



Diving into

BORNEO FROM BELOW

How cinematographers Bertie Gekoski and Will Foster-Grundy made magic in Borneo – and where they are headed next

TEXT BY ELIZABETH CLAIRE ALBERTS
PHOTOS BY SCUBAZOO

If you're into underwater cinematography, chances are you've heard of Scubazoo, the production company based in Southeast Asia. Either that, or you've seen Scubazoo's footage on BBC, Discovery or National Geographic. But it's quite possible that you haven't heard of *Borneo From Below*, a new-ish online film series produced by SZtv, a digital offshoot of Scubazoo. The show began as an experiment that involved a GoPro, a leap of faith and a plane ticket for English-born presenter, Aaron 'Bertie' Gekoski. What resulted is an extemporary tour-de-force—a high-energy, low budget show that's a great resource for anyone who wants to dive in Borneo.

When I travelled to Borneo last June to go diving, I first stopped in Kota Kinabalu in Sabah, Malaysia, where Scubazoo's headquarters are based. Here, I met with Gekoski and Will Foster-Grundy, *Borneo From Below*'s producer-cum-director-cum-cameraman, as well as Bertie's on- and off-screen sidekick, and talked to

them about filmmaking, their creative process, and of course, the best dive sites in Borneo.

Gekoski and Foster-Grundy were a pleasure to speak with—both are down-to-earth, passionate, and knowledgeable about diving the region. They were also always up for a laugh, especially Gekoski, who hams it up for the camera, and has earned a reputation of being a diva. "No one understands the hardship of 'everyone knows your name'," Gekoski said with a deadpan expression when we met at a local café. "Sometimes I can't even leave my house—it's been getting very difficult." Foster-Grundy, the softer spoken of the two, chimed in: "He developed a nickname on our last shoot—'Princess Bertie!'"

Antecedents

Besides sharing a keen sense of humour, Gekoski and Foster-Grundy are great at what they do, and I was surprised that neither came from a filmmaking background. Before moving to Borneo, Gekoski

spent six years in Africa, working as a journalist and underwater photographer. He'd also done a presenting job for Epic TV, diving into shark-infested waters to snap selfies with black tips and tiger sharks. When Gekoski's shark selfies went viral, it landed him an interview with Simon Christopher, founder of Scubazoo, whom Gekoski and Foster-Grundy affectionately call 'Pie Man'.

"He said that SZtv [Scubazoo's new online channel devoted to wildlife and conservation] was going to have all of these different channels, looking at the ocean, the jungles, conservation stories," Gekoski said. "And he was interested in me coming over to Borneo, and heading up the marine side of things as the presenter. It was a very new, very exciting project just in its infancy stages. So I said, 'Why not? Borneo sounds exciting.'"

Gekoski quickly fell in love with Borneo's underwater world and found a wealth of material to work with—megafauna, macro diving

Opposite: Bumphead parrotfish and schools of jacks. **Left:** A giant clam works it for the camera. **Top right:** Will and his trusty Sony EX1R and Gates housing. **Above right:** Bertie and Will filming

and the seafaring indigenous community called the Bajau Laut. But Scubazoo had never done anything like *Borneo from Below* and the company was reluctant to invest too much into the project, so they gave Gekoski a meager budget and one piece of equipment—a GoPro. Luckily, Gekoski struck a deal with Scuba Junkie, a local dive outfit Gekoski refers to as one of the "greenest dive operators in the world." They've given Gekoski countless spots on their boats to shoot segments, and generously shared their local knowledge. But the job was overwhelming—Gekoski initially acted as writer, editor, producer, director, and, of course, presenter. "I struggled a bit at first because it was just a hell of a lot to think about," Gekoski said. "I was filming myself on a GoPro; I was taking care of producing; I was trying to direct myself; I was trying to interview people; I was editing. I realized I needed someone to come on board with me."

After a few autonomous shoots,



Gekoski took his raw footage back to the office. This is where Gekoski met Foster-Grundy, a zoologist fresh out of university who was interning at Scubazoo. Foster-Grundy had been stuck with the not-so-exciting job of transcribing hours of raw footage, and when Gekoski asked if he'd help him with editing, he leapt at the opportunity. Gekoski and Foster-Grundy quickly became a power team—they brainstormed, planned, and wrote together, and Foster-Grundy was eventually promoted to producer.

