

THE LAST DOGS OF WINTER

MAN'S BEST FRIEND IS LIVING ON THE EDGE

Directed by Costa Botes

Produced by Costa Botes & Caleb Ross



www.costabotes.com/the-last-dogs-of-winter/ Facebook/The Last Dogs of Winter

QUICK REFERENCE FACT SHEET

Title: The Last Dogs of Winter

Director: Costa Botes

Producers: Costa Botes
Caleb Ross

Featuring: Brian Ladoon
Caleb Ross

Tag Lines: Man's best friend is living on the edge
A Film about Wildlife, and One Wild Life

Cinematography: Costa Botes
Caleb Ross

Original Score: Tom McLeod

Sound Post: Underground Sound, Phil Burton

Production Company
in Association With Lone Pine Film Production
the New Zealand Film Commission

Technical: Colour, HD, 97mins, 16:9, Surround Sound

Shot on location in Churchill, Manitoba, Canada

THE LAST DOGS OF WINTER

Short Synopsis

The Canadian Eskimo Dog, aka Qimmiq or Inuit Sled Dogs, were once indispensable to human life in the Canadian arctic. Today, the breed faces extinction. Since 1976 Brian Ladoon has stuck to a promise to maintain a viable breeding colony battling chronic underfunding, wandering polar bears, officialdom and a harsh natural environment to keep his word.

Long Synopsis

Eight miles from the town of Churchill, a tiny and isolated community on the shores of Hudson Bay, two endangered animals have found a tenuous but workable co-existence. Giant polar bears, the largest carnivores on earth, share their ancestral earth with half wild Canadian Eskimo Dogs. This is a situation unique on the planet.

Canadian Eskimo Dogs, aka Qimmiq or Inuit Sled Dogs, were once indispensable to human life in the arctic. Today, the breed faces extinction. Since 1976, Brian Ladoon has stuck to a promise to maintain a viable breeding colony, battling chronic underfunding, wandering polar bears, officialdom and a harsh natural environment to keep his word.

All the creatures in this realm: bears, dogs, and men, are on the edge, hanging on to their final foothold in a world growing increasingly inhospitable to their needs.

This is the story discovered by a young New Zealand actor, Caleb Ross, after he went to Canada looking for love, but instead found a unique adventure and a cause.

TIFF PROGRAMMER'S NOTE

The majority of Canadian may recognize a Canadian Eskimo Dog, or qimmiq, from either of the commemorative coins or stamps on which they have been depicted. It is no small irony, however, that the latest documentary from New Zealand filmmaker Costa Botes (*Forgotten Silver*) explores a Canadian tale, the little known struggle of one man to preserve this animal, the rarest registered breed of dog in the world, from extinction.

Our introduction to the story is through Caleb Ross, a young New Zealander who came to Canada for love; when that love went south, Caleb, not knowing what to do but always ready for adventure, travelled north. He read about a dog sanctuary in Churchill, Manitoba on the bulletin board of a Toronto hostel. What was intended as a month long adventure has become an inspiring three year commitment to the dogs and the sanctuary founder, Brian Ladoon.

In 1976, Ladoon took on the self-imposed task of preserving and breeding Canadian Eskimo dogs. Thousands of these dogs once flourished in the pitiless northern climate as crucial partners to the Inuit people, but the introduction of the skiddoo, along with disease and organized culling, saw their numbers reduced to mere hundreds by the late 1970's. Ladoon, an idiosyncratic raconteur and often combative man, has sustained a fair share of criticism from a faction of Churchill residents who decry the animals being kept on a barren point of land that intersects with migrating polar bears, and some would refute his knowledge of the breed and his lifetime dedicated to their survival. Interaction between the two wild species is shown in the film, and while a draw for tourists, the safety of both the dogs and bears is often cited by Ladoon's critics.

Costa Botes has captured the remorseless northern landscape and the political, financial and meteorological struggles that Ladoon and Ross face to preserve the qimmiq with a raw energy and relentless honesty. Captivating and compelling, The Last Dogs Of Winter is a film about wildlife - and one wild life.

Jane Schoettle

For the past 40 years, in a remote and harshly beautiful corner of northern Manitoba, Brian Ladoon has devoted his life to preserving and breeding an endangered species: the Qimmiq, Canada's indigenous Eskimo dog. Intimate, gorgeously rendered docu "The Last Dogs of Winter" from Kiwi helmer Costa Botes, intelligently surveys Ladoon's quixotic mission, the numerous obstacles he faces, and the uneasy co-existence of man, animal and nature in the small town of Churchill (pop. 873). A wilderness lover's delight, "Dogs" reps a shoo-in for cablers, fests and the cinematheque circuit.

One of only three surviving dog breeds indigenous to Canada, the Eskimo dogs were once essential to the native Inuit's nomadic life in Canada's north, but the population of these powerful, majestic looking animals dwindled to less than 100 by 1970, due to disease, government mandated slaughter, and the availability of motorized snow mobiles.

Botes comes to Ladoon's story through fellow New Zealander (and producer) Caleb Ross, a former Kiwi actor. As a twentysomething, the adventuresome Ross traveled to Canada for love, but, as he notes, the affair went south, and he went north, enticed by a job posting that read, "Come to Churchill, breed Eskimo dogs, see polar bears" (Churchill is known as one of the world's top spots for viewing the migrating bears).

But like Ladoon himself, the pic refuses to pander to those seeking only cute animal shots. Completing his third year on the job as Botes shoots, the affable, articulate Ross reps a distinct contrast to his tightly wound, frontiersman boss. As an eccentric character in a community full of them, Ladoon earns as many detractors as he does supporters, and the fair-minded helmer takes time (perhaps too much) to listen to all comers. Another bone of contention concerns the right of access to the government-owned land where Ladoon runs his operation.

Both Ross and Ladoon speak to some of the criticisms, including uninformed allegations that the dogs, who spend their adult life chained out of doors in sub zero temperatures, are being mistreated. Although it is true, in a perfect world, that they would benefit from running and doing the work they were once bred for, such as pulling sleds, Ladoon's Canadian Eskimo Dog Foundation has only three full-time staffers and a handful of volunteers for a 7-day-a-week grind that includes driving more than 100 miles a day just to feed the animals and make sure they're healthy.

Filming with a lightweight HD camera and only his wife as crew (a job that required her to drive a pickup truck down vast stretches of icy road and carry a gun with rubber bullets to be prepared for rogue polar bears), Botes intercuts artfully shot interviews with spectacular outdoor scenes. Among the most captivating are those of the chained dogs interacting with the curious bears, and the lumbering white bears gamboling with one another in the snow. Fine sound design and musical effects support the visuals, as does Tom McLeod's atmospheric score.

The Last Dogs of Winter

Reviewed by Helen Martin

Documentary NZ 2011 Lone Pine Film Productions **prods** Costa Botes, Caleb Ross **dir/writer** Costa Botes **ed** Costa Botes **camera** Costa Botes, Caleb Ross **sound** Darren Maynard, Underground Sound, Phil Burton **original score** Tom McLeod **featuring** Brian Ladoon, Caleb Ross. 97min Costa Botes's blog <http://costabotes.com/the-last-dogs-of-winter/>

Where do you go to find extraordinary people doing extraordinary things? The end of the earth is a good place to start and there he is, this dogged man, hunkered down at the Arctic fringe, fiercely pursuing a dream his opponents regard as a complete and ruinous folly.

