. I mean, even in a simple context, if you had to describe a pizza every time you are going to reference the fact that that's what you were going to have for dinner, you know, it's a, it's an onerous thing to do to describe the bread and the, the rising and the cheese and the toppings and all this stuff. You just need a shorthand concept, how the problem makes



us feel without words to describe that we're really left at some kind of, of a loss, because you can't quite see it for what it is.

Yesh (10:53):

And "solastalgia", that's the word and the concept you're just, you're describing.

Pete Muller (10:59):

You know, I mean, Glenn created it to describe the sense of homesickness that people have while they're still at home, as they're undergoing forms of physical environmental transformation that strips the essence of the place, such that it no longer feels comfortable. It's no longer giving them that sense of solace. And I think that that's an interesting and likely prevalent experience in a lot of people's lives.

Yesh (11:21):

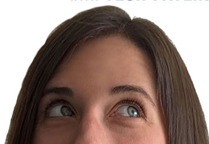
So Glenn and his wife drive 20 miles out of their way to avoid seeing this horrendous degradation of the land near their home. And it's probably pretty lonely for them too-- many of their relatives have simply moved away. It sounds really upsetting to be honest. And also like they were probably feeling solastalgia personally, not just describing it in an academic way. How did meeting Glen and his wife changed you as a photographer, as a journalist or as a human being?

Pete Muller (12:01):

Well, meeting them and, and examining their experiences with this notion of, of, of language in mind. Is there a word that we should have for this experience that people are undergoing was a profoundly, intellectually transformative idea to me, I mean, I had to really, really work on this project to try to get my footing,

Yesh (12:27):

Frankly. I'm not sure I can really imagine how hard that must have been, not just intellectually, but emotionally as well. In fact, I'm really curious about your trip to Paradise, a town that was almost completely wiped out by the Camp fire in 2018. At the time, it was the deadliest fire in California's history. As the Campfire killed 85 people and destroyed close to 20,000 homes and businesses, you visited a family who decided to stay in paradise after all that. Listener, by the way, these are just beautiful evocative photos. And I encourage you to log onto our website and take a look at them. If you missed it at the top of the show, that's degreespodcast.org. Now, Pete, I'm wondering if you can describe some of those photos in detail for our audience, and I'd like you to start where one couple is sitting in a living room and it looks like they're playing music.



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Pete Muller (13:32):

Um, yeah. So this is one of my most favorite photographs from that whole project. This is a picture of Don Criswell and his wife, Debbie Demonte in their home on the outskirts, so these are what are known as the unincorporated areas of paradise outside of the technical boundaries of the town. And when the fires happened, you know, they had never really seen such intense fire, certainly at the center of Paradise, the way that it struck, and in the 2018 Camp fire, the firefighting efforts were so quickly overwhelmed by the extent of this fire, that certainly people in the unincorporated areas where Don and Debbie live were really on their own-- the fire department just said, look, you're going to have to do your best to fight the fires yourselves. And Don in particular is he's an extraordinary person. He's been through so many exceptional things in his life. He was an infantry soldier during the Tet Offensive in Vietnam in 1968, he'd been a member of a SWAT teams. And in various parts of California, he was a private investigator working on the tribunals in the former Yugolslavia-- he's an incredible person. And he's a highly prepared person. I think his life has really made him prepared for a lot of adversities and things. And so he'd actually burned out, uh, in the Humboldt fire in 2008. And he had really done his best to prepare his land for any fires that might happen after he rebuilt. So he and Debbie were relatively well-prepared, uh, for, for the Camp fire, and they fought it all day. They fought spot fires around their property, and they managed to save this ranch where they live. So they were one of very few families whose homes survived the Camp fire. And what was amazing about them. I mean, they have this incredibly positive, resilient outlook about the world and about rebuilding and about being able to reassemble the sense of community that once existed in Paradise, which was particularly impressive. I think for Don Criswell, who's many people had moved from other places to paradise. Don was actually a sixth-generation Paradisian, which is quite unusual, and he'd seen the place through lots of changes. And, um, you know, there's this sort of unusual kind of contradictory psychology that seemed to be in place for many whose homes survived in Paradise, where they were in one way, really grateful that they'd made it and that their things and made it, and that they weren't in the same place of being completely displaced as so many others. But also they were alone in this place that had through their lives, been populated with all of these other people. So Don Criswell played the piano all over paradise. He moonlighted in all these different places: churches, and bars and restaurants. And he himself would say that he's not a particularly sophisticated piano player, but he loves to create atmosphere in places-- to turn dinner into a date, as he said. And I thought that was such beautiful, kind of poetic language for the subtleties of sense of place that you have somebody like Don Criswell. That's going to be reliably sitting at the piano, strumming the keys a couple of nights a week to try to turn dinner into a date for the people that come in there. But he and Debbie were really contending with what it meant to remain in this place. That for all intents and purposes, when they were at home in their house, kind of appeared normal. But to realize that that place all of the orientation, social orientation, that geographic orientation of it had been completely upended by the evisceration of the rest of the town and the community by the fire.

