



Editorial The Making of RiverBlue

By Mark Angelo

Mark Angelo reflects on the highly anticipated film that took him and his crew on an unprecedented world-wide adventure; one that set out to film great rivers in an effort to protect them, but in the process, uncovered the dark underside of the global fashion industry.

I've had a love for rivers ever since I was a boy and, as a river advocate and paddler for almost five decades, I've often thought about working on a feature length, global river documentary. And while I've written extensively about rivers and have been part of many television productions over my career, my day-to-day river-related work simply didn't allow the time needed to undertake a film.

But all that changed in 2011 when I retired from my position with the Rivers Institute at the British Columbia Institute of Technology. Around that same time, along with producer Roger Williams, I had just completed work on a Global BC television special entitled "Water for Life," which turned out to be a very successful and highly rated program. We then started talking about an appropriate follow-up and the idea of a movie suddenly became a very viable option.

When talking about how we might approach such an endeavour, I felt an important key was to find a way to convey the river conservation message, in a relatable way, to a much broader audience. In terms of my own experience, I've been fortunate to have paddled on close to a thousand rivers spanning well over 100 countries. These trips have provided a wealth of great memories for both myself and my family, but I've also seen enough to make me fearful of what lies ahead for all waterways. Clearly, clean water and healthy rivers are becoming increasingly scarce commodities to the point where, I believe, the proper care of rivers, and water resources in general, is our planet's most pressing environmental challenge. Consequently, to the greatest extent possible, I wanted our film to be an agent for positive change.

We embarked on the filming of *RiverBlue* in the summer of 2012 with an initial plan of documenting the state of many of the world's best known rivers in the hope of better protecting them in the end. Virtually all the rivers we chose to travel to were waterways I had paddled in past decades – so I was anxious to see if things had changed for the better, or worse.

As our trip went along, our journey soon became an around-the-world adventure by river; an incredibly ambitious undertaking that, in many ways, was unprecedented. Looking back, there were times when we were inspired by improvements that had taken place on some rivers - but there were far more examples of waterways that were under great stress and in deep trouble. As our experiences mounted, it became evident that many of the world's rivers are now in a state of crisis.

As a river advocate and conservationist, I've been involved in many issues over the decades where rivers faced an array of threats such as sewage pollution, hydro development, mine runoff, siltation from logging, and urbanization. But in recent decades, some of the most severe water pollution examples I've witnessed stemmed from the fashion industry. This includes the production of items ranging from garments/textiles to leather goods.



Photo: RiverBlue

Mark rowing on the Ganges River with producer, Roger Williams, behind the camera during Kumbh Mela, the largest gathering of human kind on the planet.

It also often bothered me that the environmental impact of the fashion industry, for the most part, has flown under the radar in the public's consciousness. The severe pollution caused by this sector has not been chronicled in the media nearly to the same extent as other industries. Yet, the fashion industry is very consumer focused – so I couldn't help but wonder, if there was more public awareness of the seriousness of the issue, would customers become more discerning in the products they buy? And if so, would the industry opt for changing the way it does business and start doing things in a better and more ethical way?

About mid-way through our filming, we saw an opportunity for *RiverBlue* to take the first in-depth look at the impacts the textile and tannery sectors were having on rivers. And given that we all buy clothing (blue jeans being a good example) and, given that our current buying practices actually help enable and foster the environmental and public health damage now being inflicted, documenting this issue helped to achieve our goal of making personal, the river conservation message in a way that most can, and will relate.

The last few years, while working on *RiverBlue* with people like Roger Williams, Lisa Mazzotta and Director, David McIlvride, has been an unforgettable experience. We've filmed and chronicled some amazing and disturbing things and I think the film is unlike any river documentary that has been produced to date. There were also times when going back to a river I had travelled on long ago was difficult, simply because some of the changes that had occurred were not what I had hoped for.

In addition, our journey reinforced my belief that, from an environmental perspective, everything is interconnected – and when toxins released from a riverside Asian textile mill end up in the tissue of a North American polar bear, one can't help but appreciate these are things we should all care about regardless of where we live. 🌸

Mark Angelo is a long time river advocate, educator and paddler as well as founder and Chair of both BC and World Rivers Day. He is a recipient of the Order of BC and Order of Canada for his river conservation efforts and, over the decades, he has traveled on more than 1000 rivers spanning well over 100 countries. Over the past three years, he has focused on making the soon-to-be-released film, RiverBlue, which took Mark and his crew on an around-the-world journey by river