

# Tax incentive program improves economy

BY HEIDI BOH

Shortly after the movie "Everyone Loves Whales" began filming in September, Uptown Blossoms, a popular flower shop in midtown Anchorage, had its own brush with fame when the set decorator called to talk about flower needs for various scenes in the movie.

"When we first met him we were sort of nervous, but really he's just a person like you and me," shop owner Carol Trout says, adding that her business was recommended to the studio coordinators. "Wherever there was a need for flowers, we supplied them."

Set in Cold War era 1988, the film tells the true story of a small-town news reporter and a Greenpeace volunteer, played by Drew Barrymore, who enlist

the help of rival superpowers to save three gray whales trapped under the ice of the Arctic Circle as they made their way to Mexico for the winter. The national media, environmental activists, and the United States and Soviet Union – then in the middle of the Cold War – quickly descended on Barrow in an effort to escort the whales into open water.

Trout says flower needs all had to be designed to reflect what was in style in the 1980s, and included centerpieces and arrangements for various scenes in the film. Some of the flower orders required working with the production person responsible for props any of the actors or actresses touched.

What it meant for Uptown Blossoms

was about \$4,000 in orders. Although Trout says her business is fortunate to have a steady stream of customers year-round, it was nice to have the extra bump.

#### ALASKA'S NEWEST INDUSTRY

Since beginning to offer financial incentives to studios that decide to film their movies in Alaska, as is the case with "Everybody Loves Whales," the State's resurrected Film Office is optimistically watching what is being dubbed as Alaska's newest industry. The hope is the economic development initiative will attract projects that mean millions of dollars in economic impact resulting from increased receipts for small and large businesses and local hire.



*A frame from Evergreen Films work in progress. WALKING WITH DINOSAURS 3D, which will be co-produced with BBC Earth and shot in Alaska beginning next year.*

*Frame courtesy of Evergreen Films*

which in the case of "Everyone Loves Whales," meant hiring 3,000 Alaskans statewide, though most were hired in the Anchorage area. Other businesses that stand to measurably benefit are airlines, hotels, freight handling and air cargo, along with smaller enterprises that include everything from courier businesses to seamstresses.

About 30 productions have been prequalified by the State Film Office, meaning studios have submitted applications, estimated budgets, distribution plans and script treatments for the projects. With \$100 million available and a minimum spending requirement of \$100,000, most projects qualify, including films, documentaries, commercials and video productions.

According to the legislation behind the Alaska Film Production Incentive Program, up to a 44 percent transferable tax credit is awarded within weeks once a rough-cut of the production is submitted and an Alaska-licensed CPA has audited the project. In addition to the 30 percent base rate, additional percentages are awarded for local hire, off-season production and filming in rural areas.

Although final numbers are still being tabulated to determine how much Alaska benefited from the recent production's use of local crew and services, after 10 weeks of watching those associated with the project frequent local restaurants, shops and hotels, Alaskans are seeing the potential contributions

of the industry, especially during the off-season months. "Everybody Loves Whales" filmed for 12 hours a day, five days a week for almost three months. (It takes about one day to shoot two to four minutes of film.)

As the preferred hotel for 200 cast and crew, the Captain Cook cannot discuss its agreement with Universal Pictures, though it has been estimated the property had 12,100 bed nights booked from September to December, which is historically a slow time after the peak visitor season. Add meals and incidental expenses, along with side trips that crew took on their days off, and it is easy to see how a film project can quickly contribute to the state's economic development.

#### EVERGREEN FILMS

"It's been a long time since there was a new industry in Alaska trying to build from the ground up," said Kate Tesar, business development director for Evergreen Films.

Evergreen, though not associated with "Everyone Loves Whales," is one of the industry's most watched developments. The Anchorage-based production company continues to make substantial investments in Alaska and is positioning itself to take advantage of the growing industry.

It has several productions in the works, one which will likely be the Kate Shugak television series based on Alaska author Dana Stabenow's mystery novels, including "A Cold Day for Murder," which won the Mystery Writers of America's Edgar Award. Other titles that will be made into the series are "Whisper to the Blood," which made the New York Times bestseller list, and "A Night Too Dark," which is the 17th in the series.

Based in Anchorage with offices in Los Angeles, Calif., Evergreen was founded by Mike Devlin and Pierre De Lespinois. Devlin has a computer engineering background and Lespinois is an award-winning television and film director. Devlin fell in love with Alaska and decided to build his Anchorage Hillside film editing studio after selling his software company. The team also has a yacht in Seward with adaptations that can accommodate filming both on and under water.