One of the first episodes they did together was about a two-headed nudibranch lurking in the waters off of Mabul Island. "The episode was great," Gekoski said. "We showed it to all the bosses and they realized that we were onto quite a good thing." Gekoski and Foster-Grundy went on to make 28 more episodes, many of which were filmed right off of Scuba Junkie's jetty in Kota Kinabalu. "They have a really nice decent house reef, along with some artificial structures which are full of life and frequented by giant green turtles," Gekoski explained. "So you don't need to travel far to have

excellent encounters."

But they also did lots of filming in the Semporna archipelago—Sibuan, Mabul, Kapalai, and the world famous Sipidan, where you can tick off just about every fish in your guide book, and swim with swirls of jack fish or barracuda. "Go on one dive [at Borneo's east coast], and you can see as many species on one dive as you'd see in a lifetime of diving in the Caribbean," Foster-Grundy said. "I did a lot of diving in Honduras and Belize and Mexico before coming here, and Borneo is just a completely other level."

Each *Borneo From Below* episode showcased a different element of the Borneo's underwater world, like the cuttlefish's ability to camouflage, or the strange creatures you dig up while muck diving. The shows are educational, providing a solid run-down of the local sights, and giving tips to underwater photographers.

We started making it for divers, then we started getting a lot of feedback, people's kids were really enjoying it

Left: A snorkeller observes a large school of jacks. **Middle:** Borneo From Below began tackling more important subjects such as ocean plastic, and shark and ray finning

It's also highly entertaining, especially with an ebullient presenter like Gekoski. "I think the whole style of *Borneo From Below* is simply an extension of Bertie's personality, which often is pretty childish," Foster-Grundy said with a smile. "But when necessary, we talk about serious issues."

Wide appeal

The show's light-hearted approach easily appeals to kids, and neither Gekoski nor Foster-Grundy are bothered by this. "We started making it for divers and people in the marine world," Gekoski said. "But then we started getting a lot of feedback that people's kids were really enjoying it, which I guess isn't surprising."

For a long time, Gekoski and Foster-Grundy continued using their GoPro, splicing what they captured with Scubazoo stock footage. But their equipment (or lack thereof) started creating issues. "The GoPro that we had would turn everything green," Gekoski said. "It would be normal colours, then suddenly green."

"Without a screen, you wouldn't

They started covering more serious environmental issues... like shark finning and plastic pollution

realize it," Foster-Grundy added. "So we'd be filming, and everything would seem great. You'd be sticking the camera in a fish's face, hoping you're getting a shot that you wanted. But when you'd get back to your computer, you'd be in tears."

Thankfully, Gekoski and Foster-Grundy got an equipment upgrade. They filmed their later episodes with a Sony EX1R with a Gates housing, although they've continued using their trusty GoPro. "There are elements of GoPro in every episode," Foster-Grundy said.

Along with new equipment came a shift in subject matter—Gekoski and Foster-Grundy started covering more serious environmental issues that plagued the region, like the overharvesting of seahorses for traditional medicine, shark finning and plastic pollution.

"People often see conservation as a dirty word," Gekoski said. "People don't want to be

bombarded with negativity. They don't just want to hear how marine life is being killed everywhere, and the oceans are overfished and polluted—they also want to know that there is hope."

They even coined their own term—"fun-servation", a word Foster-Grundy took time to warm to. "Initially, I despised it," Foster-Grundy said. "It's just incredibly cheesy. But I've come around to the idea, and it is a very good way of summarizing what we want to do. Conservation is arguably a boring or a difficult topic, and it's important to put an interesting or fun spin on it."

This year, Scubazoo only released two new episodes of *Borneo From Below: Hunting for Hammerheads and City Centre Scuba*, but all of the earlier episodes remain online for free viewing. They also have another project in the works—a new show called, *Indonesia From Below*. The goal, Gekoski told me in an email, is to release six seasons with 12 episodes each — 72 instalments in total. If the new show's anything like the last, it's definitely something to watch. []



SHINY STUFF

Earlier episodes were filmed with nothing but a Go-Pro, but Gekoski and Foster-Grundy now use the following kit to make their magic:

- Sony EX1R with Gates housing
- Keldan LUNA 4X
- Fathom dome (for wide angles)
- GoPro Hero 4
- Panasonic GH5 with Olmypus 7-14mm PRO lens and Nauticam housing 4K
- Nikon D800 with Nauticam housing and ports and Inon strobes (for still photography)
- Tokina lens 10-17mm with 1.5 x teleconverter and 60mm and 105mm macro with the Nauticam SMC-1 for super macro photography

To watch all episodes of *Borneo from Below*, along with Scubazoo's other online shows, visit www.scubazoo.tv