To the uninitiated it certainly appears mad – and bad, or so tourists visiting Churchill, Manitoba first believe when, along with the wild polar bears they have anticipated, they also see dozens of Canadian Eskimo Dogs chained up and living 24/7 in the snow. “Do they just sit here all day?” one woman asks, incredulous. But she and her fellow passengers on the tour bus quickly learn that, far from the animal abuse they think they are witnessing, these dogs have learned how to live in one of the harshest climates on the planet. Added to that, the dogs are central to a conservation project driven by intrepid local, Brian Ladoon, who since 1976 has been committed to saving the Qimmiq breed from the extinction awaiting them if no-one intervenes.

While ‘passion’ is a much-abused word in today’s effusive journo-speak, here for once is an instance of where the term is justified. That said, a lot of people don’t like Ladoon. They don’t like his methods and they don’t like how he behaves, and it is one of this film’s many strengths that his opponents are given a voice. But most of the running time belongs to Ladoon, his beautiful dogs and the glorious frozen landscape, with the layers of narrative evoking increasing admiration for and understanding of the man and his cause as they are delicately peeled away. “It’s not everybody’s cup of tea,” he acknowledges, “but you know what? I don’t drink tea.”

There is another significant character in this riveting story. Caleb Ross is a New Zealander who, wondering what to do after a failed relationship, took on the challenge of working alongside Ladoon, feeding and caring for the dogs, scaring off polar bears when they come to steal the great frozen lumps of shredded chicken that form their main diet, and remonstrating with interlopers wanting to exploit the photographic opportunities without contributing to the project of keeping the breed alive. A former actor, Ross had met Costa Botes in New Zealand during the making of the television series *The Tribe*, and it was from this connection that Botes, who is at his happiest as a film-maker documenting the lives and passions of driven people, saw an opportunity to capture a singular story on film.

And so, alongside the vagaries of Ladoon’s mission, we are also party to Ross’s journey as he describes his time in Churchill as an outsider who has become a trusted insider, a person at a loose end who now, in this moment at least, “gets a chance to explore other parts of himself.” Taking roles in front of and behind the camera, as the shoot progressed Ross’s contribution as second camera and co-producer became an important addition to the work of the intrepid two-person crew of Botes and his wife Jennabeth. (See *Onfilm*, May 2012, for the story of the making of the film).

Visually gorgeous, with a compelling narrative and a beautiful contemplative soundtrack that perfectly suits the observational style, this is one 2012 New Zealand International Film Festival documentary that should not on any account be missed.

NZ Listener, David Larsen

The Last Dogs of Winter Every so often a film comes along which causes me to turn to my children and say, "You know how lucky you are to be alive now? You know how rare it is, over the lifetime of our species, for ordinary people to get to see things like this?" That big screen that brings us Batman and James Bond and Jane Austen adaptations (all good things, don't get me wrong) can also be a window in the air, opening on realities that used to be available only to people who physically went out and looked for them.

Documentary film is an astonishing privilege, and we mostly take it for granted. Now as it happens, the latest film from Kiwi director Costa Botes is about another thing my children are lucky to be alive to see, in this case not because it was unavailable to past generations, but because it's quite likely it won't be there for future ones. Botes travels to a little town in the Canadian far north, where a man of a type Kiwis will recognise readily (think Barry Crump) is single-handedly trying to keep a species alive.

The species is the Qimmiq, the Inuit dog. Bred to survive above the Arctic circle, these dogs were subjected to a massive cull by the Canadian government, on the basis that if Inuits had nothing to pull their sleds, they would have to give up their nomadic lifestyle and become civilised. There are now only a few hundred of them left. An individualist loner versus a legacy of "destroy the village in order to save it" officialdom: it's very easy to pick sides in this film, but Botes is not out to bang the drums and sell you a message. This is an intimate engagement with an unusual way of life, exploratory, investigative, opening up a mental landscape and also making the most of a glorious physical one: the cinematography is of a very high order.

If you're interested in the question of how good films can be made on a low budget – and it's a key question for the New Zealand industry – here's one answer. If you're just interested in seeing dogs play with polar bears and getting to know a capital-C Character, this will enlarge your world and leave you smiling. It opens in Auckland today, and will be moving round the rest of the country by stages. Watch out for it. 4.5/5 DL

<http://filmsandmore.blogspot.co.nz/2012/07/the-last-dogs-of-winter.html>

The Last Dogs of Winter

A good documentary takes you someplace else, introduces you to someone new or gives you something new to think about after you've had your attention occupied for ninety minutes or so. The last dogs of winter does all three. It was made by Wellingtonian Costa Botes who has done a variety of good stuff, including a short film I'm quite fond of, Stalin's Sickle.

The someplace else in this film is Churchill, Manitoba which is famous for being the Polar Bear Capital of the World. I'd like to go Polar Bear spotting one day, so this is one reason why I went. The someone(s) new are Qimmiq (Eskimo Dogs) about which I knew nothing at all, and about the man (Brian Ladoon) who, almost single-handedly, has brought the species back from the edge of extinction. He's aided in the quest by a New Zealander, Caleb Ross, who

brought Brian and the dogs to Costa Botes' attention and caused the film to be made.

The new stuff to think about is the logistics and the politics of bringing a domesticated species back from extinction when the species really has to live outside but has to be managed by people and can't be left to run free. Tricky stuff. You get plenty of opinion on the matter from the people interviewed in the film. You also get great footage of both dogs and bears who both have oodles of furry animal charm, and a landscape that couldn't be more different from Wellington.

My rating: 4/5.

The Last Dogs of Winter

Reviewed by Helen Martin for Onfilm Magazine, July 2012

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<http://canta.co.nz/reviews/film/documentary/the-last-dogs-of-winter/>

Fans of Peter Jackson's *Forgotten Silver* and the making of *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy will already appreciate the directing talents of documentary filmmaker Costa Botes. As part of the 2012 New Zealand International Film Festival, Botes is making his way around New Zealand with his most recent film, *The Last Dogs of Winter*.

The Last Dogs of Winter is a documentary focusing on Manitoba's fiercely protective Canadian Eskimo Dogs (or Qimmiq) and the people who spend their lives at what seems like the edge of the earth, struggling to help them survive. Once an integral part of life the sled dogs have mostly been replaced by skidoos, effectively rendering their existence inconvenient to most except Brian Ladoon. Ladoon has dedicated his life to protecting and breeding these dogs for the last forty years in an attempt to prevent their extinction. Working alongside Ladoon is Caleb Ross, who might be familiar to New Zealand audiences as the star of television series *The Tribe*. The two men don't often interact on screen, but they have the kind of camaraderie that comes from shared goals and passions.