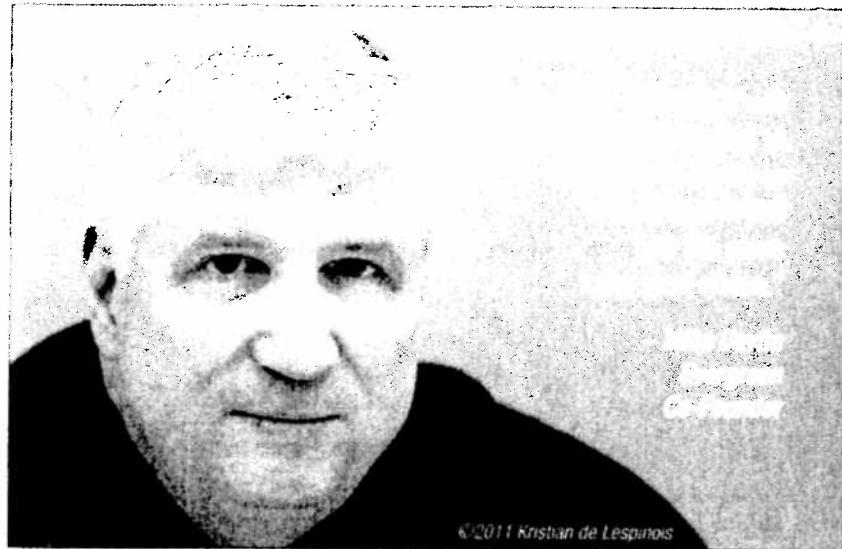
Another of Evergreen's biggest market advantages is the company's state-of-the-art digital and 3D studios, including 3D camera systems, groundbreaking LIDAR scanning technology, photo-real 3D Computer Generated Imagery (CGI), and an integrated 3D post-production workflow. The technology allows them to create a realistic portrayal of any location. This technology will also be used in "Walking With Dinosaurs," the Alaska-scripted and -produced, live-action dinosaur feature. That production will highlight photo-realistic 3D dinosaurs immersed in real, live-action 3D environments. This will launch in 2013 with 20th Century Fox securing the distribution rights. Evergreen is partnering with BBC Earth to produce the \$65 million feature film. Devlin says most of the live action for "Walking with Dinosaurs" will be filmed in Alaska to take advantage of the beautiful exteriors and the State's film incentives. The franchise model of the film means a new movie will be produced every two to three years. Evergreen and BBC are also partnering on the production of the \$25 million feature film "Africa 3D."

#### **NANA PARTNERING**

Responsible for helping create the incentive legislation, Tesar says Evergreen is committed to developing the industry statewide so that many communities benefit from the economic boost. To that end, it recently partnered with NANA Development Corp., an Alaska Native corporation based in Anchorage, which offers infrastructure and services that will help grow the industry and employ more Alaskans, including NANA shareholders.

"We are thinking it will take 10 to 15 years to build the industry in Alaska and NANA has the same long-term vision," Devlin says. "Together, the two of us are making a mutual investment to build the industry - we focus on film, they focus on building the service industry, and we will involve them in every production we're doing."

By making a financial investment, NANA is about a one-third owner and the company's partner in films that are shot in the Arctic environment, meaning it is the preferred vendor for those services it offers. The partnership is



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*Mike Devlin co-founder of Evergreen Films, with offices in Anchorage and Los Angeles.*

expected to create a lot of opportunity for shareholders - whether they are hired to work on a film project, or they simply benefit from dividends resulting from this newest investment.

When Evergreen approached NANA in 2009, it was looking for corporate involvement in specific high-budget films. NANA was less interested in being involved in specific films and more likely to invest in the company as a whole, says Robin Kornfield, vice president of communication and marketing for NANA Development Corporation. Although being involved in the film industry is not an area NANA has experience in, as it researched the opportunity it quickly became apparent that many of the services it had built up over the past 38 years are the same ones required in film production, including remote camp services, food service, security, transportation and staffing services.

"We already provide many of the back-of-the-house things that make it possible for those in the front to get their work done," Kornfield says. "We realized it was a better fit than we thought when we first went in - with just one phone call the industry can access all the film support services it needs."

Although the idea of partnering with Evergreen may seem like a big stretch to the business community, Kornfield says that, in fact, the board of directors was not completely unfamiliar with the benefits of the film industry. The group

travels to Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada, regularly for business associated with Red Dog Mine and is used to seeing film crews shooting in the middle of the street. "The prospect of doing something in Anchorage was not foreign to them at all," Kornfield says.

One big draw for NANA was that the film industry offers more opportunities in areas younger shareholders will be interested in such as computer graphics.

Although acting is an obvious opportunity for shareholders, Kornfield says, the greater opportunity is for them to be involved in the service industries, which is the backbone of the corporation's success. Although the partnership will evolve over time, Kornfield says NANA will do whatever it takes to make film support services available, and at the same time will offer these same services to other film production companies that come to Alaska.

