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Water, Water Everywhere Nor Any Drop To Drink: Activists use social networks and digital video in pleas for rivers and groundwater

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WATER WATER EVERYWHERE BUT NOT A DRINK

Activists use social networks and digital video in pleas for rivers and groundwater

By Lauren
Pongan '09



Contaminated spray from a waterfall in Mexico burns skin on contact. New Delhi's primary source of drinking water—groundwater—is forecast to dry up in five years. Awareness of environmental issues is on the rise, in part because young Colby alumni are taking action. They are not aspiring to save the world. They're leveraging the tools that help define their generation—social media networks and video technology—to do what mainstream media can't or won't do. Their science backgrounds, technical skills, and creative abilities help these activists

get their messages out, and their commitment to local culture, preexisting environmental movements, and community partnerships makes their work possible.

"I think environmentalists have realized that the tree-hugging alone isn't necessarily most effective," said Visiting Assistant Professor of Environmental Studies Gail Carlson, who teaches Environmental Activism at Colby.



Armed with flipcams, students from Iteco Universidad make documentaries about water-related issues. Photo by Arthur Richards

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Speaking from her sunlit office in Guadalajara with a fan oscillating in the background to offset the Mexican heat, New Hampshire native Sarah Kelly '06 talked about Adapting to Scarcity, her nonprofit organization focused on contamination of the Rio Santiago river in Guadalajara.

She described the mixture of heavy metals (including chromium, lead, and arsenic), untreated human and industrial waste, and myriad chemicals found in the Rio Santiago's water as "a cocktail of contamination." Inadequate municipal infrastructure for sewage treatment, lax enforcement of laws and environmental regulation of manufacturing plants, and a public largely unaware of the multitude of toxins polluting the river all contribute to the problem, Kelly says.

She and her colleagues are helping area residents educate each other about the importance and scarcity of clean water, and the ways in which actions in one part of the Rio

Santiago watershed have direct effects on water quality in others.

Kelly doesn't see the problem solely through the lens of a scientist, but through the broad array of experiences she acquired during her time at Colby. She's combining her writing skill, scientific knowledge, video production ability, and grassroots organizing experience to focus public attention on a daunting environmental problem.