While Botes' allegiance is clear, he is never afraid to give time to those who oppose Ladoon, whom he describes as a "stalwart character who does not suffer fools". The perspectives of others in the community contribute to the broad spectrum of opinion in his film encouraging the viewer to consider the fuller picture surrounding the preservation of these dogs. Controversy over claims of animal cruelty aside, it is hard to imagine these dogs surviving without Ladoon's care and as Caleb Ross says in the film, "I think cruelty is putting a Chihuahua in a handbag". Although the film dedicates a lot of time to Ladoon, Ross, and the other people who live in the area, animal lovers will find a lot to enjoy. There is plenty of impressive footage of the dogs in picturesque Manitoba, Canada; prepare to see some dogs casually interacting with polar bears roaming through the snowy area.

The Last Dogs of Winter provides audiences with an opportunity to see two endangered species interacting while also raising awareness about the problems they and their protectors face. The film's success lies in that it almost makes one want to go to Manitoba to help these majestic creatures.

SARAH MCMULLAN National Radio, Afternoons with Jim Mora

Sarah: The Last Dogs of Winter ... this is the new film from Costa Botes, who is the guy who made Forgotten Silver with Peter Jackson. I really like him as a documentary maker, he has a natural ability of letting the story show itself ... he doesn't rush in, he doesn't push, he's very good at getting close ... with a big sense of intimacy, without making you feel uncomfortable. Daytime Tiger, from last year, about the bi-polar writer Michael Morrissey, you were sitting there watching things that you would never have imagined you would have seen; yet it didn't feel like it was exploiting the person, you were witnessing something great.

And that is completely what this is about.

A Man, 150 Inuit Sled Dogs and lots of polar bears, living on the edge, and the last of their kind. That sums it up perfectly. Botes went to Northern Manitoba, a place called Churchill and met a guy named Brian Ladoon. The native Inuit dog - they're not huskies, though they look like it. Imagine a cross between a Shar Pei and a polar bear.

Botes got tipped off to the story by a NZer, Caleb Ross who he'd worked with on a TV show. Brian Ladoon is a little bit kooky. Locals don't like him. He's got these dogs chained up out there. And people don't understand it. We're talking weather that's minus 30 and 40. And people go, "it's cruel", but he's trying to keep the blood line going. These dogs were almost gone - Inuit no longer needed them once they got snow mobiles.

The film is as much about the man as it is about the dogs . The footage is unbelievable. The sequences of the dogs and the bears, I actually got choked up watching it. You hear about people swimming with dolphins or whales or turtles, and having a spiritual experience. Watching these dogs playing with bears was a bit like that. It's stunning. If you're going to see a film at this festival go and see this one.

GRAEME TUCKETT National Radio Nine to Noon

Costa Botes is one of the unsung heroes of NZ documentary making. A man who has toiled and probably has not had the commercial recognition he richly deserves. He has never turned in a less than good film, and this might probably be my favourite of all his documentaries, and I've seen six or seven of them.

He's prolific, and he's indefatigable. For the Last Dogs of Winter, he's gone to the far North of Canada, to Churchill, known as the polar bear capital of the world. But he's not gone there to make a film about polar bears.

This film is about a traditional breed of dog, the dogs that once guarded the Inuit. Botes has found in Churchill a community and a dog breeder who has made it his work to keep this strain of dogs alive.

So this documentary, it's breathtakingly beautiful to look at, and it's a story that will provoke great argument, about whether the man Botes is turning his camera on is doing the right thing or the wrong thing.

I'm giving a huge shout out to this film, I admire it immensely.

POSTS from PUBLIC

Wonderful film and remarkable footage of the dogs and bears! (and I'm a cat person). I hope a supportive and honest fund-raising drive will emerge from the exposure of Brian's work through this film. I was busy recommending it to people today, when we found out the last screening at the Bridgeway is sold out.

Just seen your film –Last Dogs of Winter– absolutely beautiful filmed and such a wonderful story. My friends' daughter, is now keen to volunteer. I'm sending my daughter to see it, thinking she might too, one way to get her to leave home, and such a reasonable cause, if somewhat cold.... Fantastic!

Dear Costa, I saw your film last night at the Bridgeway - you cant make an omelette without breaking eggs.If you have to tread on some toes (mixing my metaphors) to save a breed or species then so be it. The world is full of whiners sitting on their bums. Nick

Hi again Costa,

This film has touched me in a way no other ever has..I have not been able to get it out of my head or senses since seeing it on Monday at the Civic and I dearly hope it goes on to inspire many, many more audiences. You have truly captured Brian's spirit, his dogged determination, his unique character, persistence and unyielding passion in the face of all manner of obstacles..most of which are man made, and as you say he is sometimes his own worst enemy. He is of the land, rugged and tough like his dogs and his environment yet you capture and portray so well the romantic, creative and artistic spirit that he also is. The Q&A following the movie was incredible..to be able to have Caleb to talk with and discuss the situation that is being faced and to applaud him for his massive contribution and gain further insight was such an enjoyable and informative follow on from the film..thank you so much for your time doing this. At this stage I don't know quite what to do to get Brian, the dogs and the bears the assistance they need..BUT they need the world behind them..as Caleb is working with Brian towards trying to establish a viable volunteer program/charitable trust/ building an education centre and needing experienced people to get the dogs into sled teams to run them off their chains. It is a massive undertaking but if we can get people to put up their hands to help/network or whatever is needed I am sure that something economically self sustainable can be achieved..and in turn hopefully give a little back to Brian and his dogs for all that he and they have given..plus get some of the critics off his case. But most importantly ensure the survival of these magnificent dogs..we need to hope that the Inuit people will play an increasing role in this also. Thank you again for executing your craft in such a profound way.

Kindest regards,

Michelle

The [New Zealand International Film Festival](#) started this week (well, technically last weekend). I saw the documentary ***The last dogs of winter*** (trailer [here](#)) at the beginning of the week, which was all about the Qimmiq – Canada's indigenous eskimo dog – and the effort to increase the numbers and popularity of this rare breed which numbered just 100 in the 1970s. Cue some stunning filmography, lots of adorable dogs and, my favourite part, the dogs playing with polar bears. I know. Amazing. It made me really miss having a dog though.

Gregor Cameron It was a beautifully structured ode to some real characters peppered with the most astounding interactions between the dogs and the polar bears. One couldn't help but admire the drive and energy of Brian Ladoon and really respect Caleb's choices around being there. I am not sure he will stay but until the foundation is self sufficient and the breed secure in being maintained he seems to be the natural successor. Costa does this in his documentaries, he makes his subjects something special.

ABOUT THE PRODUCTION

Canadian Eskimo Dogs (aka Inuit Sled Dogs, and Qimmiq)

The Canadian Eskimo Dog's temperament reflects its original work and environment. It is loyal, tough, brave, intelligent, and alert. It is affectionate and gentle, and develops a deep bond with its owner and is intensely loyal. When used as sled dogs, they were often required to forage and hunt for their own food. Consequently, many Canadian Eskimo Dogs have stronger prey drive than some other breeds. Owing to their original environment, they take pure delight in cold weather, often preferring to sleep outside in cold climates. Like most spitz breeds they can be very vocal. (Excerpt: Wikipedia)

The official name for this breed was set by the Canadian Kennel Club (CKC). Some attributes from the breed standard are quoted below:

General Appearance : *Typical spitz dog with thick neck and broad chest, well boned legs of medium length. Majestic and powerful physique that is built for hard work, not speed.*

Characteristics: *Sled dog capable of surviving in extreme temperatures and pulling weights of 45-80 kgs (99-176lbs) per dog over 15-70 miles a day on snow, or carrying 15 kgs (33lbs) as pack dog in summer. Also used to locate game and hold it at bay.*

Temperament : *Reflects tough, hard-working function. When mature, affectionate, enjoying attention. Pack orientated with extremely rapid response to outside stimulus.*

The Canadian Eskimo Dog is also known as Qimmiq, which is the Inuit word for 'dog'. There is also a noisy minority that insists Canadian Inuit Dog is the only correct term.