"Every time a shareholder gets a paycheck - that's part of what we do," Kornfield says, adding that part of NANA's plan is to eventually develop a line of services specific to the film industry that shareholders can be trained in.

Partnerships like the NANA-Evergreen one embody the intent of the original incentive legislation, which was designed to develop new business opportunities in Alaska by pairing the supply with the demand. From there, Tesar says, the jobs and on-the-job training for Alaskans will follow. □



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## We're ready for our close-up, Mr. DeMille

**COMPASS: Other points of view**

By SUSAN BELL

(01/05/11 19:08:04)

Alaska's film industry has received much notice lately thanks to two feature films that have recently finished production here. Alaskans love watching as Hollywood discovers our state. We love the economic impact, too -- including jobs, spending on hotel rooms, rental cars and other goods and services - that comes when hundreds of people become our neighbors, if only for a short time.

Through the leadership of Sen. Johnny Ellis, the concurrence of the Alaska Legislature, and the support of Gov. Parnell, the state's recently implemented film industry tax credit has been instrumental in spurring the growth of this new economic sector. The film industry has the potential to provide diversity and meaningful contributions to the state's economy. When the film tax incentive bill was passed in 2008, the law provided a base credit of 30 percent to companies that film in Alaska and spend at least \$100,000 during a 24-month period. Additional credit could be earned for wages paid to Alaskans, as well as for productions made in rural areas or shot between Oct. 1 and March 30.

Tax credits have been a standard part of economic development strategy for years, as they stimulate additional investment and bring new businesses into the marketplace. Alaska offers similar incentives for mineral exploration, certain types of oil and gas production, and value-added salmon product development.

In the case of the film industry, attracting Hollywood north will help the state accomplish several outcomes:

- Encouraging and protecting a new industry in Alaska;
- Enhancing the economic viability of film projects attracted to Alaska;
- Boosting Alaska businesses and creating jobs for Alaskans; and
- Increasing interest in Alaska tourism from Outside audiences who are inspired to visit after watching movies filmed here.

From a competitive standpoint, it is important that we continue to build the physical infrastructure and human capital necessary to host major motion pictures and television programming. Growing this industry to the point that it is self-sustaining may take years to come to full fruition. But look what has already happened in the 30 months since the tax incentive was implemented:

- Two Alaska children are lead actors in two major feature films that will be released in 2012;
- Dozens of other Alaskans have earned speaking roles;
- Hundreds have signed on as extras, crew members, or both;

- Private industry is planning for a soundstage, a fundamental piece of infrastructure that will make Alaska more attractive to production companies;
- Films made by Alaskans are being screened at the prestigious Sundance Film Festival;
- Alaska's own film festival is growing rapidly;
- Film production management companies are starting to develop;
- Alaska cinematographers are working side by side with Hollywood's best directors of photography; and
- Alaska producers are busy working on films large and small.

What's next? We need to work hard to attract more productions and create paths of opportunity for Alaskans. The Department of Commerce, Community and Economic Development, which houses the Alaska Film Office, needs to ensure that a trained workforce is ready for action. We are working to develop job-training programs for as many Alaskans as possible, in conjunction with the private sector, other state agencies and the university system.

These aren't going to be overnight, "just add water" accomplishments. We're nurturing this industry with plans for it to develop and contribute to Gov. Parnell's vision for a legacy economy that provides opportunity for this generation and beyond. It is time. For years we have watched as other locations, pretending to be Alaska, stood in our spotlight and reaped the benefits of jobs, spending and invaluable promotional exposure. No more. Alaska is ready for its close-up.

Susan Bell is the commissioner of the state Department of Commerce, Community and Economic Development. Information about the state's film industry tax credits can be found at [www.film.alaska.gov/incentive-program.htm](http://www.film.alaska.gov/incentive-program.htm).

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## Lights, camera, Alaska! Tax credit could draw \$100M

**By Andrew Jensen**  
*Alaska Journal of Commerce*

Reality television struck gold in Alaska long ago, but a package of film tax credits passed in 2008 has the state ready to take its act to the big screen.

Two Hollywood films — "Beyond" starring Jon Voigt and "Everybody Loves Whales" starring Drew Barrymore — wrapped in 2010. An independent film shot in Barrow — "On the Ice" — by local director Andrew MacLean competed at the prestigious Sundance Film Festival this January.

"Everybody Loves Whales" has not yet submitted its final application for the tax credit, which will reveal how much the production spent in Alaska while shooting in Seward, Anchorage, Barrow and Fort Richardson. The movie had a reported \$30 million budget and the production was one of the first to apply for the Alaska film credit in May 2009.

Completed projects (\$14.9 million) and pre-approved projects (\$88 million) push the potential spending in Alaska to more than \$100 million.