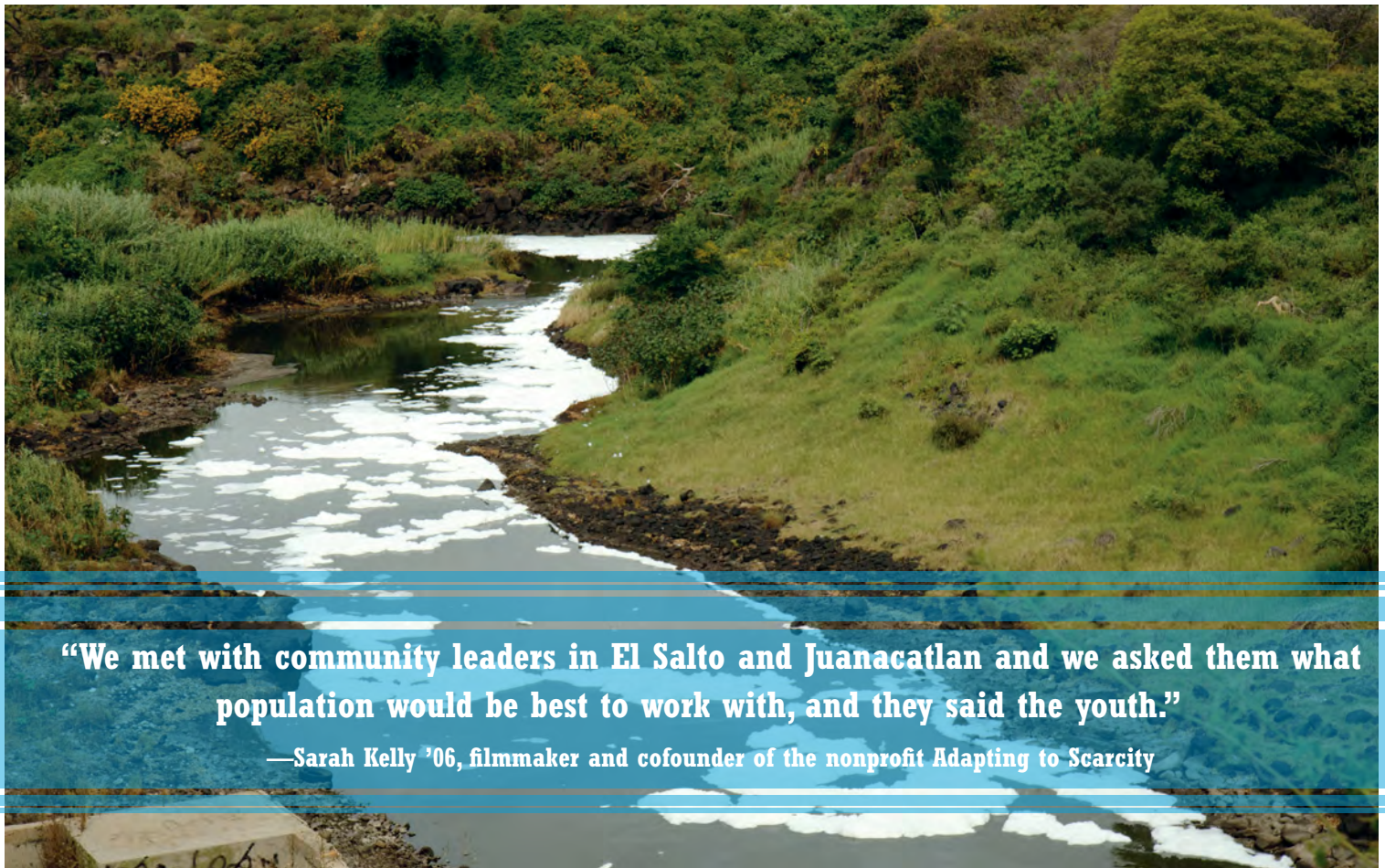
This multifaceted approach to the problems of the Rio Santiago reflects Kelly's interdisciplinary environmental policy major, one that begins with a foundation in environmental studies and adds environmental economics, domestic and international policy, and law. Electives can add Geographic Information Systems skills and a public health course. Kelly also devoted much of her Colby academic career to study of the history of Latin America. "I created my own greater study, and a lot of it was anthropological," she said

Kelly combined that academic background with documentary filmmaking learned at Colby. Inspired by the showing in class of a documentary made about and by children raised in Indian brothels, Kelly and her partners in Adapting to Scarcity turned to participatory filmmaking when they focused on Mexico's water problems, distributing video cameras to students and turning them into filmmakers.

Guadalajara native Étienne von Bertrab, lecturer in political ecology at Iteeso University, said Adapting to Scarcity's work cultivates a sense of unity between different organizations with similar goals. "It is amazing what they did," von Bertrab wrote in an e-mail, "not only because of the documentary work itself, but because most of their work was supporting people to tell their own stories, which they captured together with the opinion of a wide range of actors."

Kelly firmly believes in the power of documentary film, she says, and she isn't

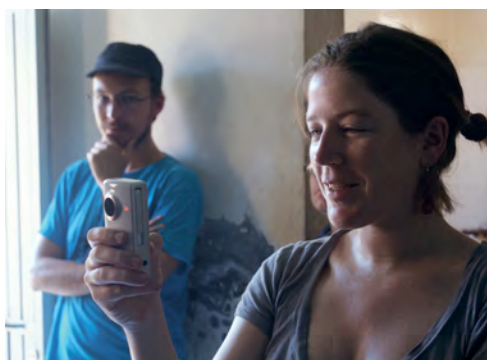
The toxic Rio Santiago, just downstream from the El Salto waterfall. Spray from the waterfall is so contaminated by chemicals that it burns the skin.



"We met with community leaders in El Salto and Juanacatlan and we asked them what population would be best to work with, and they said the youth."

—Sarah Kelly '06, filmmaker and cofounder of the nonprofit Adapting to Scarcity

PHOTO BY ARTHUR RICHARDS



Students participate in a digital photography project related to water-quality issues in the Guadalajara area. The students' photos were collected for an exhibition that was shown throughout the region. Left, Sarah Kelly '06 in Mexico filming for the Adapting to Scarcity website.

alone. The hands-on academic and engagement experience that environmental activists gain as students at Colby is producing a shift in the way they approach environmental problems, students and faculty say.

