

# THE HUMAN ELEMENT

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An EARTH VISION FILM Production

Directed by Matthew Testa



## ***THE HUMAN ELEMENT***

Running Time: 80 minutes

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## ***THE HUMAN ELEMENT***

### **Synopsis**

#### **Short Synopsis**

We humans are a force of nature. At the same time human activities alter the basic elements of life – earth, air, water, and fire – those elements change human life in turn.

In this riveting and visually rich drama blending art and science, we follow renowned environmental photographer James Balog as he explores wildfires, hurricanes, sea level rise, a struggling coal mining community, and our changing air supply. With rare compassion and heart, *THE HUMAN ELEMENT* highlights Americans on the front lines of climate change, inspiring us to re-evaluate our relationship with the natural world.

#### **Long Synopsis**

During his four-decade career as a photographer and explorer, James Balog has focused his lens on the complex relationship between humans and nature. From panoramic mosaics of America's most cherished "champion" trees to unsettling portraits of endangered species posed quizzically in a studio, Balog's work has challenged us to contemplate our place in, and responsibility to, the natural world. Now a major voice in the climate change conversation, and operating at the height of his career, Balog is witnessing the most sweeping and rapid environmental change in the history of the planet. The power of human activity has now surpassed all other forces shaping our world. But how can one photographer convey this? Attempting to document a subject so vast will be the greatest challenge of Balog's career.

*The Human Element* follows Balog on an artistic journey to distill this crucial moment in our environmental history into an approachable body of images and ideas. To achieve this, Balog is breaking this dense topic into what ancient societies identified as the four elements of life: Air, Earth, Fire and Water, seeking to photographically portray each element and examine how human activity has changed its nature.

Balog further humanizes this story of change by investigating how altering the elements is in turn affecting everyday Americans right now. *The Human Element* seeks to change this outlook by featuring iconic subjects who are often overlooked victims of climate change. Balog visits Tangier Island, a fishing community in the Chesapeake Bay who is facing the imminent reality of sea level rise threatening their island's future. We meet Yadira Sanchez and her three children in Denver, Colorado, all of whom suffer from asthma, and attend a special school on a hospital campus for children struggling with air. Balog embeds with a Cal Fire strike team on the frontlines of the most expensive wildfire in California history to witness how human activity is changing how wildfires behave on the landscape. And he ventures deep into Kentucky coal country, meeting unemployed miners finding hope from a new source.

In this way the film promises to reach outside the environmentalist bubble to a new audience by appealing on a relatable, emotional, personal level. Balog's ultimate hope is not to preach, but to use art to raise awareness of the interconnectivity between nature and a singular, all-powerful force on earth: *The Human Element*.

Environmentalists have often taken the view that human progress is anathema to the health of the planet. Balog sees it differently. Humans have indeed influenced the planet. This is clear from looking at the four elements. In fact, Balog concludes, it's safe to say that humanity is tantamount to a fifth element that affects and modulates the others. But ultimately this means humans are part of the whole system of nature and not *apart* from it. Knowing this, Balog finds great hope that the fifth element, the *human element*, can bring the whole system back into balance.

## ***THE HUMAN ELEMENT*** **Filmmaker Biographies**



### **MATTHEW TESTA (Director)**

Director Matthew Testa has been working in documentary film and television for two decades, often focusing on the environment, social justice issues and the interplay between people and nature. *THE HUMAN ELEMENT* is his fourth documentary. Previous films include *VLOGUMENTARY* (YouTube Premium), *FREEDOM! The Movie* (CMT Docs) and *THE BUFFALO WAR* (ITVS, winner of 9 festival awards). Some of his documentary television credits include *MURDER MOUNTAIN* (Netflix), *WHALE WARS* (Animal Planet), *SNAKE SALVATION* (National Geographic), *GOLD RUSH: ALASKA* (Discovery), *THIRTY DAYS* (FX) and *STORM CHASERS* (Discovery). Testa received an MFA in Film Directing from the American Film Institute (AFI) Conservatory in 2004. He lives in Los Angeles.

### **OLIVIA AHNEMANN (Producer)**

Olivia Ahnemann has been producing and directing documentary films for nearly 20 years. Most recently, she produced *Under the Gun* with director Stephanie Soechtig, which premiered at the 2016 Sundance Film Festival, and was distributed by EPIX/Lionsgate. And, *Racing Extinction* with director Louie Psihoyos, which premiered at the 2015 Sundance Film Festival, and was distributed by Discovery. In 2016, Olivia was nominated for an Emmy Award for Exceptional Merit in Documentary Film Making.