"Beyond," which had a reported budget of \$10 million, spent \$6.6 million filming in Anchorage last fall and received a tax credit of \$2.14 million, the largest to date. The tax credits, which have averaged about 32 percent of total Alaska spending, are issued based on how and where companies work.

The base credit is 30 percent of Alaska expenditures, with a total incentive of 44 percent available with a 10 percent Alaska hire credit, 2 percent seasonal credit for shooting between October and March, and another 2 percent for shooting in rural Alaska. The credits are transferrable, which means production companies can sell the credits to Alaska companies for reductions in their state corporate income taxes.



The Tweto family (from left), Ayla, Ariel, Jim and Ferno are featured in the reality TV show, "Flying Wild Alaska," a series on the Discovery Channel about Bush pilots. It is one of dozens of productions filmed in Alaska, many of which are taking advantage of the state's tax incentive. *AP Photo/Discovery Channel*

Alaska has no state sales or income tax, so the credits will exceed a company's tax liabilities. According to the state Film Office website, the credits can fetch 80 percent to 90 percent of their value and provide an additional cash stream for production companies.

The largest credit by percentage issued to date was 37.67 percent to the production of "Disaster on K2" completed in 2009. The documentary, which did some shooting in Nepal, took advantage of Alaska's scenery to recreate the 2008 expedition that left 11 of 15 climbers dead.

Since the introduction of the credits, 15 productions have wrapped after spending \$14.9 million in Alaska. Tax credits have totaled \$4.9 million to date.

There are now 29 active projects pre-approved for the credit, including "Everybody Loves Whales," with total proposed Alaska spending of about \$88 million and \$29.4 million in potential tax credits.

Alaska Film Office director Dave Worrell cautioned that it is unlikely all \$88 million actually will be spent, but it indicates the growing interest in Alaska's film incentive program.

"As we see some productions happening, particularly feature films, it kind of feeds off of that," Worrell said. "People are a little hesitant to be the first on the block. Now we've seen a couple feature films come in and be successful here, I think the word will get out that, yes you can make a movie in Alaska."

Worrell was particularly excited about "On the Ice," which was shot on a budget of \$524,628 and earned a credit of \$171,145. MacLean is a native of Barrow who attended film school in New York and shot his senior project "short" in his hometown.

The short also qualified for Sundance, and MacLean was encouraged to shoot it as a full-length feature.

"That's exactly what we want to see," Worrell said. "We want to see Alaskans telling Alaskans' story."

With 43 states (including Alaska) and every Canadian province having some kind of film incentives, Worrell said it was "critical" for the Legislature to pass the credits.

"With the global economy the way it is right now, films are having a hard time getting a green light," he said. "It's an indispensable part of the business now. If Alaska is going to be competitive, we have to have some kind of incentive."

Alaska has work do to, though, in having sufficient numbers of qualified crew and movie infrastructure if it wants to attract additional big budget studio films. A variety of tacks are being pursued from the Department of Labor and Workforce Development, to the University of Alaska system, the nonprofit Alaska Crew Training Inc. and the recent partnership between NANA Corp. and Evergreen Films.

Being able to shoot indoors is another need, Worrell said.

"Right now we have to rely on what Alaska has always relied on, our amazing locations," he said. "That right now is the huge draw for us. But filmmakers need something to keep their

crew busy on rainy days. Having sound stages where they can do interiors will be a big help for the industry. We recognize this is something that has to pencil in, so it's a little bit of building slowly. We think there's interest and a market for Alaska, but a business case has to be made to build the infrastructure."

The incentive has benefitted the wide array of reality shows that were already home in Alaska such as "Deadliest Catch" and "Ice Road Truckers."

In its sixth season, "Deadliest Catch" spent \$1.75 million in Alaska and received a \$584,562 credit. The third and fourth seasons of "Ice Road Truckers" wrapped in 2010 with a total Alaska spend of \$3.9 million and a credit of \$1.3 million.

A slew of new reality programs also hit the air in 2010 and 2011, including "Alaska State Troopers," "Gold Rush: Alaska," "Flying Alaska Wild" and "Sarah Palin's Alaska." Other shows such as "Ax Men," "Man vs. Wild" and "Top Gear" dropped in to film episodes.

Deadliest Catch, now filming its seventh season, has been a ratings giant for Discovery Channel. It ranked No. 1 in the coveted 25-54 demographic for 14 straight weeks on cable last season, drawing a record average of 5.4 million viewers and 8.5 million for the final episode that recounted the untimely death of Cornelia Marie Capt. Phil Harris.

Ice Road Truckers has steadily drawn more than 3 million viewers; Gold Rush: Alaska attracted 3.7 million viewers for its Jan. 7 premier episode; Alaska State Troopers pulled 6.2 million total viewers for the debut of its second season.