Like Kelly, Tarini Manchanda '09 participated in the Colby-sanctioned International Honors Program (IHP) study-abroad project, Rethinking Globalization, in which students spend a year traveling to five countries to study individual and community reactions to globalization. After graduating Manchanda returned home, to Delhi, India, and cofounded Get on the Bus Productions with two fellow IHP alumnae, Katie Gillett (Boston University) and Moriah Mason (Sarah Lawrence College). Together they studied Delhi's water problems and produced a documentary film called *The Groundwater Up Project*.

So far more than 500 people in India and

more than 150 in the United States have seen the film, which boasts more than 1,260 hits on YouTube, and it has a Facebook group with more than 400 fans.

For young environmentalists like Kelly and Manchanda, technology and activism go hand in hand. Off the top of their heads, they pointed to other environmental activists using video and the Web: iLoveMountains.org, which uses an interactive map featuring videos of citizens describing the impact of mountaintop removal coal mining, in their local areas of Appalachia. Jump the Fence Productions' Matt Myers is educating the public about Picher, a former lead and zinc mining town in Oklahoma whose citizens have been forced to relocate due to contamination and fear of cave-ins. None of these efforts required deep pockets.

Manchanda's Delhi project started with a \$4,000 grant from a fund set up by a fellow United World College alumnus. Her first film, funded by a yoga studio in India and made with Fern Jeremiah '09 and Lara Wilson, documented the 2004 tsunami that

devastated many areas in southern India. Manchanda and Ned Warner '09J produced a short documentary, *Narmada Rising*, funded by a Goldfarb Center grant, about people displaced by the damming of the Narada River in India. Manchanda also completed a film project in Government Professor Ariel Armony's Globalization and Social Innovation course.

Like Kelly, Manchanda knew early that film would be her chosen medium for activism. She says her film skills grew considerably during her senior year at Colby, when she made videos about student life for insideColby.com and took English Professor Phyllis Mannocchi's documentary filmmaking course, American Dreams.

"American Dreams helped me realize the power of film and its effect on people," Manchanda said. "Films can make people angry or motivate them." The course, she said, taught her storytelling techniques, while working on InsideColby, the student-produced website and magazine about life at Colby, taught her technical editing skills. "InsideColby gave me real-life experience," she said. "It helped me work with an audience in mind and weekly deadlines."

Manchanda and Kelly each took Mannocchi's American Dreams course, which includes both technical instruction and storytelling techniques. Students research a local issue relevant to a general audience and create a story line, Mannocchi said. By assigning groups of students to produce their own documentaries, American Dreams provides hands-on experience in the filmmaking process.

In fact, Colby has ramped up administrative support for video projects in recent years, opening the Instructional Media Center in Lovejoy in 2009, to support courses like American Dreams and a variety of language courses and various other courses that use video.

On the environmental studies side, the Green Cluster in Colby's Integrated Studies Program added Environmental Activism as one of three component courses in 2007. Designed primarily for first-year students, the ISP is an interdisciplinary approach to studying a single topic or era from the perspectives of several academic disciplines. The Green Cluster marries courses titled Biodiversity (biology) and Philosophy of the

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Environment (philosophy) with the Environmental Activism (environmental studies) course taught by Carlson. “They really learn the historical roots of activism, how other people have acted, and then they learn how you act yourself—everything from framing a public debate to how to write a press release,” she said.

Students create a mock activism group complete with a name, mission statement, an organizational structure, and a strategic plan that includes funding and communications strategies. “They have to actually plan a real action and present it to me as if I were a funder,” Carlson said.

“From the start [Carlson’s] class has had a huge impact on getting underclassman very active on campus,” said Environmental Studies Coordinator Elizabeth Kane Kopp.

While Carlson’s class offers what she describes as “old-fashioned, take-it-to-the-barricades kind of a training,” she steers students who want to learn technical skills involved in things like web design, recording, and editing, towards campus resources like the Instructional Media Center and the American Dreams filmmaking class.