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Yesh (16:44):

Have you followed up with them? We had worse wildfires this year. Were they affected again? Are they still in Paradise or have they, and others moved on?

Pete Muller (16:55):

They, they weren't affected by-- in fact there was fires that burned relatively close to paradise this year, but fortunately the town wasn't really hit again, uh, the way so many other places were. And I do keep in touch with Don and Debbie. It's been a couple of months now, but we've talked after the COVID pandemic started. And another interesting thing that arose as a sort of a parallel to COVID with Don and Debbie and other people from Paradise was that in some ways there was almost a feeling of preparedness-- that they had been through something akin to this not so long ago... to have had everything disrupted, to, to really feel that sense of at the absence of all of these social networks and people that you keep close to you. And this normalcy that so many of us take for granted in our lives that had been disrupted for them already. So there was a disappointment that things were just beginning to come back a little bit and then COVID comes around and causes a shutdown again. But for, for many people in Paradise, it wasn't that much of a disruption actually, which I thought was quite interesting.

Yesh (17:56):

It, it definitely set them up for, for success in, in a way that caught the rest of the world very much off guard. Well, it's obvious that every time you get to know families, whether they're in paradise, California, or they're in Russia, or they're in Sierra Leone, you become very connected. You're really asking people to share the depths of their experience with you. So I, I can imagine that you feel very close to them and that relationship continues to far beyond the story. In some cases. How did documenting the Criswells change you?

Pete Muller (18:34):

I took a tremendous amount of inspiration from both of them, uh, particularly from Don. I think that there's really an important, I think kind of fascinating conversation around the role of adversity in resilience. You know, we talk a lot about resilience these days. It's really a buzz word in so many different sectors. But what's fascinating to me is that it feels like adversity is in a lot of ways, preparation for, for resilience. And this was something interesting that was what was mentioned by this, uh, really fascinating woman. Who's the school psychologist at Paradise high school, who was one of the main characters in this film, um, that national geographic distributed this year called "Rebuilding Paradise", which is a Ron Howard film that chronicles the tale of rebuilding the town through some really compelling, fascinating characters out there. It's a documentary film. So this woman, Carly Ingersol, who

was the, uh, the school psychologist at Paradise high school was explaining to me that a number of the students at Paradise high school rank relatively high in what's called the sort of ACE, uh, metric, which is, uh, Adverse Childhood Experiences. And her perception was that as she was watching students go through the psychological hurdles after the fire, that she felt in some way that the prevalence of adverse childhood experiences almost set students up to be more resilient-- that these were students who'd been through challenges before they were not necessarily strangers to adversity. And so when the fire happened, they were in some ways relatively well-prepared, psychologically, to try to get through that, which I thought was, was interesting. And certainly Don Criswell is a person who really impressed upon me how the, the adverse experiences, the challenges that he'd been through in his life really affected and sort of moderated the ways in which he perceived what the burning of Paradise was really going to mean. Don certainly felt a profound sense of loss to see his community transformed in that way, and to see his relationships up-ended and in the sense of dislocation, but he had been through enough in his life that, in his words, you know, he really felt that he was relatively well-positioned to try to see the other side of, of this very tumultuous event.