The state tourism office is trying to capitalize on the Alaska fascination with new promos running during the shows, and Worrell noted the boom to New Zealand tourism after the "Lord of the Rings" was filmed there.

"Having Alaska visible on the big screen and small screen, it reminds people, 'that's someplace I've always wanted to go,'" Worrell said. "Maybe the constant presence of Alaska will spur that little extra and 'OK, this is the year I'm going to go.'"

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## Promoters see bright future for Alaska in movie business

**NEW VANCOUVER? Boosters want to build \$1 billion movie industry.**

By KYLE HOPKINS

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(09/14/10 15:53:04)

Another major movie is expected to begin filming in Alaska early next year, a local film insider told Anchorage business people on Monday.

The filmmakers are talking to actors Viggo Mortensen ("The Lord of the Rings"), Liam Neeson ("Taken") and Oscar winner Jeff Bridges ("Crazy Heart") about playing the lead role, said Carolyn K. Robinson, executive producer for Spenard-based SprocketHeads LLC.

Preproduction for the film could begin as early as this fall, she said.

Meantime, NANA Development Corp. announced Monday that the company recently bought a 33 percent stake in a local film production studio, Evergreen Films Inc. The company is spending "several million dollars" on the deal, President Helvi Sandvik said.

The announcements came as local film boosters on Monday pitched Anchorage business leaders their goal of turning the city into the new Vancouver by building a \$1 billion Alaska film industry over the next decade.

"When you get a major corporation like NANA saying they're going to help participate ... that's a big vote of confidence," said Evergreen Films chief executive Mike Devlin. Among other ventures, his studio has been developing the popular Dana Stabenow mystery novels into a series that's set to be shot in Alaska.

The first modern, major movie to be filmed entirely in the state -- "Everybody Loves Whales," starring Drew Barrymore and now Ted Danson -- begins filming Thursday in Anchorage.

"We're just shooting, I think some interiors that don't involve any of our main actors," said David Linck, a spokesman for the film.

The film crews will be working Thursdays through Mondays this fall, allowing the crews to shoot in local buildings, such as schools, on weekends.

For decades, movies about Alaska have almost always been filmed somewhere else. Moviemakers credit the state's new tax incentive program -- which allows them to recoup as much as 44 percent of their costs -- with luring new productions.

In other words, Alaska essentially subsidizes its fledgling film industry by allowing companies that buy the credits to save on taxes that they would otherwise pay to the state.

Productions that hire Alaskans, shoot in remote locations or film during the off-season are eligible to save more money. The idea is to launch a new industry in a state that leans on flagging oil production to create jobs and pay bills.

"It's a renewable resource," said NANA Development's Sandvik.

NANA is the business arm of Kotzebue-based NANA Regional Corp., the Alaska Native regional corporation for Northwest Alaska. A partner in the Red Dog Mine, the company already provides catering, security and other services for the oil industry. Now executives hope it can do the same for filmmakers.

### **'HOLLYWOOD NORTH'**

The model for growth in Anchorage is Vancouver, a city nicknamed "Hollywood North," where production spending generated \$1.2 billion in 2008. That included 20,000 production jobs, plus thousands more support workers such as taxi drivers and beauticians, Devlin said.

New Mexico and Louisiana have also succeeded in wooing Hollywood producers in search of tax breaks and refunds. Other states tried and stumbled.

In Iowa, for example, corruption in the state film office sank that government's effort to nurture a film economy, Devlin said. Others failed to stoke enthusiasm for the industry.

What Anchorage needs now are soundstages, large buildings where you can build sets and film regardless of the weather, he said. Enticing scripted television shows, which are more expensive than reality TV and can cost millions per episode to produce, is also key.

Sandvik said the company's executives have seen first-hand the results of other cities' efforts to court the industry.

They've waited on film crews before crossing the street in Vancouver, where NANA meets with the Canadian partners in the Red Dog Mine.

In February, NANA officials visited Louisiana to talk about offshore oil and gas development. "We had to hang out in the rain while Nicolas Cage was filming a movie," she said.

### **THE BOTTOM LINE**

Robinson, the SprocketHeads co-founder, said the director of the newest Alaska-based movie and "his international team" recently toured the state scouting locations and meeting Alaskans. Among the stops: a scouting visit to four-time Iditarod champion Martin Buser's kennel in Big Lake, she said.

"The film executive told me flat out that they did a multi-country, multiple-state comparison, calculating in our film incentive program," Robinson said. "The bottom line said shoot in Alaska."

Robinson -- who urged business honchos at the Anchorage Chamber of Commerce luncheon to picture an industry based on exporting film canisters rather than oil barrels -- said she can't talk much about the movie yet.