The environmental thrust of many student documentary and activism projects (including an American Dreams film about the resurgence of the once-polluted Kennebec River) reflects the growth of the environmental movement in the past decade, according to Kopp. “Now it spans our society,” she said. “Green used to be a word to describe a color, and now it describes an environmental infiltration into every aspect of your life.”

At Colby, which names sustainability as a core value, this is especially true. Manchanda views her documentary work as a means of “translating” the science and “making it fun and making it a part of your everyday life.”

In many ways Kelly’s Guadalajara project is a culmination of the environmental studies and activism she engaged in at Colby. In addition to conducting an environmental analysis of water quality in nearby China Lake, which provides drinking water for Waterville and surrounding communities, Kelly and others fought for regulation of the Maine bottled-water industry.



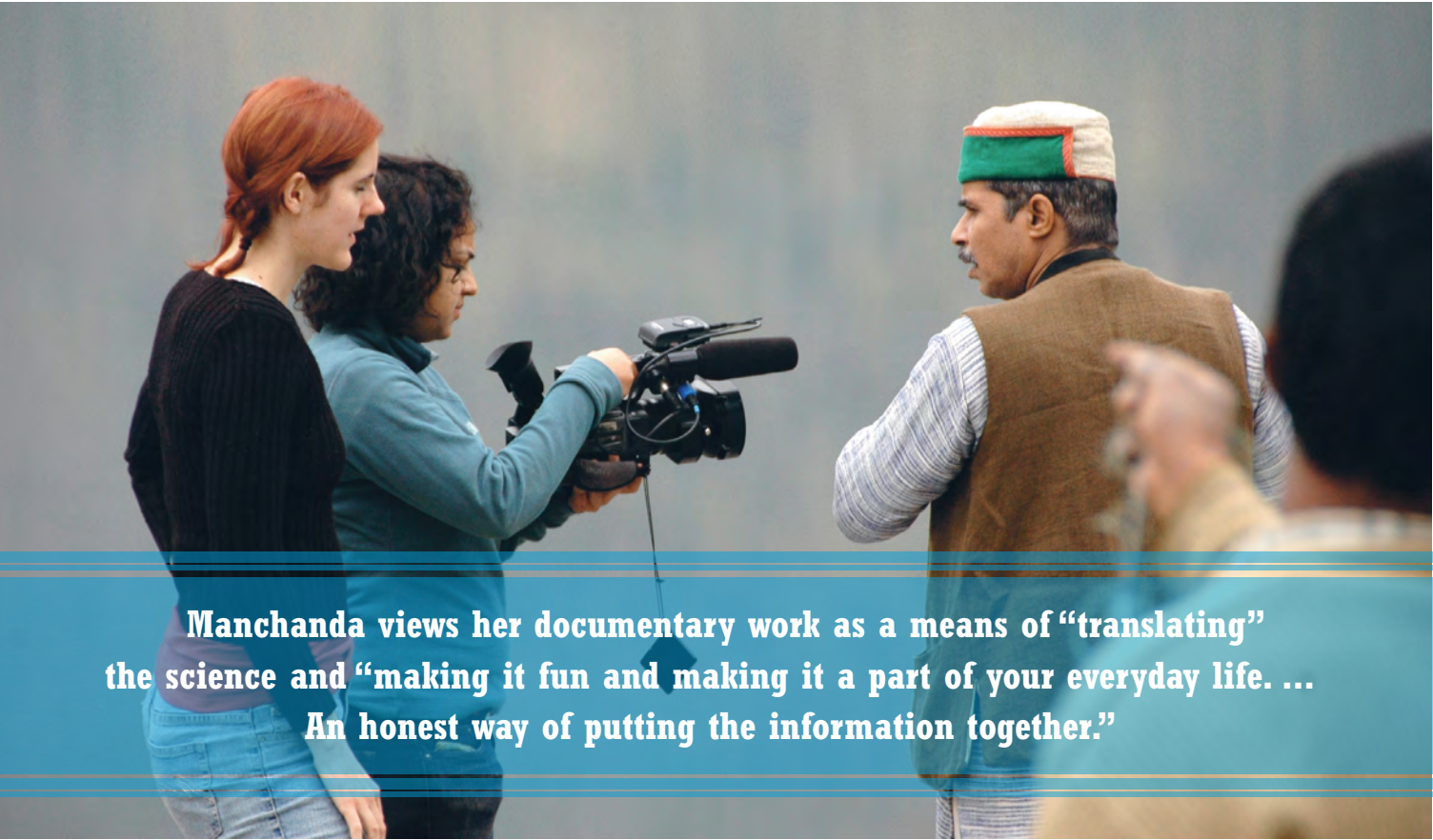
PHOTOS BY KATIE GILLETT

In foreground above, Moriah Mason, Tarini Manchanda '09, and Katie Gillett, founders of Get on the Bus Productions, with activists at a meeting near Delhi, India. Top, activist Vimal Bhai during a tour of the Tehri Dam reservoir.

Working in Mexico on water-rights issues during her semester abroad, she returned there after graduation, focusing on Guadalajara’s heavily polluted Rio Santiago. She and cofounder Arthur Richards began by going to the people. “We met with community leaders in El Salto and Juanacatlan and we asked them what population would be best

to work with, and they said the youth,” Kelly said. The elders “didn’t really feel like there were creative outlets or ways for youth to be involved in the movement.”

Adapting to Scarcity distributed flipcams to high school and college students, organized workshops, and provided ongoing support to local environmental activists. “It’s



Manchanda views her documentary work as a means of “translating” the science and “making it fun and making it a part of your everyday life. ... An honest way of putting the information together.”

Moriab Mason, left, and Tarini Manchanda '09 film activist Vimal Bhai at the Tebri Dam reservoir. The dam diverts water to Delhi but has sparked concerns about relocation of local residents, environmental concerns, and drastic reduction of the flow of the Bhagirathi River.

most important to me to provide people with tools that they can use after we're gone,” said Kelly, though she has no plans to end the Guadalajara project anytime soon.