Olivia was co-producer of *The Cove*, which has garnered over 70 awards globally, including the 2009 Academy Award for best documentary and the Producers Guild of America documentary award. The film brought worldwide attention to the annual dolphin drives in Taiji, Japan and high levels of mercury in seafood, man's primary source of protein. Television credits include programs for National Geographic, PBS, A&E, and Discovery. Olivia has contributed to several independent films, including *Enlighten Up!*, which had a nationwide theatrical release in 2008. She lives in Boulder, Colorado, with her husband and daughter.

### **JAMES BALOG (Writer and Film Subject)**

For 40 years, photographer James Balog ("BAY-log") has broken new conceptual and artistic ground on one of the most important issues of our era: human modification of nature. An avid mountaineer with a graduate degree in geography and geomorphology, James is equally at home on a Himalayan peak or a whitewater river, the African savannah or polar icecaps. His new film, *The Human Element*, is an innovative and visually stunning look at how humanity interacts with earth, air, fire and water. Its world premiere was at the San Francisco Film Festival in April. Since then it has screened all over the world and been released on myriad streaming platforms across North America, including iTunes, Amazon, Google Play, and many others.



To reveal the impact of climate change, James founded the Extreme Ice Survey (EIS) in 2007. It is the most wide-ranging, ground-based, photographic study of glaciers ever conducted. The project was featured in the internationally acclaimed documentary *Chasing Ice* and in the 2009 PBS/NOVA special *Extreme Ice*. One YouTube video clip from *Chasing Ice* has received more than 40 million views. *Chasing Ice* won an Emmy in 2014 and was shortlisted for the Academy Awards. It has been screened at the White House, U.S. Congress, Great Britain's House of Commons, the United Nations, and major international science and policy conferences, including COP-15 in Copenhagen and COP-21 in Paris. *NBC, ABC, CBS, CNN, PBS, and NPR* have done features on his work, as have David Letterman, Bill Maher, and Bill Moyers.

James is the author of eight books. His images have been collected in dozens of public and private art collections—and extensively published in the world's magazines, particularly *National Geographic*.

Many organizations have given James their highest accolades; they include:

The Heinz Foundation,  
American Geophysical Union  
Duke University  
Universities of Alberta, Missouri and Colorado  
Nikon  
American Alpine Club  
International League of Conservation Photographers,  
HIPA award under the patronage of the Crown Prince of Dubai  
Royal Photographic Society of Great Britain



**DANIEL WRIGHT (Co-Producer)**

After graduating from Colorado College with degrees in film and anthropology, Daniel began working at the Oceanic Preservation Society, the filmmakers behind the Academy Award-winning documentary *THE COVE*, on their highly anticipated second film, *RACING EXTINCTION*. After a premiere at the 2015 Sundance Film Festival, it had a worldwide broadcast in 220 countries on the Discovery Channel and received a Primetime Emmy nomination. Wright associate produced *MAURIZIO CATTELAN: BE RIGHT BACK*, a documentary about the provocative and elusive career of Italian contemporary artist, Maurizio Cattelan. The film premiered at the 2016 Tribeca Film Festival and was called “uproarious and thought-provoking” by *The New York Times*.



**LYMAN SMITH (Editor)**

Lyman's work has appeared in festivals across the globe from Sundance to Tribeca to Telluride as well as Cannes, Paris, and Frankfurt. The efficacy of his approach to the craft has also helped to launch successful documentary programs on a variety of television networks including IFC, BBC, CNN, National Geographic Channel and The Discovery Channel, and his work has appeared before the UN General Assembly.

With an interest in climate change and social justice, Lyman views every film as an opportunity to inspire audiences for the sake of a greater good. Lyman lives in Salida, Colorado.

## ***THE HUMAN ELEMENT***

### Filmmaker Credits

**Director:** Matthew Testa

**Produced by:** Olivia Ahnemann

**Co-Producer:** Daniel Wright

**Executive Producers:** Linda A. Cornfield, David J. Cornfield, Brooks Fisher, Ginny Jordan, Paula Dupre' Pesmen, Wendy Schmidt

**Co-Executive Producers:** David & Pat Atkinson, Jim & Paula Crown, Sam Rose & Julie Walters, Tom Roush

**Associate Producers:** Jill Mazursky, Alejandro De Castro

**Edited by:** Lyman Smith

**Cinematography:** Jim Hurst, Josh Salzman

**Still Photography:** James Balog

**Written by:** James Balog, Lyman Smith, Matthew Testa

**Concept by:** James Balog

**Original Score by:** Morgan Kibby, Jeff Russo

**Additional Music:** Zoe Keating

### Social Media

Trailer: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k34FhplukXQ>

Website: [www.thehumanelementmovie.com](http://www.thehumanelementmovie.com)

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/thehumanelementmovie/>

Instagram: <https://www.instagram.com/thehumanelementmovie/>

Twitter: <https://twitter.com/HumanElementMov>