More than 30 productions have pre-qualified for the Alaska tax credit, Alaska Film Office manager Dave Worrell told the business crowd. All told, the estimated budget for those projects amounts to more than \$99 million in spending in Alaska, he said.

But Worrell cautioned in an e-mail last month that several productions that pre-qualified may not get made -- and, as a result, won't receive tax credits.

"We had a flurry of films in-state for preliminary scouting over the summer, but it's too early to know which ones will receive their greenlight and start on-the-ground production," Worrell wrote in late August.

Not all film and television productions are eligible for tax credits, the film office said. Crews shooting political ads, news stories and pornography have to pay full price.

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Read The Village, the ADN's blog about rural Alaska, at [adn.com/thevillage](http://adn.com/thevillage). Twitter updates: [twitter.com/adnvillage](http://twitter.com/adnvillage). Call Kyle Hopkins at 257-4334.

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## Boosters hope Alaska will be "Hollywood Far North"

Sat Oct 02 19:01:21 UTC 2010

By Yereth Rosen

ANCHORAGE, Alaska (Reuters) - On a crisp autumn day, as office workers went about their business, one of Anchorage's major hotels became the temporary hub of what state leaders consider a promising new Alaska industry.

The lower level of the Hotel Captain Cook was occupied by a Hollywood film crew that converted rooms into movie sets, makeup and dressing areas and equipment-packed work sites.

In progress was filming for Universal Features' "Everybody Loves Whales," a movie starring Drew Barrymore and recounting a 1988 rescue mounted for three gray whales trapped in Arctic ice.

In a departure from past history, this Alaska-based movie is being filmed on location, rather than in a make-believe Alaska set constructed in British Columbia or elsewhere.

Alaska officials hope this and other projects will help diversify the state's economy from its precarious dependence on dwindling oil production.

"We wouldn't be 'Hollywood North.' Vancouver claims that. We'd be 'Hollywood Far North,'" said state Senator Johnny Ellis, an Anchorage Democrat and self-professed movie buff who authored 2008 legislation that established a special tax credit for big film projects and revived a state film office that had been eliminated during a past austerity push.

Ellis' measure entitles film companies spending \$100,000 or more in Alaska to transferable credits of 30 percent of those costs, plus 10 percent of money spent hiring Alaskans. Extra credits are given for expenditures in rural areas or outside of the summer tourist season.

Film companies in the past have largely avoided Alaska, citing the state's high costs, remoteness and overall inconvenience.

But the tax incentive has made a difference, said David Linck, unit publicist for "Everybody Loves Whales," a project Ellis refers to as "Northern Exposure Meets Free Willy."

"It's dollars and cents," Linck said.

Filming will run through November, he said. It has been an economic boon to Alaska, with several key roles filled by Alaska Natives selected after casting calls in remote rural sites, he said.

Among those sharing in the bounty is Su Gamble, owner of a hair salon in an Anchorage strip mall the producers selected for three days of filming because of its retro-1980s look. Gamble herself was cast as an extra, an experience that still thrills her.

"It's such a blast that they chose my place, and they chose me," she said.

### OSCAR HEADED NORTH?

She recounted the two hours crew members spent creating her 1980s big-hair look, proclaimed the film producer and crew "so sweet" and "so patient," and predicted an Academy Award for the project.

"Drew Barrymore's going to be the best actress for the year 2012," she said.

It will be several years before Alaska is able to develop its own industry support system, with skilled workers and specialized contractors, anywhere on par with what exists in British Columbia, said Mike Devlin, chief executive of Los Angeles-based Evergreen Films.

Still, each new project moves the state incrementally toward that standard, he said.

"Every film means some Alaskans are in on the production," he said.

Evergreen Films is so bullish on Alaska it has located a studio in Anchorage. The studio occupies a vast and elegant house perched in the mountains overlooking the city, glacier-fed Cook Inlet and a panorama of snowy mountains, including active volcanoes and Mount McKinley.

The studio doubles as Devlin's residence.

"I'd rather get up in the morning here than in L.A.," he quipped, taking in the view from a bank of windows.

Evergreen Films has produced nature documentaries, among other projects, and is working on a television series based on mystery novels by Alaska author Dana Stabenow.

Last month, NANA Corp., owned by Inupiat Eskimos from the state's northwestern region, announced it was investing in a joint venture with Evergreen. The project will "create jobs and economic growth," a NANA statement said.

Alaska already is experiencing a boomlet in reality-TV productions such as "The Deadliest Catch," the fishing series produced by the Discovery Channel, and former Gov. Sarah Palin's controversial series being produced by TLC.

"Alaska is the talk of the nation, in many ways, good and bad. But most of it good," Ellis said.

For some Alaskans, the desire to lure film projects goes beyond money.