Semantics aside, we are describing an animal that is a distinct breed of dog, different from malamutes, Siberian huskies, and other dogs of mixed origin commonly associated with the North.

The Canadian Eskimo Dog was an indispensable partner to humans in the Arctic for thousands of years. The Inuit relied on their dogs for transport, hunting, and protection from wild animals. In extremis, they would also use their dogs for food.

These dogs are superbly adapted to their freezing environment and can survive and thrive in extreme temperatures. Their endurance is legendary, and their strength formidable. Which is why they were the first choice as expedition dogs, used by all significant polar exploration teams. Hundreds of Canadian Eskimo Dogs were taken south to Antarctica and used there until the 1980s.

As late as 1950, there were many thousands of dogs in the Arctic. Estimates put numbers as high as 25,000 but by 1970, numbers had crashed catastrophically.

The dogs precipitous decline has been blamed on a number of factors. Most controversially, Inuit have claimed that their dogs were systematically slaughtered by the Royal Canadian Mounted Police as part of a deliberate campaign to break the peoples nomadic culture. An Inuit produced film, *The Last Howl* advanced this claim.

It is highly debatable. Many dogs were certainly shot, but this seems to have been more an outcome of animals being neglected and becoming a menace in their communities. A more significant factor is that the dogs purpose and lifestyle was rendered obsolete by petrol powered skidoos. Over a short period, the dogs simply became redundant. It was much easier for a hunter to pour petrol into a motorised wagon than to train, feed, and keep fifteen dogs. At the same time, new settlers migrating to the north brought their own pet dogs and introduced diseases which decimated the local canines.

The Canadian Eskimo Dog probably would have gone extinct if not for the efforts of a few dedicated individuals. The first moves towards recovering the species were made by the Eskimo Dog Research Foundation (EDRF), founded in 1972 by William Carpenter and John McGrath. This was largely funded by the Canadian Government and the Northwest Territories with some support from the CKC. The EDRF purchased dogs from the small population remaining in the Canadian Arctic from remote Inuit camps on Baffin Island, Boothia Peninsula and Melville Peninsula. The EDRF then began breeding dogs in order to increase numbers.

Brian Ladoon was just a few weeks behind Carpenter, establishing his own foundation colony with dogs sourced from Inuit communities in Nunavut like Igloolik. He has never received Government funding.

Carpenter's operation sadly collapsed in the 1990s due to illness and financial exhaustion. Some of his dogs were distributed to breeders like Ladoon, others were destroyed.

Today, Brian Ladoon maintains the largest single colony of Canadian Eskimo Dogs. He is the only breeder keeping dogs in a natural regime approximating the dog's ancient lifestyle. This has made him a figure that excites both admiration and controversy. To some he is a hero, taking on a responsibility for Man's oldest friend when nobody else will; others view his practices as inhumane.

But even Ladoon's sternest critics are conspicuously silent on the question of what might happen to the breed if he were to shut down. What cannot be denied is Ladoon's sheer tenacity, and success in giving the breed a viable ark in an uncertain world.

The question of how many Eskimo Dogs are left in the world is a vexed one, and there will be different answers from different people. Views on registering or not registering animals with the CKC colour this matter. However, a rough estimate of numbers in North America – registered or unregistered - would be about 2000 animals.

They are on the brink. The analogy Brian Ladoon uses to describe how he keeps his dogs is, "like jewels in a vault". If these animals disappear, they are gone for good.

BRIAN LADOON

Brian Ladoon is a true 'man of the north', a 'character' in the oldest sense of the word. Brian grew up in Fort Churchill – the military base which was the main centre in the area up until the 1970's. His father was a carpenter who worked for the base. As children, Brian and his friends would get up to mischief that might be unthinkable today - like daring each other to run past polar bears. They'd also improvise sleds and tie them to the nearest dog. Thus it was that young Brian first felt the excitement of sledding. He would in time become an expert sledder and dog handler.

But first he had to satisfy a yen to travel. Aged only 15, Brian Ladoon stowed away on a British merchant ship, using a secret hiding place that even today he refuses to divulge (he jokes he might need it again someday). By the time the crew found him, the ship was too far away to turn back. The Captain made Brian work for his passage. And thus began a ten year career, starting in the galley, eventually progressing to the rank of Bosun. Brian had his heart set on becoming a Captain one day, but his colour blindness caused him to fail a crucial test.

After a decade at sea, Brian returned to Churchill and settled into a low key 'hippy' lifestyle, doing odd jobs to stay afloat. This included such extremes as running the local community TV station and digging graves. He taught himself masonry and became highly skilled at working with stone. And he kept dogs, running them across the tundra every chance he could.

It was at this time in the mid-1970s that Brian formed a friendship with the local priest, Bishop Omer Robideaux, and made a promise that would change his life. The Bishop travelled regularly throughout the Inuit communities in the far north, and he was keenly aware that the Inuits dogs were disappearing. Knowing Brian's love for sledding, he suggested Brian should try and collect a few of the best animals he could find, and build up a breeding colony.

This was not an easy enterprise. It took a good deal of money and effort to travel to places like Nunavut. Brian made two trips, gathering about a dozen young dogs which became the foundation stock of his colony. At the same time, Bill Carpenter had set up his Eskimo Dog Research Foundation, with some government assistance. Carpenter and Ladoon were in the vanguard of efforts to get the breed re-registered by the Canadian Kennel Club, which had dropped the breed designation.

Then Brian's mentor died in an aircraft accident that also took the lives of another senior member of the clergy, the head of the Grey Nuns, and Keith Rawlings, a Churchill businessman. Brian felt an obligation from that time to maintain the commitment he'd made to

the Bishop to look after Canadian Eskimo Dogs, breed the best dogs he could, and help them to survive.

CALEB ROSS

Caleb Ross was born and raised in the far north of New Zealand. Growing up surrounded by the outdoors, he has always been interested in adventure and travel.

He was a performer from a young age, joining a theatre group in Whangarei, and performing regularly in school productions. He played Hamlet while in secondary school. He is also an accomplished musician and singer.

Caleb had already been in a few short films and TV programmes when he was spotted by a talent scout and given a leading role in a show that would change his life.

The Tribe was produced by Cloud 9 Screen Entertainment in New Zealand. The series, which followed the fate of a group of teenage characters in a post-apocalyptic world, was an international phenomenon, licensed to more than 70 countries. Caleb played a character named Lex. Ruthless, selfish, and fickle, Lex was a rogue a long way from Caleb's own nature.

Ten years later, there is still a huge and dedicated fan base for *The Tribe*, and for Caleb personally.

Caleb's yen to travel was satisfied by promotional tours for *The Tribe*. He always took any opportunity he could to take the long way home and saw various parts of the world.