Yesh (20:45):

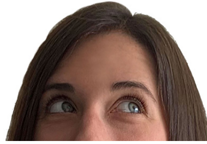
Well, and, and then in history to follow that we didn't expect the pandemic and no doubt the, the, the trend continues. So with that, um, I can't imagine when you're crossing the globe. And again, when you're trying to access intimate families and communities that are facing crisis, it probably doesn't always go swimmingly. Was there anything you tried to do on this specific project, not paradise exclusively, but your entire project that failed. And I'm wondering if there are any lessons learned from that, that you can share with our audience.

Pete Muller (21:25):

I'm always convinced that I'm going to fail. You know, like it's, it's almost a matter, it's just like a proforma that every time I set out to do something, I am terrified that it's not going to work out, that I've made a huge mistake and I feel I'm always so filled with doubt, always.

Yesh (21:42):

Um, I mean, I think we've all been there at some point in time. And in addition to having that doubt on a big project, this work is hard! When you're talking about gathering stories from people and documenting movements, and moments in human history that are painful, and big, and emotional, how do you emotionally manage all that you need to, to take in what can be really scary and really painful and translate that to an audience? You've done it in so many different ways. And I can only put myself in your shoes and wonder, Pete, does that take a toll? It must take a toll, right?



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Pete Muller (22:27):

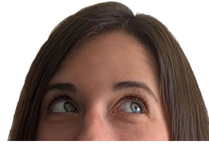
I never really know how to answer that question. I, I, um, I think it certainly does take a toll. I mean, I got involved in all of this because of my temperament feels very connected to people. I really care about people. I want to understand them. And so I feel a lot of things with them, and there's no way really for me to be with people in times of incredible emotional distress and not feel that with them. And, and frankly, I think if you're not feeling that with them, I think that there's something kind of wrong. And I think that your pictures, I don't know, they begin to reflect that, that you're not feeling that with them. And it's a very, very delicate balance because someone in my position has also made a choice that I'm in many instances, I'm there in a professional capacity. So I'm really riding this line between all of these fundamental facets of my personality and my sense of connection and empathy with people, and also needing to try to keep some level of distance so that I can try as best I can to make a record of what's transpiring. I mean, if you can't hold your self together enough, that you're able to record what you're seeing, then your presence there is really, in some ways an intrusion. I mean, I've been in many situations where, you know, it should be a place that's really only for the most intimate of connections, you know: funerals and moments of real tragedy and terrible things. And the unspoken, or in some cases spoken contract that you have is that I have been allowed to be here. It's an extraordinary honor, and it is somewhat an imposition for me to be here. And you have my pledge to do my utmost in making a respectful, thoughtful, empathetic, fair rendering of what's happening here, with the idea that when we share this, hopefully this is part of a process of trying to build a sense of awareness that leads to all of these other mechanisms-- hopefully kicking into play and ultimately seeing some kind of relief from the circumstances that you're photographing. If you don't feel that if you don't feel some modicum of, of hope that there's, uh, a purpose for your being here, then you can't last very long emotionally, and you arguably probably shouldn't be there to begin with.

Yesh (25:09):

So, one thing that will be particularly of interest to our listeners, who are thinking about using their creative and artistic talents to bring light to climate change and making this sometimes invisible phenomena, this invisible experience, visible, I'd love to hear more about your thoughts on that process on you, yourself, identifying what is invisible and deciding as an artist, how it's possible to make it visible.

