



## 'Chasing Ice' catches time-lapse realities of melting glaciers;

*Photographer on a mission faced frostbite, foxes*

By: Wendy Koch - November 27, 2012

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Photographer James Balog set out to film climate change by placing two dozen time-lapse cameras throughout the Arctic. The result, aside from frostbitten fingers and a near helicopter crash, are stunning images of melting glaciers.

His footage is captured in *Chasing Ice*, a 75-minute documentary with scenes of a house being washed away by surging water -- a timely visual given Superstorm Sandy's recent rampage along the East Coast. The film opened Nov. 9 in New York City and is rolling out to select U.S. theaters this month.

Balog, once a skeptic of global warming, was surprised by what he and his crew found. "In the first few months, we were seeing tremendously mind-boggling change in some of the cameras," he says. "Then as a few years went on, we all started to get the feeling of, God, this is such a powerful piece of history. We've got monumental change happening in front of our eyes."

He says he wrestled a long time over how to film climate change. "My brain kept coming back to ice," he says, recalling how he settled on the idea of time-lapse photography after an assignment in the Arctic for National Geographic.

In 2007, he launched the Extreme Ice Survey and began putting cameras -- initially set to shoot every hour and, later, every half-hour or 20 minutes -- in Alaska, Montana, Greenland and Iceland. His crew battled 150 mph winds, up to 20 feet of snow and subzero temperatures.

"We had temperatures down to minus-35 on a dogsled trip in Greenland in the wintertime. The frost bit my fingers and my nose," he says. "We had cameras destroyed by falling rocks coming off cliff faces." Other equipment was ruined by snow, foxes and ravens.

At one point, Balog broke down in tears when he realized a camera wasn't working and the project may have lost months of filming. In another scene of *Chasing Ice*, witnessed by film director Jeff Orlowski, who joined the expeditions, the edge of Greenland's Ilulissat glacier -- also known by its Danish name, Jakobshavn -- breaks off and falls into

the sea below in a thunderous crash.

Scientists have used satellites to document a related development: sea ice levels in the Arctic and the Antarctic. In September, the University of Colorado's National Snow and Ice Data Center (NSIDC) reported that Arctic sea ice had fallen to its lowest level since measurements began in 1979, attributing the loss partly to climate change. It reported a slight increase in Antarctic sea ice but said that was a result of increased wind.

The loss of Arctic sea ice, which can reflect the sun's heat and mitigate warming, could contribute to glaciers melting, but the extent has not been quantified, says Julienne Stroeve, an NSIDC scientist.

Patrick Michaels, director of the Center for the Study of Science at the libertarian Cato Institute, says people shouldn't panic about Arctic sea ice. He says history suggests that the Arctic has lost all its summer sea ice before, but its ecosystems adapted.

"The polar bears clearly survived," says Michaels, who describes himself as "lukewarm" on climate change.

Stroeve says that may be the case, but natural climate variability was likely the cause in the past, while human-induced climate change accounts for about half of the sea ice lost in the Arctic in recent decades.

Balog says *Chasing Ice*, which won the cinematography award at this year's Sundance Film Festival, and his *Extreme Ice Survey* provide irrefutable proof of climate change.

"Now the project seems destined to go on forever," he says, citing plans to expand it to the Andes in South America. "There's tremendous change happening there, too, and we need to get some coverage on it."