



The Brahmaputra. PHOTO: FRANCK VOGEL

Inspiring change through his pictures of rivers

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A SHORTAGE of clean, fresh water will be the next great global crisis, say experts who have been predicting it for a few years now. And helping to create awareness about a problem that is worldwide and not just limited to poor countries is photojournalist Franck Vogel, who has spent the last four years documenting the challenges facing the major rivers of the world.

"It all started during a meeting in 2011 with Green Cross director (former Russian president) Mikhail Gorbachev, who appointed me as an ambassador," explains Vogel, who studied biochemistry and has a master's degree in engineering (agronomy). His first project was a documentary on the Bishnoi community in India, possibly the world's first eco-warriors. Through Green Cross, "I learned about the Nile and the Millennium Dam project in Ethiopia. And I wanted to know how Egypt and the local people would be affected."

His motivation comes from the fact that "we humans are made mainly of water, and we need it to survive. Since we are not able to create water molecules, we have to preserve it. There is no other option." Many of the rivers in the world face daunting challenges and countries are fighting over water-rich territories. Most conflicts and water issues involve transboundary rivers.

In 2012, he started working on a preliminary story on the Nile, which passes through Ethiopia, South Sudan and Egypt. "And I had a feeling that the Nile was not the only river with water issues in the world," he relates. He moved on to the Brahmaputra in India, followed by the Colorado and Jordan rivers. His next project will be the Mekong this summer and, next year, he will work on the Ganges and the Amazon.

Some 60 photographs from three of those rivers - the Nile, Brahmaputra and Colorado - will be exhibited in Singapore as part of the Voilahn! French Festival. "I try to capture the most powerful images I can - which are graphic, colourful, powerful, and with a real story behind them. I hope that some will become iconic symbols that inspire change. It seems the best way to spread my message worldwide," he relates.

One of the most difficult shots was in South Sudan, where he travelled to photograph an abandoned gigantic bucket excavator nicknamed Sarah, which had been used to dig a canal through the territory. It was a controversial project and the machine itself was attacked and destroyed during the civil war in the mid 1980s. The machine was in the middle of the bush, where dozens of men died during a tribal fight just near the machine around the time Vogel was there. He had a military escort of eight soldiers who were afraid of being ambushed. But while driving through the bush, there was no ambush; instead, they encountered thousands of huge wild antelopes crossing through a village being shot at by armed residents wanting to kill as many as possible.

"We also ended up with a bullet hitting our car! It was quite chaotic and dangerous, but in the end nobody was hurt and I got 'the shot' of the machine," he relates.

Vogel agrees that the global freshwater situation has reached a critical point and that it needs immediate attention and action. Saving water is more than just simply reducing water consumption in the home or garden, he explains. True water consumption is nearly 30 times more than the 150 litres used every day at home in Singapore or the 200 litres used in France daily, he points out. "This hidden water consumption is actually all the water that is necessary to produce what we eat, drink, the clothes we wear, and basically everything in our lives."

Besides holding exhibitions all over the world, Vogel will also publish a two-volume photography book (the first volume with a French publisher will be released in September) to create awareness about the issues he is passionate about.

The Asian premiere of Transboundary Rivers by Franck Vogel will be held from April 16 to May 30 at Gardens by the Bay, Colonnade and Supertree Grove. He will also be holding a conference on Transboundary Rivers on April 16 at 3.30pm, at Gardens by the Bay

Other festival highlights

- Luminéoles Ballet at Marina Bay - April 15 from 7.30pm and April 16, Supertree Grove, Gardens by the Bay from 7.15pm
- Guitar Recital by Thibault Cauvin, Chijmes, May 13
- Gourmet picnic with a classical French concert by Amaury Coeytauxsupersoloist of the Radio France Philharmonic Orchestra - and a string quartet, April 17, Botanic Gardens
- Gaumont: 120 Years of Cinema, April 15-May 15, National Design Centre, April 15 - May 15
- Christianity in Asia, featuring artworks from Musée du Louvre and Bibliothèque Nationale de France, at the Asian Civilisations Museum, May 26-Sept 11
- Urban Fork Exhibition by Philippe Diversy and Bob Lee (May 5-31, The Projector)

Voilah! is held from April 15 to May 31. More information at www.voilah.sg

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Vogel (above) captures images which are "graphic, colourful, powerful, and with a real story behind them".
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