Videos made by community members have been posted on YouTube and are linked from Adapting to Scarcity's website. The films have been screened at community events, and the footage is being used in Kelly and partner Arthur Richards's full-length film *Como Corre El Agua [How The Water Flows]*, which is scheduled for release in October at Rivers For Life, a worldwide meeting of people (and their allies) affected by dams.

At first glance Manchanda's and Kelly's projects overlap considerably. Both were environmental policy majors, both are studying and documenting water scarcity in urban settings, both tell their stories through films. Both took American Dreams, and both are IHP alumnae. They have much in common, but their initial connection was serendipitous.

As a first-year student curious about IHP,

Manchanda had lunch with Kelly to learn more. Kelly was not encouraging, but it didn't work. “In trying to sort of dissuade her and just to tell her how intense the program is and how prepared you have to be, I inadvertently convinced her to go,” Kelly said.

In Tanzania in 2007, a funny thing happened to Manchanda. “I was in the program library in Zanzibar and I opened some random book,” she said. “This postcard fell out that Sarah Kelly had written to a friend when she was on the program three years ago.” The postcard gave them a reason to reconnect, and later Kelly helped Manchanda reintegrate back into Colby after the program ended. “You become so idealistic, and it's really difficult to come back,” Kelly said. “I wrote her with advice and tips and my story.”

Later, on the IHP listserv Kelly posted information about her project in Guadalajara. Since then Adapting to Scarcity and Get on the Bus Productions have worked together. “We've been in touch ever since,

comparing notes, sharing our understanding and ethics. We're staying in touch as our projects have grown and are supporting each other,” Kelly said.

The two organizations ran a collaborative workshop, Digital Storytelling for Social Change, at the 2010 U.S. Social Forum in June in Detroit. They hope to collaborate on a film project in the coming year.

Above all, both activists are drawn to film. “So much of what people say is really valuable in the moment that they say it and the way that they say it and because of their experiences,” Manchanda said, reflecting on what makes the medium powerful.

Their ultimate goal, they said, is to forge a connection between people and their environment and to create a sense of awareness about the systems of life that support us. “You can read about an issue, you can see photos,” said Kelly, “but video is the most tangible way to learn about different realities—be it problems or beautiful solutions.” 