Pete Muller (25:40):

I'm glad that that's what you've asked, because I've been thinking a lot about that. I'd recently heard just like a sort of snippet on NPR-- but it was this series that they were doing about like, Hey, here's a cool instance of how people got together to solve a problem. And what they were talking about was the hole in the ozone layer. And they were describing how there was a sort of public awareness campaign, and they were trying to draw attention to the fact that, of course, this is like of all things invisible, the hole in



the ozone layer is this big, invisible thing that nobody can really perceive. And of course it's having impacts that we can perceive, but how do you get people to care about something that they can't really see? And so there was this effort underway to create a visual representation of this hole. And it was done effectively enough that people started to really understand, and the, and the message started landing with them far better. And they were able to galvanize enough public support, which translated into political support, which translated into funding, to begin to make tangible strides towards a resolving this, this problem.

Yesh (26:36):

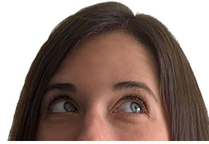
That resonates so much with me, that that's my childhood right there-- um, watching that become important. And even as being able to understand at a very elementary level what the ozone layer was and, and why we were affecting it, how we were affecting it, how we could change it. I I'm just timing it to say, I really agree with you because I can remember even as a child, that idea being so poignant.

Pete Muller (27:00):

Well, we can't fix what we can't see. And I think that there's so many different ways to begin to see something. I certainly am trying to utilize photography and other things to try to help that process of, of seeing. What's enticed me a little bit and, and somewhat to my frustration, because it's so much harder to do it this way, is that as a conventional photo journalist, you deploy out to where the action is, for the most part, you know, and you're there to take snaps of, of this news highlight of the day or whatever. And I'm not saying that it's all high-octane and you know, very extreme, but for the most part, that's where we gravitate to because that's where the camera thrives in that, in that medium. And I've like I said, kind of frustratingly develop this fixation on trying to utilize the camera as part of the process of photographing things that are really hard to photograph. And this means by the way, uh, knowing what is appropriate in what settings and what isn't, you know, like photojournalism: you never intervene. That's the first and foremost rule of photojournalism. You don't step in, you don't ask people to repeat things. You don't stage things-- unless you're very clearly saying, listen, I want to take a portrait of this person. In which case you would identify it as this is a portrait of Yesh in her closet, recording or podcast or whatever it is. But for the most part, it's supposed to be observational as possible. And I think that the photojournalistic technique is profoundly impressive and it's so important for the historical record. And it has a really prominent and important place. And I, I love it now. I love to consume it and I look at it, but: it's not always in my opinion, the right technique for using visuals to chronicle a subject, you know? And so like some of these images in the solastalgia project, these are directed portraits. In some cases, you know, the image that you had mentioned about the couple--

Yesh (28:55):

Playing the piano--



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Pete Muller (28:56):

I saw Don and Debbie playing like that the night before, and I left them a note. I was bringing up dog food over the back steps that have been delivered by Amazon. And I came up the back steps and I, and I saw them through the window and they were playing. I thought, Oh my God. And I felt so, you know, I was so voyeuristic. I was like standing outside and watching this thing, but it was dark outside. And, and we really have a wonderful relationship. I didn't feel that I was breaching any trust. Really. It was. So it was so beautiful. And I, I stood and I watched it a little bit. And then I left them a note in the morning. I said, I saw you guys sitting at the piano last night when I brought the dog foot up onto the porch. And it was the most beautiful thing I'd seen in so long. And I'd love that to be the photo of you guys. And so we agreed. But that picture is not the moment. That's not actually the moment that I first saw them, but that's the moment that we made of that moment was real, you know? I mean, I think that there are instances where something can be somewhat less real and be an indication of truth. And there are also things where something can be real and not necessarily be true, you know, because it's a snippet, it's an unfair representation. You chose this moment where this woman's face was very contorted. And in that moment, she looks angry at the person that she's talking to.

Yesh (30:07):

She had an itch!