When *The Tribe* ended in 2005, Caleb continued to do some acting, but also pursued his musical interests, and learned about audio production, becoming involved in sound design and recording effects for a number of movies and TV shows.

It was his continuing passion for travel, and seeking out unusual adventures that drew him to Churchill in the wake of a stranded romance in Canada. There Caleb found a cause and a place that held him.

He continues to have a restless spirit, and looks forward to other challenges, but for the moment Churchill is home. In the wake of this movie – which was a dream for more than three years - he plans to put into motion some positive initiatives to help Brian and his dogs – primarily setting up a volunteer program that will ease the work load, but also provide an authentic northern experience for participants, and allow dogs to work and run – as they were bred to do.

COSTA BOTES, DIRECTOR

Costa has been an independent film-maker since the early 1980s, writing and directing original work for film and television. His short film *Stalin's Sickle* won the jury prize at the Clermont-Ferrand Short Film Festival in 1988. *Forgotten Silver*, an internationally infamous mock-documentary about the greatest (fictional) unknown film director in history was co-written and directed with his friend, Peter Jackson. It won several awards at the NZ Film and TV Awards; a Special Critic's Prize at the Venice Film Festival in 1996, and resides in the collections of several (real) great film directors.

Costa's first feature film, *Saving Grace* (1997), was selected for competition at Valladolid, Asia-Pacific, and Fantasporto Film Festivals. He documented the making of Peter Jackson's epic trilogy *Lord of the Rings* trilogy from 1999 to 2003. The three feature length documentaries that resulted were released by New Line Cinema in a limited edition DVD box set in 2006 and again in 2011 as part of the Blu-Ray collected edition.

Costa established his own production company, Lone Pine Film & TV Productions in 2005 to develop independent documentary and drama projects. These have included *Struggle No More* (2006), a biography of New Zealand's greatest unknown band; *Yes That's Me* (2008) about a blues musician with manic depression, and *Candyman: the David Klein Story* about a forgotten American candy genius, which premiered at Slamdance and Hot Docs in 2010.

He produced and edited the documentary, *Lost In Wonderland* mentoring its young director, Zoe McIntosh. This premiered at the 2009 NZ Film Festival and won Best Documentary and Cinematography awards at the Qantas NZ Film & TV Awards in 2010.

He wrote and produced another film for Zoe, a 35mm short called *Day Trip*, that has been screened at numerous international festivals including New York, Clermont Ferrand, and Hawaii. It won the Signis Award at Espression En Corto in Mexico.

Costa's most recent feature, *Daytime Tiger*, a verite documentary about "madness, marriage, and misunderstood messages from God" premiered at NZ Film Festival in July 2011, where it was described as "enthraling, honest, and perversely entertaining".

Costa's intention is to carry on making films about inspirational and passionate individuals wherever he can find them.

THE DIRECTOR'S NOTES

This movie started out with a chance encounter. Caleb Ross's mother lives in Northland, and so does my mother in law. We bumped into each by chance at a beach fair. I first worked with Caleb in 1999 when I directed a few episodes of *The Tribe*. I liked him a lot as an actor and as a person. Our paths have crossed several times since then, but I had not seen much of him for a few years.

The reason for this became evident when he started telling me about what he'd been up to. He'd gone to work for a character named Brian Lagoon in the small town of Churchill in Canada's far north. For three years, he'd been helping to breed Eskimo Dogs, and hanging out with wild polar bears.

Wow. What a contrast to where we were. In shorts and T shirts, with the fiercest animal in sight being my delinquent terrier. Perhaps it occurred to Caleb spontaneously at that moment to ask me if I'd be interested in making a film about what he was doing. I think he'd been considering the possibility of making a movie since he arrived in Churchill. Now almost immediately, we resolved to try and make it happen.

It took me two years, and two more films under my belt, but I got there, though not how I expected.

Initially, my thought was to try and work with a Canadian producer and pre-sell the concept to a Canadian TV network. It was a reasonable pathway to take, but I quickly deduced that such a road would be long and crooked. The upside would be a decent budget, but the downside would be complex and time consuming co-production paperwork, and perhaps rather too many creative constraints.

The strong New Zealand connection with the core story enabled me to pitch it directly to the NZ Film Commission instead. I was happy to work at a much lower budget level than most producers would contemplate. This film would require a higher level of resourcing than my other work to date, but it was still a logical extension of the kind of one-man DIY docos that I've specialised in over the past decade.

I commonly shoot, and edit my own stuff. This approach not only enables more 'bang for buck', it's also stylistically a good fit for the kind of intimate, observational character based stories that I like to make.

My films seem to cover a wide range of topics, but in fact they all tend to fall into the same thematic territory. Invariably they involve characters who are in some way battling to practice their creativity or passion in the face of significant obstacles. The goals and stakes might change, but my work is all about championing underdogs who are in some way admirable or inspiring.

So it was that my wife Jennabeth and I eventually found ourselves on a slow train out of Winnipeg, heading north to Churchill. 48 hours of incredibly monotonous landscape later, we arrived. And so the fun started. Within an hour I was looking at my first wild polar bear.

There would be many more bears to come. But of course, I wasn't there to film bears.

The dogs were the main event. I wondered how we'd get on. They have a reputation for wildness, and are commonly assumed (incorrectly) to have interbred with wolves. As a dog owner myself, I have a healthy respect for strange dogs, especially when I was warned that Brian's dogs are anti-social and can't be around humans.

This was the first of several falsehoods about Brian which I learned through direct experience. Contrary to the warning, I found his dogs friendly and affectionate. They might tear apart any animal foolish or unlucky enough to wander into their territory. They will even confront adult bears; but they adore human company.

THE TROUBLE WITH BRIAN

Brian Ladoon is in some ways his own biggest obstacle. He is a stalwart character who does not suffer fools. He also has the frontiersman's instinctive mistrust of outsiders. The modern town of Churchill (it was largely rebuilt after the defence forces pulled out in the 1970s) has a high turnover of short timers. In my observation, it's fair to say that much of the bad rep Brian gets in town has come from such individuals. They're disaffected and perhaps intimidated by his status as a local's local; while he bristles at anyone coming into town from outside and telling him or anyone else what to do.

In the film Brian says, "not everybody likes me, but not everyone likes everyone; and not everybody likes the Captain of the ship". The unspoken message there is that Brian sees himself as the Captain of his own ship, and Captains don't take orders from anyone.

Brian has irritated and challenged the citizens of Churchill over issues related to his dogs, most particularly where he keeps them, but he is generally regarded as a special character whose uniquely eccentric point of view is an asset to the town's identity.

I heard a number of criticisms about Brian's activities, but only two people who were prepared to go on the record and speak on camera. Even so I was able to investigate for myself the truth of the following claims:

1. Brian mistreats his dogs
2. The dogs get no shelter and are allowed to freeze
3. Brian feeds his dogs to the polar bears
4. His dogs are unhealthy
5. The dogs are poorly fed
6. The dogs get no stimulation or regular exercise
7. Brian has no affection for individual dogs

In every case, I found these claims to be either flat out wrong, or so rooted in ignorance that they can't be taken seriously. As one might expect in a small town, there is a lot of reliance on misinformed hearsay. And then there's plainly malignant gossip as well.