Hollywood's habit of using non-Alaska sites to film Alaska stories -- even the iconic television series "Northern Exposure," which was filmed in Washington state -- has long been an irritant.

Some on-screen results made Alaskans cringe. Pine forests and wooded hillsides stood in for what was supposed to be open Arctic tundra. Asian actors portrayed Alaska Natives. And there were improbable story lines, like running gags about snake problems in the reptile-free far north.

The final insult, said Ellis, was learning that a major romantic comedy starring Sandra Bullock was being filmed in Massachusetts even though the story was set in Sitka, Alaska.

"That aggravated me, and it aggravated others," the senator said, referring to "the Proposal," released in 2009. "There's a long, sad history of Alaska losing out. But I hope we're starting to change that."

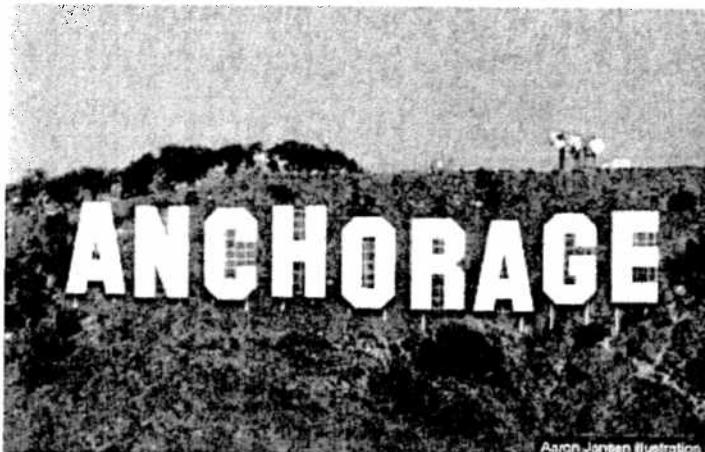
(Editing by Steve Gorman)

## Features

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# Behind the scenes as Hollywood meets Alaska

Joshua Saul | Oct 11, 2010



Aaron Jansen illustration

Early on a Saturday morning in early October, inside an Anchorage middle school dressed up to play Barrow's high school, 140 extras sweated in bunny boots, parkas, and kuspuks. Extras playing Alaska Native villagers sat facing the front of the room, where a half-dozen somber whaling captains sat with two huge Panavision cameras behind them. I stood among the virtually all-white press corps clustered in behind the villagers: an Alaska reporter dressed up to play an out-of-state photographer.

When Drew Barrymore breezed onto the set, the extras burst into applause. Barrymore hid her face in her hands, feigning embarrassment, then told the Alaska Native extras they wouldn't like her after we heard her character arguing against the head whaling captain.

She was right. The scene being filmed -- a pivotal plot twist in "Everybody Loves Whales," a \$30 million movie that recreates a real 1988 event -- portrayed a community meeting in Barrow held to decide whether three whales trapped in the ice should be killed and eaten or freed. Barrymore played a Greenpeace activist fighting for the whales' release while the Alaska Native extras professed to like the taste of whale and said they hate being told what to do by white environmentalists from the Lower 48.

When filming began, Barrymore argued with a handsome young whaling captain in a red bandanna and Sorel boots. The press corps pretended to jot notes and take photographs of the confrontation. The extras playing villagers followed the director's instructions to "be a little impolite." When Barrymore's character said it would be wrong to kill the whale and its "babies," the villagers shouted her down. They cheered on the whaling captain as he replied that whales are what he feeds his family, what his whole village feeds its babies.

"What you're saying is ridiculous. You're a white girl. Go back to California. This is Inupiat country," the captain said, drawing the loudest cheers of the scene. But Barrymore's character wasn't finished. You don't need to hunt, she said, not when you all get big stipends from the oil companies and have enough money to buy all the food you need.

"Those stipends last just a few months," the young captain shot back. "We have to hunt. One day that oil's going to run out. And when that happens, who will feed our children? Will you?"

## Real Alaska conflict comes to the silver screen

The scene reflected a real conflict between the subsistence lifestyle practiced by some Alaska Natives and the sometimes condescending environmentalism of urban and Outside interests.

Subsistence is a touchy issue in Alaska. Urban sport hunters and rural subsistence hunters clash over hunting quotas, the wanton waste of caribou on the tundra near Point Hope (resulted in criminal cases that were covered by the Alaska media), and the decision of an Alaska Native state legislator to overfish his subsistence permit

became a high-profile court case.

Usually that conflict is misunderstood or ignored by the outside media and entertainment industries, so a mainstream Hollywood movie that appreciates the complexities of the conflict is something new. The film's directors did show at least some awareness of the divisions that sometime define Alaska. At one point, the first assistant director walked back to two white extras playing Barrow villagers. You don't have to be as angry as everyone else when Barrymore makes her points, he told them, adding that as white villagers, they wouldn't necessarily be agreeing with the Natives.