Pete Muller (30:08):

But in fact, she's not-- exactly! These are like the ongoing forever debates about the photographic medium is that it is this distillation that happens so quickly. And, and is it fair? And is it true? And so to me, as I've begun to become more interested in these explanatory projects that are about things that are harder to visualize, I've become increasingly open to using different photographic methods to try to get at those things. Because I fear that if you don't-- if you are too committed necessarily to the purity of photojournalism, say, we risk missing really important things about the human experience that just are not as legible to this photojournalistic technique,

Yesh (30:53):

Pete, what makes great photography?

Pete Muller (31:01):

I mean, great photography-- great photography to me makes me think. You know, there's a kind of effervescent intangible quality to great photography. I sometimes say that for me, photography is really nothing more than a gateway to conversation. I love the artistry of photography. I mean, I come from, from a world of painters and photographers and people who really have devoted their lives to pursuing

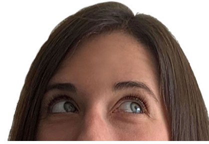
and refining their artistic vision. And I have great appreciation for that side of it. But if it doesn't spark a conversation, I mean, that's what I want. I want to take pictures that when you look at them, you think: hang on a second, either, either this, this really resonates with me in a way that I want to discuss, or it's rubbing me in some kind of way. That's making me think about something in a way that perhaps I hadn't. if we're having an impassioned conversation as a result of the photography, then I think it's been successful

Yesh (32:02):

Well, and on that note, you have a dream job. For many of our listeners, whether or not they're in communications. And let's be honest, only a handful if, if only a handful of maybe will become National Geographic photographers themselves. So what advice would you give to our listeners who want to use their artistic and communications talents to advance conversations about climate change, the way that you're doing with your work?

Pete Muller (32:37):

I think that it's really partially related to the way that photography has been so transformed by technologies. You know, we are all now proficient photographers. We have phones on our cameras that enable us to take pictures that are overwhelmingly correctly exposed and in focus. And given that we all now have that capability to record the world around us, and the world is just swimming in, in pictures of everything, we really have to think very carefully about what we have to say, what can our photographs contribute and how can we utilize this form of communication to express ideas and to challenge things and to invite people and encourage their curiosity and engage their sense of interest in the world. And so, in some ways I feel like photography is it's almost besides the point. You know, if you'd like to take pictures, take pictures and look at lots of other people's pictures and look at lots of art, you know, familiarize yourself with the principles of the way that the art world is organized and, and utilize those things and try to figure out how to make them your own. But spend the majority of your time reading and thinking and consuming other forms of information that can inform the frameworks in which you start to employ photography. One of the story to directors of photography at National Geographic used to say, "we're up to our eyeballs in good photographers, and we're up to our ankles and good ideas". And, and, and I think that that's so incredible. I mean, what an, what an observation. Sure. He meant it in the context of photography, but boy, that deals with everything out there, whatever your pursuit is, your ideas are your currency. And so if you're not very proactively cultivating and refining and looking for, for sustenance, for your ideas, then the outputs that you make, be it photography or films or whatever it is maybe lacking.



Episode 12: Pete Muller
A National Geographic photographer captures the emotional impacts of climate change

Yesh (34:31):

That's great, thoughtful advice for people who are doing the work. I'd love for you to add to that. What advice can you give our listeners who are looking for jobs who are budding writers and marketers and artists and photographers who want to use their talents to help mitigate the climate crisis?

