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Before the Flood | National Geographic Channel

Leonardo DiCaprio's 'Before the Flood': A Review

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The release of Leonardo DiCaprio's new film 'Before the Flood', near the end of a US election in which climate change has gone all but unmentioned, is to be celebrated. As is the fact that it has been made available free online, and within the first 2 days of its release, has already been viewed 3.5 million times, as well as trending on Twitter. Ah, the power of celebrity. It powerfully reminds the world of the urgency around climate change, which can only be a good thing. You can [watch the whole thing for free here](#) first, then proceed into my reflections on it:

[Before the Flood: Full Movie | National Geographic](#)

It's not a film you get to the end of without a real jolt around the urgency of climate change. Very few people other than those who have completely severed the link between their brain and their heart can watch footage taken flying over the Alberta tar sands ("it looks like Mordor", he tells the executive of the company wreaking this devastation. "What's Mordor?" comes the reply), over the Indonesian forests deliberately set alight by palm oil companies, or over collapsing ice sheets without being deeply troubled. "Everything I have seen on my journey has absolutely terrified me", he says.

In terms of the gravity of the challenge, the film doesn't pull its punches. "The window", Johan Rockstrom of the Stockholm Resilience Centre tells him (i.e. the window of action for avoiding disastrous climate change), "is barely open".

He visits world leaders and key people in governments and business. We see some degree of how this impacts on him personally, for example when the shooting for scenes for ' *The Revenant*' that require snow have to be moved 9,000 miles south, from the Canadian snow belt to southern Argentina because there's no snow left in that region of Canada. All of which leads me into the two fundamental issues I have with this film.

One: Before the Flood ... of tears?

Climate change is clearly something Leonardo di Caprio cares about deeply, and has for many years. One of the key moments in the film, for me, is his interview with Sunita Narain of the Centre for Science and Environment in New Delhi. She challenges him, saying that 30% of Indians still have no access to electricity, and for the US to tell India to cut its emissions without cutting its own, without recalibrating its own lifestyle and its expectations, is not going to work. When she presses him on this point, he says "it (the US voluntarily changing its lifestyle) is probably not going to happen".



Leonardo DiCaprio and Sunita Narain in a still from 'Before the Flood'
YouTube | National Geographic Channel

There is, in this moment, a tension that runs, unaddressed, throughout ' *Before the Flood*'. DiCaprio lives in a world of contradiction. His influence is such that he can make a film containing interviews with the Pope, President Obama and so on. He is a very wealthy man, owning an island off Belize, numerous homes around the world. He supports lots of great projects. He is part of the 1%. He has the 11th largest yacht in the world, which cost over \$200 million, which has its own wine cellar and a helicopter pad. He attracted a lot of criticism when, earlier this year, he flew from Cannes to New York by private jet, to collect an environmental

award. It has been argued by some that his lifestyle diminishes his 'moral authority' to speak out on issues like climate change.

I don't want to knock him. In many ways it's a great film, and I think he is a great ambassador for all of this. He's a cool guy, and his opinion is respected, especially by young people who find themselves bewildered in cyberspace by the "is climate change real or not?" nonsense babble. It's impossible to keep everyone happy: if you're rich and a celebrity and you speak out, people will accuse you of being privileged and out of touch, if you aren't, far fewer people will listen. It's brilliant that he has made this.

But I would like to have seen more of his inner conflicts. It would have transformed this film's narrative, impact and credibility. He knows the reality of climate change, yet he lives a 1% lifestyle. When he was on that plane to New York, to pick up his environmental award, how did he justify it to himself? What did those internal conversations look like?

Yes, he drives electric cars, and has solar panels on his house, but nothing in this film, including his reaction during that interview in Delhi, mentions 'sacrifice'. And ultimately, if we are to get through this, wealthier nations, and wealthier people, need to make sacrifices. [We know from Oxfam](#) that the world's wealthiest 10% generate half of global carbon emissions. There is huge leadership to be shown here.



Leonardo DiCaprio and Dr. Enric Sala in a still from 'Before the Flood' | YouTube | National Geographic Channel

Absent are his reflections on how that future world could be, on how a more equitable, just, sustainable world could be so much better than today. In that world, what do the lifestyles of the rich and famous look like? What kind of inner journey do they need to go on? What do they need to let go of, and what does that grief, that refocusing look like? How does their

relationship with privilege and power need to change? What does it look like for a celebrity to really become embedded, rooted, in a place, rather than houses around the world, connected by private jets and huge yachts? That's what I wanted to see. I wanted to see how this stuff affected his heart, made him rethink and reimagine his own life and lifestyle, his self-image.

DiCaprio could do that. He could be the first celebrity to really model that. I wondered if the title '*Before the Flood*' might in fact refer to the moment before the flood of tears that often come before any real period of self-examination. The reality is that there is really no place for super yachts in a world that manages to stay below 2 degrees. Nor for fracking, third runways, huge new infrastructure projects. Nor, indeed, for the 1% with their current ways of living. The film would have us believe that we can have our cake and eat it. We can't. But there is still a delicious, albeit different, menu on offer.

I'd have loved him to have read [Chuck Collins' book 'Born on Third Base'](#) before making this film. DiCaprio's reluctance to share his own honest, painful, rich journey with us is such a pity. He is, perhaps, uniquely placed to do that. It would have had such an impact, and his example would have touched the 1% as well as the rest of us. In his book, Collins writes: "Wealthy friends and neighbours. It is time to come home ... to come out of your gated communities and gated hearts". It's a journey I would love to have seen DiCaprio make.

Two. Social technologies

'*Before the Flood*' presents a case where climate change is to be solved by politics and technology. It's all about international agreements, new tax regimes, renewable energy, eating less meat and battery storage. "There's no reason we can't solve this problem in time" he says at one point. Elon Musk would have us believe that technology can do it all, and his vision and commitment are certainly remarkable. We are left with a sense that this is a challenge that can only be solved by the rich and the powerful.

Yet all over the world, people are already doing a huge amount. Much of the best action is coming from city Mayors, from local governments, and from communities. And this stuff is growing, and spreading fast. I loved Jonathan Latham's piece ['Why the Food Movement is Unstoppable'](#) which gives a great taste of this.

What are the new social technologies, the social infrastructures, that this shift requires? They are being pioneered, around the world, through a huge diversity of initiatives and communities. They are recognizing that climate change is a crisis that is about disconnection, from each other, from nature, from the places where we live, and they are [reweaving those connections](#). The role of the Obamas, the 1%, should be to support those and to learn from them.



Leonardo DiCaprio and US President Obama in a still from 'Before the Flood'
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Yes, the leadership from the powerful people interviewed here is important. But President Obama cuts an unconvincing figure, somberly acknowledging that the Paris Agreement is “nowhere near enough” but offering little else, and the Pope’s amazing historic Encyclical on the climate [has largely fallen on deaf ears](#). But other than mobilising through demonstrations, people could reach the end of this film with the impression that nothing is happening on the ground. The reality couldn't be more different.

This is a powerful, timely, and beautifully made film, and it will have a big impact. But it could have been so much more, gone so much deeper, taken so many more risks, been braver. Climate change demands us to take risks, to reimagine sacrifice as opportunity. But if we avoid the sacrifice bit, we skirt around the heart of the issue, and around our own hearts too.

Want to see some inspiring examples of bottom-up action? Check out our [21 Stories of Transition](#) here.

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