The driver for that is envy. Brian is seen to be deriving a financial benefit from his access to polar bears. He keeps his dogs on a piece of land that has always been frequented by migrating bears. This land is subject to a lease agreement. Brian is required to control public access, and he is responsible for public safety. For several years, he has taken to charging visitors varying amounts to come onto his land. Tour bus operators pay him, and so do many professional photographers and film makers. But with bear season lasting only 8-10 weeks, and most tourists going on foreign-run package tours, Brian's share of the eco-tourism market in Churchill is negligible. All income derived from bear watchers goes towards paying the dogs annual food bill, but doesn't come close to covering it.

For the record, I did not pay Brian to film on his land. The film was made on the basis that I would have complete editorial independence at all times. A percentage of any profits the film is able to make will go back to the dogs via Brian's charitable trust, the Canadian Eskimo Dog Foundation.

So, as far as controversy goes, all very interesting from a social anthropology point of view, but more distraction than topic for me. I did not want to dignify nonsense, or waste time in the movie shooting down lies when I could just show people the truth instead.

There is nothing in the film that I can't stand up and discuss with a clear conscience. The movie has a point of view. Yes, it positively advocates for Brian and his dogs, but it's also a work of fact, and it allows viewers to draw their own conclusions.

Brian is most vulnerable on a single point. Canadian Eskimo Dogs were bred to work. They're never more happy than when they're running and pulling a sled. Brian's dogs don't work. They exist to breed and perpetuate their kind. Most of them live and die on their chains.

This is something that upsets many people. Certainly it seems cruel at first glance to confine an animal to a 5 metre diameter circle of chain. But a moment's reflection might suggest that the average domestic dog does not get a great deal more space, on or off chains. An ordinary back yard offers a good deal less sensory and social stimulation than that enjoyed by any of Brian Ladoon's dogs. They are exposed to nature, and they're in close proximity to others of their own kind. This is a vital point. They're never alone, which would be the worst kind of deprivation a pack animal could have; yet it's the normal state for most suburban canines. Pets or not, dogs are highly social creatures, and most behavioural issues source back to social deprivation.

As Caleb Ross says in the movie, "I think cruelty is putting a Chihuahua in a handbag". Separating sentiment from fact is not easy in such matters.

But any responsible dog owner can readily spot the signs of misery in a dog. They won't see any such signs in Brian's animals. Contrary to the opinion offered by one Churchill resident - "those dogs are unsocialised, they can't be around humans" - the practical evidence I observed strongly refutes this.

There are no veterinary services available in Churchill. The nearest registered vet is a day's train ride away in Thompson. Brian does the best he can with experience and local knowledge. He is inspected twice a year by the Humane Society, and by the Provincial Vet. On the last such visit, which I filmed, The Vet visited both of the sites where Brian keeps dogs and made a positive report. The Vet has powers, backed up by the RCMP. On that same trip, a Churchill resident was arrested for mistreating his two dogs.

I went to Churchill with an open mind, and I listened carefully to anyone that would talk to me. My conclusion is I don't believe there's any fair basis for the criticisms made about Brian locally; there's especially little merit in the nonsense repeated (with significantly imaginative embroidery) by organisations like PETA. As explained above, they are based on deliberately emotive misinformation rather than factual or well informed experience.

In terms of overall happiness there's no doubt the dogs would benefit from being run or worked daily. But to do this, a large number of volunteers would need to be organised, and at least some minimal infrastructure built up.

It can cost a professional musher 20-30,000 a year to maintain a trained sled team of 12-15 dogs. This was the figure quoted to me by Dave Daley, a highly experienced and well respected musher based in Churchill. Brian has ten times that many dogs, including nursing mothers and pups, which have very different care needs. He is in a financial and existential Catch 22 situation at this point, struggling daily just to maintain a precarious status quo.

The loud voices raised in town against Brian keeping more dogs than he can possibly exercise persistently ignore the fact this is the only large scale Eskimo Dog breeding colony left in Canada. The dogs are a precious and rare resource. The diversity of CED genetic lines within this place cannot just be destroyed or scattered without an absolutely deleterious impact on the breed.

It is a constant sore point for Brian. He simply can't understand why other people don't share his deep love for his dogs, why they can't accept how important these animals once were, and how much responsibility he feels we owe them. His mission is not to pamper them as pets, but to protect their very existence.

For Brian, keeping the breeding colony going has become everything. It's his life's cause, and his mantra. "These dogs are so close to extinction, it's stupid", he says, "you can't just get rid of them now, and then one day pull a bunch of dogs out of the ground like carrots. Once they're gone, that's it. Tick the tail off another species."

ON FILMING

Once I understood what Brian felt was at stake, and the nature of his emotional attachment to his dogs, I knew what this movie had to be about.

Then it was just a matter of execution, and persistence.

The Last Dogs of Winter was shot with the simplest of means. It had to be simple because I had very little in the way of means.

The total crew for the shoot was me, and my wife. She drove our borrowed truck, and acted as my bodyguard when necessary. She's a country girl and knows how to fire a shotgun, but all the same I'm glad that particular role was not put to any serious test!

All the camera and sound equipment came from New Zealand. It had to fit inside an airline cabin bag. I used a lightweight professional HD camera that allowed me to manually focus, set exposure, and control all audio levels.

I did all the camera operating and audio recording by myself, relying often on radio mics to pick up conversations from a distance. The single biggest problem I faced was operating small delicate controls with freezing fingers.

The cold was not as bad as I feared. Good quality clothing helps. But average temperatures well south of zero did make shooting difficult. Simply trying to see well enough to focus through bits of glass that were always fogging up was a persistent headache. Some days I spent more time blowing snow off the lens and drying it than I did filming.

Another significant limitation was being trapped most of the time within a truck. With wild polar bears running around, it just wasn't safe to be outside a vehicle. The bears weren't overtly aggressive, but I had great respect for them and took no silly chances. Though one day early in bear season, I did get out of the truck to do some shooting. The coast seemed clear, but my wife was loudly admonishing me as I fiddled with my camera. I turned around and said something smart like, "What bears? There's no bears here. Can you see a bear???"; at which point she said, "what about that one?". And sure enough, there was a 1500 pound brute about 30 metres away. He'd snuck around some low rushes, and popped out on my blind side.

Though I was not hysterical with fear, I was reminded of Chef and Willard's encounter with a tiger in *Apocalypse Now*. I hopped briskly back into the truck, and after that, there were no more reckless exits!

There was a predictability about the animals behaviour. Day by day I could capture different aspects of their lives and build up a decent library of material.

As usual, recording humans was a good deal more difficult. The good people of Churchill value their freedoms, and seem to love life most when it's improvised. Even their routines are unpredictable! So catching people for interviews became an exercise in ruthless cunning. Strangely, when we did trap people long enough to be interviewed most of them were remarkably lucid and interesting.

I always try and get a lot of 'B' roll, or active sequences with my subjects when shooting documentaries. This proved particularly tricky with Brian Ladoon, as he is naturally a loner, hates being corralled, and even when I

was able to tag along with him anywhere, his truck is so crammed with equipment, food, guns, and all manner of stuff, there was hardly a spare inch for me! All the same, I did my best to deliver some 'fly on the wall' moments.