Pete Muller (34:52):

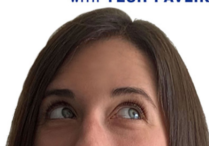
What is always most interesting to me about great storytellers is that they are by and large capable of finding sort of fabulous stories, wherever they are. It's more of an outlook than a matter of practicality. You know, how are you approaching the world? Are you, are you keenly, voraciously interested in other people and what they're experiencing and how do you demonstrate that? I mean, in order to learn things about people, which in turn help you learn things about yourself, you have got to be engaged. And people will not give you the time of day, if they sense that your attention is trite or superficial or extractive. And so in some ways, I don't know if that's practical advice necessarily, but really trying to take a proactive approach to the engagement and interest that you have in places that are familiar to you: landscapes and environments and social situations that are really familiar to you and engaging them in, in a kind of active way-- actively thinking, actively talking with people, actively listening to people. And I think too, as a matter of advice for people who are trying to get into this, really try to interrogate your own ideas as well. You know, I fear that we're, we're veering a little bit into territory where we want a kind of a soothing experience from what we're consuming and what we're making, and the kinds of stories that we're telling, and having our ideas contradicted is very uncomfortable. But that's so essential. You know, we cannot devise critical ways of approaching complex problems if we are not fully versed in all of the parameters of what the argument around these issues are. And as, as devoted as we have to be to what we understand to be the principles of science and, you know, a strong sense of principle, we also really have to remain open to things that come in that are challenging, that can help to at least give us a greater understanding of things as uncomfortable, or sometimes as unpleasant as that may be. I think we have to be open.

Yesh (37:07):

Um, now that you've done this project, how important is storytelling in fighting climate change?

Pete Muller (37:17):

I think it's, I think it's profoundly important. I think there is something very primordial about storytelling. Our abilities to communicate as a social species have been so vital in every facet of our evolutionary process, the way that we engage with each other, the way that we build broader societies, the way that we've put together, all of the social enterprise, that's really defined homosapiens as a group of people. And all of that in one way or another is connected to story. How are we connecting various points that



are otherwise kind of disparate things out there in the world? It's like a storytelling editing where we say, well, this point is important. And that point is important and this not so much. And, and that process is so influential and it can be so cathartic or it can be so devastating, you know-- and I think that the stories that we tell about the issues of our time-- climate change being no different-- can have a profound impact on how we adapt to these things. Or at least how we do it constructively, you know, I mean, because fact of the matter is time will March on and people will live as long as we can live, you know, but it's, how do we want to live? What do we see as a judicious path forward? That's reasonable, that's attainable that we can bring people on for that can hopefully make the type of quality of experience that we have as we persist as a species for as long as we can. How can we attain those things? And I think storytelling is a big part of that. I mean, how do we imbue anybody with values, generation after generation with values? We tell them about it. And we tell stories, biblical stories and social stories and all these things that shape the way we understand the world. Stories are, they are quintessentially human.

Yesh (39:03):

Well, this has been fascinating, Pete, I'm so grateful. And, uh, this has been such, such a joy.

Pete Muller (39:10):

And thank you for your interest.

Yesh (39:12):

And that's our show for today. Thank you listeners for tuning in to Degrees. And that's a wrap on season one of Degrees. If you've enjoyed the show, please take a moment right now and give us a five-star rating and review on Apple podcasts or Spotify-- and share the show with friends and family and ask them to subscribe. Season two is on the way, and it's going to be bigger and better. As we work on it, please help us out: direct message me on Twitter @yeshsays, or reach out to me on LinkedIn, @yeshpavlikslenk. Tell us what you loved, maybe what you didn't, and what you'd like to hear more of. We love hearing from you and on behalf of the entire Degrees team, it has been a true joy to serve you. Also, if you liked this episode, please join me and Pete Muller as we go live on Instagram on Thursday, February 11th at 12:30 PM Eastern. You can find us on the Environmental Defense Fund account. Finally, if you're looking for a job, please visit our website degrees podcast.org, where we posted our favorite sustainability job boards. Degrees is presented by Environmental Defense Fund. Our producers are Rick Velleu and Amy Morse. Our executive producer is Christina Mestre. Our production company is Podcast Allies with Elaine Appleton Grant and Lindsey O'Connor. Engineering by Matthew Simonson and theme music by Lake Street Dive. I'm your host, Yesh Pavlik Slenk. Stay fired up, y'all!