At the risk of drawing too broad a conclusion from one scene, "Everybody Loves Whales" does seem to have a clearer take on Alaska issues than most Lower 48 films and news reports. And it nailed the scene right down to the coffee urn and Sailor Boy Pilot Bread set up as props.



The movie's realism is only enhanced by its extras, many of whom brought their own kuspuks and fur-lined parkas instead of waiting to be outfitted by the wardrobe department. One of the extras playing a whaling captain is even part of a real whaling crew way out on Little Diomede, just two miles from Russian soil. Sylvester Ayek, a well-known Alaska Native artist who hunts walrus from his home in Nome, was scheduled to play another of the whaling captains but was "demoted," as he laughingly put it, when he showed up late for the shoot on Saturday.

### **A day in the life of an extra**

Being an extra is harder than it looks; not like digging ditches in permafrost, sure, but tiring and monotonous all the same. During my stint on set the first weekend in October I was assigned, coincidentally, to play a press photographer. I was handed a dated Nikon with a big Speedlight SB-16 flash. To round things out, I was outfitted with black snowpants, black boots, a green pullover and a green down vest. It was easy to look the part, but more difficult to keep from sweating like a polar bear in a sauna. My press pass read "Dean Wilson, U.P.I." Positioned between a Wasilla medical biller playing a news reporter and an Arctic Slope Regional Corp. communications manager playing a cameraman, I had a good view of the room.

Actor John Krasinski, who plays Jim Halpert on the popular television show "The Office," was the tallest man on set, standing about 6 feet 3 inches with an impressive pompadour adding to his height and enormous brown boots on his feet that looked to be about a size 14. Between takes, he checked NFL scores on his iPhone and argued about "the best football movie ever" with co-star Tim Blake Nelson, who in 2000 put on a brilliant performance as the simplest-minded of the crooks in the movie "O Brother Where Art Thou." Actress Kristen Bell -- gorgeous, blonde, and the size of a middle schooler -- fanned herself with a reporter's notebook and laughed with Krasinski even while makeup artists were sponging foundation onto their faces.

There were local notables on hand to play reporters, too. Channel 2 weekend anchor Rebecca Palsha and Channel 13 anchor Natasha Sweatte were in the crowd, along with former Channel 2 reporter Julie Hasquet, now the spokeswoman for U.S. Sen. Mark Begich. Accepting high-fives from Krasinski before almost every take was Ahmaogak Sweeney, the 10-year-old son of Kevin Sweeney, campaign manager for U.S. Sen. Lisa Murkowski. Dressed in a blue track jacket and carrying a tape recorder slung over his shoulder, Sweeney appears to hold the substantial kid role in the movie.

After the morning filming broke for lunch -- which included chicken masala and orange roughy -- but before the

extras returned to the set, two men beat on traditional drums while four women in bright kuspiks danced a Yupik blessing for the people in the middle-school cafeteria. Many of the extras were Yupik or Cupik instead of the northern Inupiat they were playing in the movie, but it makes sense when you consider the realities of geography: Barrow is 725 miles north of Anchorage, while Bethel, the air hub of the Yupik regions, is just 400 miles west.

### **Elders among the extras treated with respect**

The film crew seemed aware of the great respect with which Alaska Natives treat their elders. When the herd of extras was held up in the school's halls, elders were asked multiple times if they would like a chair so they could sit down for the few minutes it would take to get the group moving. And elders were shuttled to the front of every line, whether they were at lunch waiting to serve themselves or in wardrobe waiting to return their parkas and boots.

The elders, like most everyone else, seemed to be enjoying the shoot. As much as the extras shouted down Barrymore's character, it's impossible to stay mad at perky Drew. Sunday morning, on the second day of shooting the scene, an elderly Alaska Native woman sitting in the front row hollered for everyone's attention so she could organize a greeting for Barrymore. When the actress walked onto the set, carrying a copy of Jonathan Safran Foer's non-fiction book "Eating Animals," the crowd of extras boomed out "Good morning, Drew!"

Drew blushed again, then answered "That's the nicest good morning I've ever had in my life."

Then it was back to the filming. The director coached the extras on how he wanted them to react to the arguments made by the young whaling captain and Barrymore's character, telling them "It shouldn't feel choreographed" and "Try not to know where the scene's going."

While the extras playing villagers feign anger and the extras playing press snap their flashbulbs, the rest of Alaska waits to see whether the finished movie turns out to a realistic portrait of a complicated state and the people who live there or a shallow vehicle for a cheesy romance that sidesteps the pressing issues that bubble up in the 49th state.

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