For me, the most spine chilling thing I shot is a short sequence where Brian talks to a stubborn polar bear. It was humbling to observe this almost mystical communication knowing that this man once routinely shot these animals and has now come to a special "arrangement" with them. Although I have some sympathy for the purist argument that wild animals and humans should never mix, it's hard to see how that could ever work near Churchill without bulldozing the town off the map and banning any kind of eco-tourism entirely.

Until that happens, I would support Brian's contention that his operation offers migrating bears a sanctuary where they can be safe and relatively unmolested.

Costa Botes: Filmography to August 2013

- **A Persistent Vision** (2013) 28 minutes, Documentary, Prod/Direct/Camera/Editor
- **The Deadly Ponies Gang** (2013) 65 mins, drama, Editor
- **King of Caravans** (2012) 25 mins documentary editor
- **The Last Dogs of Winter** (2011) feature documentary, Prod/Director/ Ph/Ed
- **Daytime Tiger** (2011) 92 Minutes feature documentary, Producer/Director/Editor
- **Songs for a Bigger island** (2011) 48 Minutes, documentary, Prod/Dir/Photography/Editor
- **Kathmandu Blues** (2010) documentary, 88 Minutes, Prod/Dir/Photography/Editor
- **Day Trip** (2009) 12 minutes, Short Film, Producer/Writer
- **Candyman** (Feature documentary), 74 minutes, Producer/Director/Editor
- **Lost In Wonderland** (2009) TV Documentary, 52 minutes, Producer/Camera/Editor
- **Yes, That's Me: Dave Murphy Plays the Blues** (2008) 55 minutes, Prod/Director/Editor, Music DVD
- **My Sweet Town: Paddy Burgin & The Woodenbox Band** (2008) 82 minutes, Prod/Director/Editor, Music DVD
- **A Job With The Circus: Nigel Gavin In Concert** (2007) 96 minutes, Prod/Director/Editor, Music DVD
- **Drive By** (2007) 3 minutes, Short Film, Prod/Writer/Director/Music/Editor
- **Who's Your Daddy?** (2007) 11 minutes, Short film, Prod/Writer/Director/Editor
- **Design Led Futures** (2007) 10 minutes, sponsored video, Prod/Director/Editor
- **Six Days with Patty** (2006) 30 minutes, Documentary, Prod/Director/Camera/Editor
- **Struggle No More** (2006) 84 minutes, Prod/Director/Camera/Editor, Documentary
- **The Songs of Kurt Weill** (2006) 96 minutes, Director/Editor, Live concert DVD
- **Mislaid** (2005) Prod/Writer/Director, 12 minute short film drama
- **A New Tomorrow: 5 Episodes** (2005) Director, TV Childrens Drama
- **The Making of Lord of the Rings** (1999-2004) Prod/Director 3 x Feature Docs. Released 2006 in limited edition DVD,
- **She Drives** (2004) Producer, Script & Director, 4 minute music video featuring the Windy City Strugglers.
- **The Tribe Series 5: 12 Episodes** (2003) Digital Betacam, TV Drama Series, Director
- **Revelations: 6 Episodes** (2002) Digital Betacam, TV Drama Anthology Series, Director.
- **The Tribe Series 4: 12 Episodes** (2001 TV Drama Series, Director.
- **The Tribe Series 2: 12 Episodes** (1999, TV Drama Series, Director.
- **The Tribe Series 1: 4 Episodes** (1999), TV Drama Series, Director.
- **Between Life & Death** (1998) 16mm, 48 minutes, TV Drama, Director.
- **Charlie** (1998) 16mm, 48 minutes, TV Drama. Director
- **Saving Grace** (1997) 35mm, 90 minutes, Feature Film, Director
- **Original Skin** (1996) 35mm, 15 minutes, Short Film, Script, Director
- **Forgotten Silver** (1995) 35mm, 54 minutes, Mockumentary Co-Script & Co-Director with Peter Jackson.
- **The Edge & Sunday** (1992-94) TV Arts/Magazine show, dir. numerous field items.
- **Tomorrow's Child** (1992) 16mm, 24 minutes, TV Drama, Director.
- **The Dead Man** (1992) 16mm, 24 minutes, TV Drama, Director.
- **The Dwarf** (1989) 16mm, 24 minutes, TV Drama, Director.
- **A Sound Of Thunder** (1989) 16mm, 24 minutes, TV Drama, Director.
- **Catching The Tide: Sam Hunt's Cook Strait** (1987) 16mm, 52 minutes, TV Documentary, Co-Producer, Director.
- **Stalin's Sickle** (1986) 16mm, 29 minutes, Drama, Co-Script with Anne Kennedy, Co-Producer, Director.
- **The Lamb Of God** (1985) 16mm, 29 mins, Drama, Director.
- **The Godel Sentence** (1984) 16mm, 25 mins, Drama, Script, Producer, Director.
- **Playtime** (1981) 16mm, 20 mins, Drama, Script, Director.

Media on films by Costa Botes:

Forgotten Silver (1995)

"Forgotten Silver" is a splendid tall tale. Like a combination of Woody Allen's "Zelig" and Rob Reiner's "This Is Spinal Tap," this rich comedy manages simultaneously to position its hero in the path of great events while sending up its subject, film history, with informed skill, great affection and mischievous glee."

Lawrence Van Gelder, NY Times

A classic mockumentary, a charming tongue-in-cheek jest that is both cleverly conceived and exceptionally well executed."

Kenneth Turan, LA Times

"A brilliant parody of the filmmaker documentary."

David Bordwell

The Making of Lord of the Rings (1999-2004)

"The one thing I wanted to say actually was thank you. You have documented my favourite book being made into my favourite film...and it really feels like being there. Compare that to some very bland dvd extras you get with some films..."

Daniel Clements, A Fan

Struggle No More (2006)

"Costa Botes points his camera at the flushed pink face of mandolin player Andrew Delahunty, who looks down the lens and encapsulates the band's philosophy with all the wit and streamlined grace of a Zen master: "Music is far too important to take seriously." He's right, of course. Art and ambition do not always overlap..."

Grant Smithies, Sunday Star Times

"Struggle No More speaks eloquently of a world outside the manufacturing of pop-stars and idols and the biz. The bottom line for these guys has always and only ever been the music."

Helene Wong, NZ Listener

"American singer-songwriter Gillian Welch speaks of her music as being ragged but right, and that is what this lovingly crafted and affectionate doco illuminates..."

Grahame Reid, NZ Herald

Lost In Wonderland (2009)

"It's a much better doco than you're likely to see on mainstream TV. With a gentle and intelligent touch, director Zoe McIntosh (assisted by Botes' sensitive editing) probes the man behind the news clips and finds a beguiling and self-aware human beneath the surface. It's a great story which, in a better world, would play in prime-time. As it is, if you have to go to the cinema to see it, it's very well worth the trip."

Peter Calder, NZ Herald

"A confident and evocative film with a haunting "cinematic" quality, about a unique and controversial New Zealander."

Cliff Taylor, NZ Sunday Herald

"An engaging, likeable, and stimulating film that finishes on an upbeat note."

