

# Haudenosaunee Elders share wisdom in Beaton documentaries

By Robert Taylor  
TODAY STAFF

SIX NATIONS OF THE GRAND, Ontario - A filmmaker's message can often be lost in the special effects and overbearing musical scores of commercial films.

Danny Beaton (Mohawk, Turtle Clan) avoids this pitfall in his documentaries *The Iroquois Speak Out for Mother Earth* (2001) and *Mohawk Wisdom Keepers* (1999). His simple format of capturing Haudenosaunee (Iroquois) Elders sharing their wisdom on film on topics from protecting Mother Earth to declining family values in Indian Country are not lost in the trappings of a commercial motion picture.

The hour-long *Iroquois Speak Out* will make its world premiere March 30 at 9 p.m. on VisionTV's Outlook Canada documentary series.

A consistent theme in the teachings in both films is encouraging young people to take advantage of the wisdom of the elders. Clan Mother Harriot Jack (Mohawk, Bear Clan) said the elders are teachers who hold the wisdom that defines who we are today, but much of the time they remain ignored.

"The elders sit out there and they wait for the young people to go to them to ask them the stories of what it was like when they were growing up," said Jack. "A lot of them can't get out of their homes. They just sit there and wait and no one stops by to visit them."

Jack, who replaced her late mother in the film, warned that

the Ojibwe, but also the mother of the Chinese people or the black people of Africa," said Porter. "They have to get to know this too, those that forgot, because they used to know at one time when the world was new."

Porter said colonization by "the greedy power of kings and queens" and the residue of this tradition in the modern businessperson have corrupted people's relationship with Mother Earth and the respect the Creator said people are supposed to have for all life. He did not advocate a return to old-fashioned ways, but a rejection of the greed that has harmed the earth.

"Antiquity? I don't know if that's a Roman word, but it's sure not Mohawk," said Porter.

John C. Mohawk (Seneca, Turtle Clan) presents a provocative dissertation on global warming in *The Iroquois Speak Out* on Mother Earth. Mohawk is an author and professor in the Center for the Americas at the State University of New York at Buffalo and is regarded as a leading scholar of Seneca culture and history.

Mohawk states that global warming phenomenon is a direct result of the dominance of Western culture, which he defines as a trend that grew out of the Industrial Revolution of the 18th Century. The Industrial Revolution was made possible by technological advances in metallurgy and the use of fossil fuels. In turn, the western culture concepts of greed, consumerism, and possessive individualism forced the explosively expanded use of fossil fuels.

The uses of fossil fuels, particu-



PHOTO COURTESY DANNY BEATON

Canadian documentary maker Danny Beaton (Mohawk, Turtle Clan) sits with Oren Lyon, faith-keeper of the Onondaga Nation during work on his latest production "The Iroquois Speak Out for Mother Earth" which will premiere March 30 on VisionTV's Outlook Canada series.

younger people had a responsibility to go to the elders because they would not be there forever to ask questions of.

"I can't go back and ask Mom how did this ceremony go or what is the meaning behind this teaching," said Jack.

Another of the profound teachings in the films comes from Tom Porter (Mohawk, Bear Clan). Porter said his travels around North America have reinforced what he had learned at home, which is every people in the world are an indigenous people. He explained that as indigenous peoples we all share a relationship with the Creator and Mother Earth, but that many cultures have just forgotten.

"We have to learn again that the Earth is again our mother, not just for the Sioux or the Mohawks or

larly coal and oil, has in turn led to a dramatic shift in the global climate, according to Mohawk.

"Many, many millennia of natural evolution has been reversed in a couple of centuries," Mohawk said. The natural process, as Mohawk explains it, involves carbon being absorbed from the atmosphere by plants and animals. These forms of life would die an become fossil fuels, the burning of which returns the carbon in unnaturally large amounts to the atmosphere resulting in global warming.

"This is the single most significant thing to happen in the past 300 years," said Mohawk. "People 1,000 years from now will look back at this time and will not see the politicians, they will not see the headlines of the day, but they will see the chemical transformation from what was in the earth put into the sky."

Mohawk said the solution to the damage done by the use of fossil fuels would not be found in science, but in indigenous cultural approaches to nature outside of Western culture. He said that in indigenous cultures have put a priority on human survival above national profits and trade deficits.

"Indigenous cultures have an awe of Nature, not respect," said Mohawk. "Nature is the power of the universe manifested."

Beaton may never win an Academy Award or become wealthy with these films, but that is not the point of either project. The merit of these documentaries is bringing the message of the Elders to as wide an audience as possible.