Richard Mays, The Guardian

Candyman: The David Klein Story (2010)

"Just like Willy Loman (in Death of a Salesman) or any number of Shakespeare's tragic heroes (Othello probably comes closest), the last person to understand the part David Klein played in his fall from hero to zero is the man himself. What we're talking about here is a story that has much to say about nothing less than the human condition – hubris, warts and all. Candyman exemplifies documentary filmmaking at its very best – a great 'found' story, brilliantly told, satisfyingly redemptive (with the redemption coming largely as a direct result of the film making project) and, ultimately, really uplifting."

Helen Martin, OnFilm NZ

Daytime Tiger (2011)

"Film-maker Costa Botes makes documentaries distinguished by a rigorous and unsentimental way with an edit suite, a minimum of manipulation, and flammery, and an absolute commitment to serving his story accurately and well. In Auckland writer Michael Morrissey, Botes has found his most engaging and challenging subject yet. Morrissey is bi-polar. In the grip of mania, he becomes one of the most objectionable and obnoxious human beings you're ever likely to meet. But in his quieter, post mania reflection he will break your heart. Morrissey invited Botes into his home to film his battles with his "tigers", and Botes has brought back one of the most honest, provocative and perversely entertaining portraits of an extreme personality you're ever likely to see."

Graeme Tuckett, Dominion Post

AN INTERVIEW WITH BRIAN LADOON (transcript of a talk with Costa Botes)

THE PROMISE

I was living in Camp Nanuk in the seventies. Bishop Robedeaux (The Bishop of the North) used to come over on a Friday or Saturday night during the summertime. I had my hippie friends, guys, and girls with hair down to here. It was sort of a fun place to be; and he would come there, and he'd like to talk, and we'd have a wine to drink, and food. We'd talk about multiple subjects, and people would challenge him in discussion.

At the time I had Siberian huskies, but they weren't so strong for the cold weather, and then I went to Malamutes, but they were still not what I wanted.

The Bishop, he had been all over the Arctic. He knew everybody and everything. He'd been there for years and years, decades. He told me where the last Eskimo dogs were.

When I went to those communities, Bill Carpenter (who started the first Eskimo Dog rescue breeding programme in Yellowknife), was two weeks ahead of me. They were buying the last genetic stock of dogs for their programme. The Bishop told me where to go get the best dogs, and the best communities, the people to go and see, everywhere; because they were going to become extinct. And so I went up there, and I did that.

I liked the Bishop as a man. He was a cool guy. He was human, not like the ones you would see in Church. He got killed in a plane crash ... dropped out of the sky. I felt like I was sort of responsible, in a way, for the dogs, because the Bishop had led me into a secret.

THE DOGS

The dogs were really beautiful. Shit, they were the best ... tough, hard working. You couldn't leave it. By no stretch of the imagination are there dogs that are better anywhere in the world, and I don't care what anybody says.

In the indigenous proposal for the re-registration of the Canadian Eskimo Dog for the Canadian Kennel Club in 1988, I am one of the three foundation breeders for this registration in Canada, the only three in the world that are recognised by the Canadian Kennel Club.

I bred between 40 and 60% of the registered foundation stock of these dogs, and then I ran out of money to keep registering them, because the registration costs come to thousands of dollars a year.

Each dog has to have a registration, litter, microchip, transfer of ownership, breeding license, all these things add up. By the time you finish, you can spend several hundred dollars over a dog's life, just in permits.

We still have the genetics. The most beautiful dogs in the world are here.

THE VISION

I come from a wild place, I'll tell you.

I left home when I was 16 years old. I stowed away on a ship, okay? I lived with pirates. Fuck. The worst kind you ever saw.

The worst thing in the world, I've seen it. Dead, dying, starving people all over, in Africa, India, all over the place, I was so happy to get back here and raise a herd of dogs, you have no idea. I was on so many stinking ships ... I'm so glad to be back here.

That's what made me want to take care of the dogs, I was so glad to be back here; safe pure, clean ... everywhere, was so polluted. This was the only place I found that wasn't polluted. So I stayed, and took care of the dogs.

My bigger vision was, I was going to build a castle, and the castle would be put in the hands of people who would manage it to make money. The first floor is still sitting waiting to go up. The money and the profit from that were going to go to the dogs. I was putting everything under the Canadian Eskimo Dog Foundation ... the idea was that it would make money and be self-sufficient... to protect the area, and for the dogs and bears.

But (it takes money)...

Think about it. We have had no support from anybody.

THE CONFLICT

Conflict? There is a different level, throughout the triumvirate of the government organisation; there's the local, the provincial and the federal. It's all to do with existence. Their mental attitude does not believe the dog should be existing.

Their way to solve the problem of dogs is kill them all. Get rid of them all.

They haven't come to the conclusion yet this is an indigenous breed on a local level, never mind on a provincial level. There are a few people that are aware, but not the right ones.

That makes it hard, that so many people are unaware. That's where the problem is. Number one, the land.

The dogs have been given land to exist, and then ... people who hate me ... they'll fight against poor people who are trying to help animals to the limit, with their own resources, in the middle of fucking nowhere.

I've fought guys... when I go to their office, it's a cube...

Some guy is going to dictate to me how to run my life from a cube? When I'm in the middle of nature, in the middle of nowhere?

I've run into conflict with the natural resources people, at different government levels, because I will never be dictated to by a man who's never been in my shoes.

They have no idea how to take care of horses, or cows, let alone dogs.

I don't have a problem with the other people here (eco-tourism operators). Everybody's got their own little pigpen to operate in. How you operate it is your own business.

Everybody has their little stage show or gimmick going on.

THE FUTURE

Ours is ... still at ground level. Everybody else is past that. They're eons ahead of us, but our potential is ten times more than theirs.

At ground level, on the front line, you've got to look for able bodied people, to take the project on. That's how they've survived up till now, with every hook and crook deal I can pull off.

The project is to save the best Eskimo Dogs in the world. Period. Whatever it takes to do it. Whatever criticism I gotta face, means nothing to me.

I mean, people who love animals, you have to have compassion. But my compassion is run to the limit at times, you better believe it. You can become dis-compassionate... and I hate it when I'm dropped to that level.

The world we live in here is so fucking cruel and brutal, only the strongest survive, just like 1000 years ago.

We haven't changed anything.

Nature is one piss away from the next dog. Only the strongest can survive.

We are not here to save every single dog that is born. Casualties are acceptable.

I know other people have Eskimo dogs, but they have made them weak, because they have never seen what we have here, the true environment. It's gone, that era is gone, and the last remaining spot is here.

The dogs have got to be tough as fucking nails. They've got to be like a thousand years ago. Otherwise, what are they? They are a changed breed. And the Bishop said, "Make sure they don't become weak". I remember, he said, "they're strong, they're tough. Keep them that way".

If this goes, another breed goes extinct. There's only a chance it can be saved. I do everything I have to, to take care of the dogs. They are that important.

You can't imagine, the cards we are dealt day to day, you can't imagine. You have a plan, the weather changes it, all these changes... All these people, my critics, who have not looked after more than fifty dogs in their lifetime... I have nothing to say to them.

I love it, and it's kept me highly motivated. Hard core. The life I live, it's good to look after animals. If I wanted to make money, I'd do like my uncle says, "Go where there are a million people, take one penny away for them; in three months, you're a millionaire."